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Dialogues with Winfried Fluck

Essays and Responses on American Studies

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Your Culture My Clutter: Popular Media and the History of Our Digital Present[1]

Frank Kelleter

Frustration Narratives

> Of making many books there is no end …
>
> – Ecclesiastes 12.12

In her book *Too Much To Know: Managing Scholarly Information before the Modern Age*, cultural historian Ann Blair quotes René Descartes in 1684: "Even if all knowledge could be found in books, where it is mixed in with so many useless things and confusingly heaped in such large volumes, it would take longer to read those books than we have to live in this life and more effort to select the useful things than to find them oneself" (5). Descartes famously proposed to counteract the information overload of his age with an innovative *method* for securing knowledge: not through the escalating production of books on ever new and increasingly specialized topics, but by identifying "first principles." The philosophical attraction of this program resided not only in its promise of epistemological stability, but also in how it separated philosophy from philosophy's media, reducing the number of potentially "useful" publications from infinite to, ultimately, one: Descartes's own.

Descartes was neither the first nor the last writer to wrestle with the frustrations brought on by communication technologies that transcend the bio-mental capacities of any single human life. As far as "narratives" go, the one about cultural inflation is an old and persistent one. Blair traces "the

condemnation of overabundance" (15) back to the Bible verse from Ecclesiastes that serves as epigraph for this section. The history of technological media is a history of media anxieties. In this essay, I will follow Winfried Fluck's prompt and consider some of the more recent stages of this history, relying pragmatically on research suggestions borrowed from seriality studies. These suggestions cannot take the place of actual research. But a theory of seriality that conceives of seriality as a defining practice *of* modern popular culture, not as a narrative formalism *within* it (cf. Kelleter, "Popular Seriality"), can help describe "modernity" (another topic of Fluck's essay) as a historical process which produces incessant desires – and incessant techniques – for reducing its own complexity, while these reductions, or fictions of control, in turn keep mushrooming into second-order complexities.

As Chad Wellmon has shown in *Organizing Enlightenment: Information Overload and the Modern Research University*, the very institution of scholarship as we know it is such a technique of media-historical contingency control. The eighteenth-century German research university and a new paradigm of *Wissenschaft* developed in direct response to pronounced feelings of cognitive exhaustion fueled by "too many books" (151). Countless are the calls, in the age of print, for "orientation" that shall be "provided" by "someone." Or by something: new bibliographic practices, advanced systems of collecting, innovative archiving institutions, and, perhaps most crucially, ever competing methods of reading struggle to keep up with their own media conditions. To be sure, such methods were not yet artificially intelligent in the eighteenth century but always already remarkably self-confident, ranging from the "historical-critical" approach to Bible studies (which, via Feuerbach, would evolve into what Fluck summarizes as the Marxian "power narrative" ["Self-Serve Media," in this volume 395]) to Fichte's distinction in *Einige Vorlesungen über die Bestimmung des Gelehrten* (1794) between the momentously singularized "scholar" and, well, all other readers. And so on, each master method feeding the process it hopes to settle, until no single scholar can any longer survey the productions of so many different hermeneutics, which are "suspicious" chiefly of each other. That all these differentiating epistemologies of print are really *media practices* becomes apparent in the fact that reading, for them, typically signifies writing: to produce "a reading," in its professional sense, means to produce a text. Another one.

Evidently, tales of information overload are more than just stories. They are themselves agents and drivers of cultural change, because they refer to – in fact, they organize – actual communicative emergencies: a "reproduction" of culture that is unpredictable precisely because it does not unfold according to

the programmatic principles of a philosophy of history, but in serial feedback with what it produces (its narratives, its images, its philosophies, its ideologies, its anxieties, its theories about itself). These reflexivities keep "changing," as Fluck phrases it, because the "system" that generates them keeps transforming its own output into input. Put differently, accounts of information overload and media fatigue always register real asynchronicities in the ongoing co-evolution of technology and the human sensorium, made palpable, sometimes painfully so, at the level of generations (increasingly configured as media generations in our time) and individual lives (aging, now more than ever, means media frustration).[2]

But let me focus on storytelling, taking my cue from Fluck's long-standing interest in this matter. Cultural historians are well equipped to study how processes of technological change have been narrated, that is, how these processes have been plotted into "From … to …" sequences. Wellmon suggests that since early modern times, the experience of media proliferation has repeatedly nourished perceptions of epistemic *fragmentation*: "Knowledge, which for so many eighteenth-century figures was supposed to be a unified and coherent whole, had fragmented into distinct and often competing claims and truths" (41). In its most popular U.S.-American versions, the fragmentation narrative has frequently assumed the more specific form of a narrative of lost social consensus. The story that is being told is not simply about cognitive exhaustion ('how can I possibly read all this stuff?'), but about a dramatic present shift occurring at all levels of national life ('citizens don't agree anymore on which readings to disagree on'). In terms of personal overload it makes no difference if a scholar of literary realism cannot individually read a thousand novels or if a scholar of social media cannot individually read a billion posts. Both numbers are mere fractions of what is out there anyway. But in terms of social cohesion, it does make a difference if my own experience of media disorder reflects a larger transformation in which public communication is said to be atomizing into self-reinforcing enclaves which, by the sheer force of their number, crowd out any larger conversation that could still be called "cultural."

In our time, Mary McNamara's journalistic coinage "self-serve media," quoted by Fluck, joins a plethora of digital-age formulas for the perceived loss of a common, unifying culture: "media bubbles," "polarization," and "tribalization" are just a few of the catchphrases popularized in contemporary punditry.

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2   On "media generations," see Kathleen Loock's current project "Hollywood Memories" at Leibniz-Universität Hannover (Germany) and her forthcoming book *Hollywood Remaking*.

Many of these slogans come with narrative implications worth exploring. "Tribalization," for example, suggests an often politically charged story of regression, not unlike Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's complaint in 1680 that the "horrible mass of books that keeps on growing" signals "a return to barbarism" (165).[3] The idea of a "self-serve" culture, in turn, recalls – both in plotting and word choice, including the striking reappraisal of the word "culture" (more on this below) – older American self-descriptions such as Christopher Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979). There is a long-standing genre of postwar American sociological literature that keeps diagnosing, for each generation anew, a loss of communal democratic purpose (or "republican virtue," in some of the story's earliest predecessors dating back to the nation's founding era). From David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) to Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000) and beyond, the alleged evaporation of public meaning is typically linked to changing communicative practices, if it is not traced back directly, as in Lasch, to a larger media-driven shift toward "self-serving" tastes and concerns.

In its canonized historiographic version, sometimes summarized as the decline of "the liberal consensus" (Boyer at al. 903), this popular American auto-narrative pinpoints the new social movements of the 1960s and 1970s as prime causes for the nation's *political* fragmentation – a key concern also in Lasch's critique of the "culture of narcissism," with its tirades against "cultural pluralism," "the educational radicalism of the late 1960s" and "the fragmentizing impact of the mass media," all of which are said to have turned "the university" into a self-serving "multiversity" (144-45; 91) that encourages not only cultural inflation, but also "moralistic inflation" (32) and "the ubiquitous inflation of grades" (145).[4] With such declarations, *The Culture of Narcissism* is an important source text for a plot pattern currently attractive to a wide spectrum of political

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3   "Je crains même, qu'après avoir inutilement épuisé la curiosité sans tirer de nos recherches aucun profit considérable pour notre félicité, on ne se dégoute des sciences et que par un désespoir fatal les hommes ne retombent dans la barbarie. A quoi cette horrible masse de livres, qui va toujours augmentant pourroit contribuer beaucoup. Car enfin le désordre se rendra presque insurmontable, la multitude des auteurs qui deviendra infinie en peu de temps, les exposera tous ensemble au danger d'un oubli général, l'espérance de la gloire, qui anime bien des gens dans le travail des études, cessera tout d'un coup" (165).

4   See also: "The rhetoric of black power corrupted the white left and the black left alike, substituting a politics of the media for the civil rights struggles earlier waged in deadly earnest in the South" (83). This sentence is remarkable not only for its stridently categorical distinction between "deadly earnest" struggles and merely "rhetorical" ones, but also for its implied claim that the Civil Rights Movement did not engage in "a politics of the media," which is quite misleading (not to mention how strongly the

positions in the U.S. (and not only there), stretching from the classically liberal to the resentful revanchist: the explanation of right-wing populism as something that has been caused by left-wing radicalism. It should be noted that this is also how right-wing populism explains itself.

In the digital era, then, stories of media fragmentation are regularly pronounced in a register of political insistence that links them to seemingly contradictory stories about the rule of a powerful new mainstream: a mainstream of minorities. Cultural cohesion is fading, we are told, but that's the culture now. In fact, the word "culture" itself is serialized and dramatized here, denoting what Alexander Starre has called "any systemic groupthink behind real or imagined social problems" ("cancel culture," "woke culture," etc.).[5] Many of the more recent charges of cultural narcissism thus come with a telling catch: they bemoan disintegration at the same time that they bemoan domination. The mental world in which this paradox makes sense is the world of a waning hegemony. Apparently, the "liberal consensus" is not so much declining in a digital media environment as it is getting frustrated, being ever more incapable of enforcing the illusion that its authority really is, or has ever been, consensual. (Claims of political consensus for the postwar period usually tell us more about the era's reality machines than its actual spectrum of political articulation.) In (pop)cultural production, too, any sense of prior unity – of an accepted canon of works, tastes, or values subsequently exploding into chaotic special interests – indicates first and foremost the existence of historically specific canonization structures before the great decline. As Fluck writes, "the cultural history of (...) texts is the history of their varying uses" ("The Role of the Reader" 271). Speaking of narcissism, then, the true narcissistic shock provided by new media is perhaps felt by those who, being accustomed to other communicative roles, now find themselves demoted to the status of "one voice among many others."

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era's embattled sense of liberal unity depended on media politics in the most basic connotation of the term).

5   "The recent trend toward calling any systemic groupthink behind real or imagined social problems 'culture' (...) has set the American culture concept on a darker course, one that is fully aligned with (...) the culture's political situation" (Kelleter and Starre 14).

Notes on the Clutter Industry

> By considering (…) how what we cannot
> expect and what we cannot ignore intersect,
> we can continue to explore the territories
> both old and new carved out by the most
> ambitious serials of our moment.
>
> – Sean O' Sullivan, "The Inevitable,
> the Surprise, and Serial Television"

Which narrative is it, then, in 2023? A story of expressive individualism finally reaching its tipping point and plunging U.S. popular culture into farcical disarray? A story of interactive media progressing resolutely on their march to dehierarchization, establishing an algorithmic culture devoid of axiological remains? Or do we, for the long haul, even have to choose between opposing narratives of modernity, one telling a tale of increasing – or increasingly subjectivized – articulation, the other a tale of ever more comprehensive – and ever more objectifying – social control? And how then should we factor in, if at all, the original Marxian insistence on the interdependence, rather than opposition, of freedom and unfreedom? If we decide to regard the history of capitalism as relevant background for our digital present – and there are good reasons to do so, even beyond storytelling – it may be helpful to remember that already Marx and Engels conceptualized industrial capitalism as a dynamic and disruptive force, not a settled and conservative one: as an ambivalent process, that is, which produced new liberties, bourgeois liberties, at the price of historically new forms of subjection. The strained rhetoric of early Marxism grapples with the dialectical notion of a "system" that reproduces no stable regime of suppression but a historical movement of escalating contradictions. Modernity, in this model, soon becomes the name for the social, psychological, and ecological costs of a remarkable human history of material improvement and emancipation. This concerns the revisionary Marxist understanding of colonialism as freedom at home through extraction abroad as much as it concerns the psychopathology of bourgeois life in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which allowed for plausible theories of genuine individuation alongside complementary theories of instrumental reason and the commodification of personalities.

Fluck's interest in the narrative dimension of these modern self-descriptions is well taken, because storytelling is really where their compatibility – or their dialectical interdependence – has turned into incompatibility. This happened long before any poststructuralist ever obsessed over totality. The confrontation

of theoretical choices identified by Fluck for classical narratives of modernity can be traced back to several moments of philosophical contingency control in the nineteenth century, or acts of emplotment, among them Marx and Engels's translation of their empirically won notion of contradictory reproduction into a Hegelian agon of quasi-personified historical forces. The Marxist philosophy of history tells a story in the oldest – non-serial – sense of the term: imagining a beginning and an end for otherwise open-ended and recursive sequences of action. Significantly, however, this move toward closure has mobilized entire series of follow-up narratives, many of them no longer Marxist in name, but all of them attempting to realign theoretical requirements with the unpredictable sprawl of the empirically observable.[6] In terms of storytelling, what emerges can essentially be viewed as continuity management: after the puzzling failure of "the working class" to appear as a revolutionary agent, other idealistic subjects or other sentimental objects were called upon to act as characters, inspiring alternative plots within the same narrative universe, among them the competing narratives of control and expressiveness singled out by Fluck in his accounts of American Studies in the 1990s.[7]

How does this history of narratives cast light upon U.S. popular culture in the early 2020s? One way of gauging the methodological provocation of this question, from the point of view of a theory of seriality, is to approach certain narratives about popular culture (consistent with their media conditions) as popular narratives themselves. Another way is to attend to feedback loops between these stories and stories of high-theoretical modernity. One and the same dramatic scenario in either field (say, "the people versus the power bloc") can have – and usually does have – different cultural meanings and different political consequences in 1998 and 2023, precisely because its iteration unfolds against the reflective background of an entire series of previous variations.[8] In other words, seriality studies shifts our analytical focus from basic stories to multi-agential storyworlds.

What this means for the history of our digital present becomes clear when we consider a third point: to call something a narrative – and to study its narrative actions – does not mean that its accounts are necessarily fictional or its explications necessarily false. Whether one sees the serial proliferation of

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6   Marx, coincidentally, was an attentive reader not only of Hegel but also of Eugène Sue.

7   See especially Fluck's thoughts on "cultural radicalism" as a driving force of methodological differentiation at the time of the founding of The Futures of American Studies Institute at Dartmouth in 1997 ("Humanities"). On one-upmanship as a practice of serialization, see Jahn-Sudmann and Kelleter, "Serielle Überbietung."

8   For "the people versus the power bloc," see Hall, "Race, Articulation and Societies" (360).

identities in the 2020s as a legitimate process of social articulation that makes the culture more inhabitable, or as some post-Fordist diversionary tactic, or as the absurd narcissism of miniscule differences ('how many feminisms do we need?') probably depends to no small degree on one's own interactions with a fledgling liberal media ecology. Two of the expert sources quoted by Fluck on the disappearance of the popular in the era of streaming platforms are, not coincidentally, professionals within a changing popular media landscape themselves. Mary McNamara is a TV and film columnist who came of age in the broadcasting era, a time of deep commitment to the "cultural forum" ideal of popular media.[9] Anne Helen Petersen, in turn, introduces herself as a "media studies professor," which is correct in the sense that she taught classes at a liberal arts college (Whitman College) in the context of her PhD thesis on celebrity gossip, but she is probably better described as a digital pundit tasked with constantly processing new releases. (Hence her focus on keeping up with what's coming out, rather than, say, questions of canonization and historicization; hence also her sudden turn to praising content diversity over cultural agreement at the end of her *Guardian* piece.) Both writers are buzz workers in the gig economy, Petersen literally working for *BuzzFeed*, with book publications on millennial burnout and stress management to her name. Put differently, McNamara's diagnosis of "self-serve" culture and Petersen's rhetorical worry that U.S. entertainment is turning into fragmented clutter are experientially grounded in very specific ways. That is what makes them so interesting: they are narratives *within*, not just *about*, digital popular culture.

Having reached a point where "loss of popular cohesion" has become a popular scenario itself, we might want to ask (borrowing a criterion invoked at the end of Fluck's piece): how "close to reality" is this often-told tale? I would suggest that the formula of "self-serve media" tells a story not only in the sense that it is plotted (*from* culture *to* clutter), but also in that it acts as an orienting *fiction* with interesting cultural and demographic affinities. In digital times, it responds to new causes for worry with established scenarios, turning frustrating developments into customary dramas. Not surprisingly, the story's more scholarly uses tend to cluster around two epistemic modes which are inversely connected: para-academic opinion journalism (Petersen, Andersen) and sweeping big-concept sociological commentary with a certain mandarin indifference to actual digital-media research (Jürgen Habermas's otherwise instructive *Ein neuer Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit und die deliberative*

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9   Newcomb and Hirsch's "cultural forum," like the "liberal consensus," of which it is the pop-cultural offshoot, is best understood as an auto-ideal of broadcasting rather than an empirical description of deliberative media realities.

Politik comes to mind, which offers a theory of social media largely based in Habermasian classification literatures rather than empirical case studies, let alone social media literacy). In other words, the theory of culture's digital dissolution comes with methodological constraints that suggest the need for alternative accounts. Let me offer a few thoughts on these constraints in the remainder of this section before I will ask, in the next, how Fluck's work on epistemic narrativity can aid the study of popular culture in the twenty-first century.

Fragmentation is an unhelpful concept for grasping the reality of current media transformations because it already gets fundamental features of digital communication wrong. McNamara's belief that viewers "never see anything they don't want to see" – the topos of digital "bubbles" – can serve as a case in point. Increasing customization of media content (an obvious fact) and radical political polarization (a fact in need of a different terminology) are basically read here as narcissistic atomization (microscopic consumer groups ceaselessly mirroring themselves in their own taste preferences). While it could be asked how challenging or confrontational pre-digital broadcasting routines – or academic reading cultures, for that matter – ever were for their audiences by comparison, there are other problems with this claim as well. When differentiation is interpreted as disintegration, this certainly tells us something about the normative assumptions of the implied ideal of public communication, but the resulting verdict of subcultural self-absorption obscures noteworthy effects of permeability between digital communities. In fact, the metaphor of mutually indifferent "bubbles" clashes interestingly with the metaphor of belligerent "polarization" which so often accompanies it. Does digital differentiation primarily work as close-circuited reinforcement? The recent history of popular genres, which is largely a history of intensified genre crossovers, seems to paint a different picture. Socially, too, it is doubtful if the existence of micro-targeted genres isolates people into exclusive taste communities. Nothing prevents audience members from participating simultaneously in several different, even seemingly incompatible, subcultures. The "cultural omnivore," while not an invention of the age of Twitter, has become a pervasive phenomenon only in digital times. Indeed, everyone who has spent some time on social media knows that it is not impossible – and actually quite likely – that pop-cultural discursive spaces cut across multiple social and political groupings. Thus, "equine-themed entertainment" possibly brings together Democrats and Republicans in a similar fashion as did Robert Putnam's acclaimed sports clubs before "the collapse of American community" (though in both cases probably less amicably than one would like to assume for voluntary associations). Conversely, one of the most

astonishing American television series of late, *BoJack Horseman*, did not stream on Horse Lifestyle but, rather predictably, on Netflix – which surely contributed to its considerable national and international popularity.

The fragmentation hypothesis is evidently not well positioned to study the real effects of digital popularity. In fact, it is practically forced to downplay or dismiss their significance. Frustration about content excess aside, artists such as Beyoncé and Taylor Swift (in pop music), or the MCU (in franchise cinema), or the *Grand Theft Auto* series (in digital gaming) are "popular" in any classical definition of the term.[10] Indeed if popularity is measured in numbers and revenue alone, digital-era hits and stars regularly surpass any old Hollywood blockbuster or traditional rock band. Television, in turn, would be an odd choice to exemplify one's theory of digital culture, because, as the original broadcasting medium after radio, American television has undergone numerous institutional and aesthetic transitions to transmedia narrowcasting since the 1980s which have no direct equivalent in digital gaming or social-media memes (arguably the more typical manifestations of contemporary popular culture). This is why digital-era television provides such an instructive case to track shifting constellations of cultural spheres (formerly known as "high," "low," "mass," etc.) and their changing modes of canonization, but the best studies in this vein insist on a careful notion of media specificity which places televisual developments relationally within a larger media ecology.[11]

None of this is to say that popular culture has essentially remained the same in the twenty-first century or that no striking – or distressing – transformations have occurred. In fact, the opposite is true. But a strong fragmentation theory of digital culture will almost automatically read Beyoncé's *Lemonade* transmedia releases or Rockstar's *Red Dead Redemption* franchise as epiphenomenal outliers – ephemeral clutter after all: interchangeable "content," relatively meaningless

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10   In *Computing Taste: Algorithms and the Makers of Music Recommendation*, Nick Seaver historicizes the complaint that there is simply "too much music" (22) for popularity to survive: he shows that this issue is as old as popular music itself. As a "problem," it has been propagated primarily by the music industry and, today, digital tech companies which provide "recommender systems" (26) promising to relieve the very stress they posit and nourish. See: "What can we make of the long history of overload's unrelenting novelty? If we treat these stories as instances of a myth and look for their shared structure, we might note that they are not just historical accounts of the state of media; they are stories about a scalar relationship between archives and individuals" (36). I am grateful to Annelot Prins for this reference.

11   There is a rich literature on these micro-histories of U.S. television, capable of aiding any more general theory of contemporary popular culture. I will engage a few selected contributions in the next section; for a brief overview of noteworthy developments before streaming platforms, see Kelleter, *Serial Agencies*.

against the crucial backdrop of technological randomization.[12] If popular culture is a resonant field of "social and cultural self-understanding" (Fluck, *Populäre Kultur* vi, m.t.), this is not a promising theoretical option. To claim that the cultural relevance of pop is diluted by overabundance while each new Taylor Swift album mobilizes extensive, meticulous, and enduring interpretive debates in various cultural fields means to retreat from studying historical significance where it happens, in favor of either techno-determinism (whose method of choice would indeed be algorithmic) or retrenchment within the discipline's conventionalized narratives (which may not be adequate to apprehend changing communicative realities).

The challenge is to describe the outsized character of digital popularity, as it unfolds in the context of hyper-differentiated and hyper-customized offerings, both in terms of content (the national and international debates that cluster around successful titles, often with greater sophistication than in any pre-digital "cultural forum," and more durably so, as the example of franchise cinema shows) *and* in terms of technological infrastructure (the media-ecological conditions, relations, and actions of self-aware commercial entertainments). Changing patterns of evaluation and canonization in media-specific fields can be identified, and their transmedia dealings, including what Annelot Prins has called "one-sided fan practices from ... undesired audience[s]" (144), can be reconstructed without any one scholar having to survey all available productions. As Fluck notes, "scholarship in American studies and Popular Culture studies has always been selective" ("Self-Serve Media," 383). Thus, "meaningful selections" can be proposed on the basis of reasonable criteria (for instance, impact: the size, duration, or substance of cultural controversies as they accrue around specific texts or performances) much in the same way that scholars of literary realism have proposed "meaningful generalizations" (relying, for instance, on the field's own canonization practices) without having had to study or even to consider all available nineteenth-century novels and magazines (394; 382).[13] As it happens, this type of work is being done in popular culture studies

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12   To regard Beyoncé as nothing more than today's version of Madonna would suggest a poor theory of popular seriality, but even more so a poor historical understanding of Madonna's pop art – and possibly no aesthetic understanding of Beyoncé at all. It's better to let our study of popular culture be guided by Fluck's question from 1999: "Could it actually be that the success of American popular culture has something to do with the product itself?" (241).

13   The canon of television shows that have risen above the fray of ever new releases is surprisingly stable even in the narrowcasting era. While there are countless shows with only small or ephemeral audiences (though sizeable or fannish enough to warrant production), large-scale and long-lived cultural conversations still aggregate around a

today, not by a single defining publication or a grand theory ostensibly looking in from the outside, but in numerous focused contributions dialogically engaged with each other – and with the reflexivities of their material.

Many of these studies have taken note of digital culture's entanglements with political populism, especially in its right-wing varieties. There is much to worry about indeed. The world that reaches us through our digital devices, day by day, second by second, is an alarming one. Utopian populism – a powerful disposition in many Anglophone modes of studying popular culture, as Fluck points out – collapses as a credible narrative the moment you go online. This may cause identity crises in certain quarters of American Studies, but more importantly does it underline the need for more realistic accounts (to the extent that our prime commitment is to adequate research and not to disciplinary positioning). The present essay cannot fulfill this task but let me list a few preliminary points.

So much seems clear: large-scale national debates have not disappeared from U.S. culture in the age of digital media. On the contrary, national debates now invade local realities and private lives (inside and outside the United States) more pervasively and more vehemently than ever before. What distinguishes these "shared conversations" in the age of social media, apart from their ubiquity and their often negative affectivity, is that they are conducted overwhelmingly in the currency of popular culture (think of the potent effects of fictional worlds such as *The Matrix* or *Game of Thrones* on rival political imaginaries and iconographies: "red-pilling" and such). Memes and digital cosplay have become conventional idioms at the highest administrative levels (think of Donald Trump's NFT trading cards). Trolling, once primarily practiced in rowdy online communities, has turned into a standard operating procedure of American public communication.[14] Political enmities are fueled more than ever by vicious contests about the meanings of commercial products (Bud Light, Barbie, Ron DeSantis's fight with Disney, George Soros being compared to Magneto – to name just a few recent examples). Social media, far from shattering into tiny, isolated tribes, confront us with a massive agglomeration of storyworlds and gamingworlds commenting on each other, borrowing from each other, battling each other, continuing each other. In fact, this may not be a bad description of American popular culture at large right now.

Increasing politicization of popular tastes and consumer choices produces almost visceral constellations of opposition, for which "polarization" appears

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manageable set of prominent series, such as *The Sopranos*, *Mad Men*, *The Walking Dead* etc. As always, some of these shows stand the test of time, others do not, and still others are reevaluated after a while – not unlike in pre-digital canonization cultures.

14   See Phillips, *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things*.

to be far too symmetric a term. Even before Elon Musk bought Twitter and Donald Trump founded Truth Social, digital populism had been trending to the right. This gives a different, if more accurate, meaning to Mary McNamara's 2004 musings on "personal media." But the proprietary structure of new media is only the most obvious expression of a much wider paradigm shift away from liberal communication ideals – a shift that is at the same time anchored in those very ideals, but serially so, that is, by readapting them, gamifying them, weaponizing them. Simon Strick has demonstrated how alt-right "meta-politics" operates as an intensely networked pop-cultural strategy of performative transgressions, resulting in a veritable issues-pipeline leading from multitudes of Reddit influencers to reputable bourgeois feuilletons.[15] In short, neofascism is not a "bubble" in the 2020s. It is an enormously dispersed, agenda-setting campaign across platforms, media, social classes, and national publics. In fact, the liberal press's persistent obsession with "cancel culture" – closely related to the same newspapers' fondness for the fragmentation story of digital media – has reached these venues through a vibrant maze of far-right-wing channels, as Adrian Daub has shown. What is more, the "cancel culture" diagnosis is literally a *story*: an affectively charged concoction of anecdotes, rumors, hyperbole, and disinformation. As such, it bears all the marks of a classically "popular" topic of interest: ceaselessly reproduced as an urgent issue of collectivity, excitedly adapted in ever new registers and genres (from tweets to bestselling books to professional organizations), all purportedly counterworking the dangers of identitarian disintegration while seeking to uphold rather special communicative prerogatives.

When neofascist flame warriors in the 2020s re-process liberal critiques of cultural radicalism that pertained in the 1980s/90s and then feed these updated narratives back into their original media, we have reached a moment when it pays to think about storyworlds. Is it surprising that so many liberal scripts should perpetuate themselves in this situation as right-wing takes on "free speech"? Is it surprising in these revanchist times that so many public intellectuals should reinvent themselves as cultural warriors against an ideological plague of "moralizing" (Lasch's bête noir already)? With faux oppositional relish, libertarian opinion leaders can now quote Marx, Bourdieu, and even the spirit of punk against environmental activists, whom they frame as bourgeois fools for

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15   See Strick, *Rechte Gefühle*. One important origin story of the international alt-right (in organizational, ideological, and aesthetic terms) is decidedly pop-cultural: in 2014, GamerGate sparked a powerful blitz of neofascist online activism worldwide – and not just in the manosphere.

distinction, ego-driven fanatics of some juste milieu.[16] Meanwhile in academia, generational memories reboot totalitarian anxieties from the 1960s/70s (all those far-left splinter groups!) until every objection from the precarious margins feels like censorship and any appeal to an overarching perspective of social responsibility – in the face of global climate catastrophe no less – can be marked as moralistic zealotry. This remapping of our political storyworlds (the serial rebirth of ideology critique as pop-reactionary trolling) fundamentally changes the meaning of the plots and character constellations on which it draws, because awareness of a history of narrative outbidding now becomes, through deviously clever loopings, a radical outbidding strategy itself.

In a subliminally dark essay analyzing John F. Kennedy as an empty media projection, Winfried Fluck spoke of "a terrible truth about democracy": the possibility that "at the center of democracy (and democratic consent) stands a 'void' – a hero that does not exist" ("Fallen Hero" 493-94). Written in 2007, these words illuminate a great deal about the attrition of liberal reality filters in the 2020s. The mainstreaming of conspiracy theories (with their classically "popular" plots) that we get to witness every day in a wide variety of media formats – Telegram, Parler, Twitter/X, Breitbart, Fox News; in Germany: Springer, Focus, Compact, Nius, etc. – feeds on a contradiction that has accompanied the liberal-democratic *sensus communis* for the entirety of its remarkably long run: its peculiar oscillation between inclusivity and exclusivity, permissiveness and compulsion, trust in factuality and reliance on fictionalization. Must every system of serial reproduction eventually reach a breaking point, its moment of madness, when output can no longer be reflectively distinguished from input? Endgame or not, it seems strangely symbolic for the state of U.S. popular culture in 2023 that the most recent variation of "the Kennedy legend" (475) is emblematized by Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s bizarre presidential campaign – while a "sane" counter-version is provided by the social media posts and Netflix appearances of Arnold Schwarzenegger. Whether we look at Trumpian Kennedys, QAnon, militant Covid-19 denial, automotive self-defense, or the recreational terrorism of January 6, 2021: what we see is not fragmentation, but a swarm of fantastical counterpublics pushing in the same rough direction, a thousand frustrated mainstreams in frantic search of their oppression.

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16   Case in point: read any op-ed of the German daily *Die Welt* from the last five years or
      so, then trace back its buzzwords and slogans to (usually U.S.-American) fascist memes
      subsequently re-sampled, in a kind of populist DJ spirit, by multipliers like Ben Shapiro,
      Tucker Carlson, Alex Jones etc. (Simon Strick has been doing some of this work in real
      time on social media; it is not restricted to overtly "conservative" news outlets.)

The Task of Research

> Re-descriptions can justify their interpretive
> stance toward descriptions only in temporal
> terms, as being appropriate for today's state
> of things, even when we can expect that
> tomorrow they will be treated
> as yesterday's descriptions.
>
> – Niklas Luhmann,
> *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*[17]

An adequate history of our digital present cannot be written on disciplinary autopilot. It requires, among other things, precise analysis of the temporalities, affectivities, and infrastructural relations of new popular media together with a nuanced (practice-centered) conception of neoliberalism, a historically grounded understanding of fascist modernities, and a non-populist theory of populism. It also requires the kind of disciplinary self-reflection of which Winfried Fluck's work on epistemic narratives is a model.

Like many Americanists of my generation, I first read Fluck in the early 1990s, struggling to make sense of the disciplinary landscape that surrounded my PhD project. I learned from Fluck to read theories of American culture as theories of modernity. I learned to understand these theories as creative parts of the culture they professed to explain. Fluck also taught me how various American genres – from realist novels to film noir – revolve around a central topic of modernity: the conflict between structure and agency, reproduction and expression, instrumentalization and individualization. In our current post-critical climate, the meta-perspective proposed by these essays is easily misconstrued as a stance of "superiority," which claims "to see something others have failed to see" (as Fluck himself has phrased it now ["Self-Serve Media," 395]). But you only have to read them to understand that their critical gain is thoroughly empirical, not attitudinal. Maybe we can call this Fluck's Tocquevillean sensibility: the provision, not of a commanding view from nowhere, but of an illuminating view from elsewhere. I like to think of Fluck's epistemic ethos as that of the intellectual visitor, who reflects on a culture in terms that are not quite its own but in which it can recognize itself. These writings excel at making intelligible

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17   My translation. "Der Zugriff solcher Wiederbeschreibungen auf Beschreibungen kann sich dann nur noch zeitlich rechtfertigen als der heutigen Lage angemessen mit der Aussicht, daß er morgen als von gestern behandelt wird" (892-93).

what is communicated without being made explicit. They develop a sensible vocabulary for what remains unspoken when a culture speaks to itself. Or in different terms: I have learned to appreciate Fluck's theoretical writings as re-descriptions. If they offer us a master class in meta-reading, they do so with a built-in understanding of their own conditions and constraints.

Note, for instance, that many of Fluck's essays (including the one I was invited to riff on here) conclude not with authoritative solutions, but with the identification of a problem. Hence the careful, step-by-step cartography of arguments; hence the non-rhetorical questions, the tentative qualifiers, the subjunctives. An important term – a favorite word really – in many of these texts is: "unexpected."[18] The meta-narrative project consists in rendering stories visible as stories, but without resolving their contradictions, rather probing deeper into them. As a complex thinker, Fluck is no friend of easy syntheses and yet his writing provides exactly what it questions: the promise of orientation. Tellingly, the tale of two competing narratives, which is at the heart of Fluck's many variations on the history of American Studies, offers no happy endings, no tragic endings, no endings at all. And yet it has helped generations of scholars to find their way around a confusing (unpredictably unfolding) field of explanatory options.

If there is a drawback to this approach it may reside in the very strength of its own narrative about narratives. The original impact of Fluck's 1973 essay "Das ästhetische Vorverständnis der American Studies" rested in no small measure on its strong assumption about assumptions. A term originating in the German hermeneutical tradition, "Vorverständnis" (innocuously translated as "premises") refers to the fact that there is no unconditioned understanding of cultural objects, no value-free act of sense-making. This always-already status of interpretation can be narrated – and evaluated – in many different ways. A charismatic version, sanctioned by phenomenological modes of thought, will read the "Vor" *(pre)* of "Vorverständnis" as a philosophical apriority, which locates the meaning of an epistemological proposition in its "underlying" or "tacit" premises. But is this true for every act of research? Even "power narratives" are not necessarily powerful in this manner (especially not since some studies of neoliberalism have begun to question the disciplinary model of power). No doubt, philosophies of "capitalism" or "the aesthetic" – to name two widespread abstractions competing for the status of being *pre* – lend themselves to strong convictions, but it is perfectly possible to utilize their empirical affordances without staging dramatic conflicts. In good scholarship,

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18   Or in the title of the most recent essay, "Unforeseen."

output never equals input, and conclusions always modify assumptions. We have the flexibility of hypotheses; we have the corrective example – indeed the results – of other people's research.

So what should we do with articles that use Madonna as an „exemplary case[] to make their point" (Fluck, "Self-Serve Media," 376), as if that point preceded the case? I would ask, are these the best examples of the state of the field? Is this the most useful way of reading them? Does it follow that "in American studies and Popular Culture studies … scholars have selected those objects that can be used in support of the story they want to tell"? One would hope not – especially not "as a rule" (383). The stronger our narrative of narratives, the more we may be tempted to regard a particular type of scholarship as the rule of all scholarship. Some contributions, it is true, are more concerned with problems of conceptual arrangement than with problems of material knowledge, but both modes of inquiry usually inform each other. In any case – in all cases – narrativity is an inevitable feature of knowledge production, and unsurprisingly so, given that interpretations are necessarily entwined with previous interpretations, including the ways in which an object of analysis reads and interprets itself. But while preconceptions are always at work, the exact role they play in individual research contributions varies greatly. This is why the study of epistemic narrativity cannot be a gotcha exercise (uncovering *that* stories are being told, as if this revealed anything about the validity of the work being done, or as if the revealer of stories was not a storyteller in turn). What a meta-narrative approach can do, however, is ask which specific stories are being continued, which mediations are modifying them, and which consequences occur as a result. A meta-narrative approach can consider what the storied historicity of research findings means for further attempts at accurate description, including one's own inquiries (a task usually performed by other readers: one's collaborators, not competitors). As Fluck phrases it, some epistemic narratives are arguably "closer (…) to reality" than others (395). Or maybe we should say: more appropriate accounts will always be motivated more strongly by their shared interest in plausible historical reconstruction than by their desire to tell or safeguard a pre-formulated story.

This, then, is the continued promise of the Fluckian approach as I see it: "changing narratives" demand attention, not to uncover something determinist behind the research of others – whose story commitments may be accidental, contradictory, provisional, or experimental, in any case not the most important or interesting aspects of their work – but to facilitate historical meta-reflection as a process of joint communicative adjustment. That no single meta-narrative emerges authoritative from this process does not mean that epistemic chaos

rules. In fact, no *narrative* will ever be able to contain a stable sense of reality, or even a stable sense of itself, because narrative is by its nature a practice of proliferation, differentiation, and competition. Digital communication drives home this point when it irritates certain philosophical beliefs from the age of print, sometimes rendering them newly visible as the beliefs of a specific media constellation.[19] This involves, for instance, the changing historical use-value of modern self-descriptions (say, the narrative standoff between ideology critique and media populism, "mass culture" and "participatory culture," Frankfurt and Birmingham).[20] It also involves the conviction that the task of authentic sense-making falls to "the scholar" – as if there were only one, or as if each member of the scholarly crowd would have to work from such an outstanding self-conception.

No single book can do it all. No single essay, no single mind, can do it all, for the simple but frustrating media-historical reason with which this essay started. But there's good news in this: "one" doesn't have to watch every American television series or read the entirety of Twitter/X – and yet these media can be studied in meaningful ways. The challenge in doing so lies not in senseless fragmentation ("we … cannot make any meaningful selections of what is representative" [394]) but in the need to develop changing conceptual tools and changing work practices alongside our changing communicative realities. This concerns not only the constant flow of apps like TikTok and BeReal, which serially supplant each other, but also older media and their often-submerged serialities. "Paper" novels are media-ecological creatures too – and quite aware of it, as Alexander Starre has shown (2015). Our research objects come with self-observations that deserve to be taken seriously, because chances are that they will already have (been) swayed (by) the narratives we mean to "apply" to them. Any theory of U.S. popular culture in the digital age will therefore want to factor in, at some level, how scholarly and other reading modes have

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19   Compare John Durham Peters: "What if we took not two human beings trying to share thoughts as our model of communication, but a population evolving in intelligent interaction with its environment?" (4). Different temporalities than the ones inherent in the print-cultural dyad of reader and work (the phenomenological scenario of a subject struggling to understand an idealized objective "otherness") become visible when production and reception are no longer modeled as distinct sequential stages (primary and secondary) but as media-ecological reciprocities.

20   Think about the many U.S. television series of the early 2000s that directly addressed the mental and physical stress involved in watching them (Kelleter, "Serien als Stresstest" and "Whatever Happened, Happened"). The complicated capitalist self-reflexivity of these shows is not captured by delegating their aesthetics to some residual realm of non-economized recalcitrance – or, complementarily, subordinating their aesthetics to an overall diagnosis of neoliberal determination (aka "complicity").

come to shape the self-understanding and the production practice, indeed the serial continuation – the writing – of popular storyworlds.[21] Instead of bringing strongly pre-positioned narratives to "a text" (usually in order to reveal core assumptions already known to us but not to the object under investigation) we can reconstruct what the material knows about itself, about its contemporaneity, its scattered textualities, its infrastructural conditions, and how such knowledge interfaces with the knowledge we have learned to distinguish as "ours."

Another way of putting this is to ask: are current studies of popular culture really forced to state their allegiance to an established paradigm ("we will have to take a stand" [393]), so as to be fitted into a familiar narrative of narratives? The answer is demonstrably no. Many recent analyses of U.S. popular culture explicitly situate themselves "at a respectful remove from the battle lines established between critical theory (the Frankfurt School), cultural studies (in the wake of the Birmingham School), and cultural philosophy (following several master thinkers)" (Kelleter, "Popular Seriality" 10). Working under no special commitment to ideology-critical, media-populist, or vitalist-philosophical stories of popular culture – three paradigms in this model – such contributions nevertheless illuminate how the histories of these epistemic storyworlds have impacted commercial entertainment (studies).[22] Many of these investigations, and especially the German ones, are crucially informed by Fluckian modes of doing American Studies. A brief list of examples shall suffice.

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21   Compare Kelleter and Loock: "in the context of digital-age [popular culture,] (…) formerly academic modes of interpretation migrate in large numbers to the realm of consumer [and producer] practices" (131).

22   Specifying these paradigms in 2017, the quoted passage continues: "[T]his model is still far too schematic. While the Frankfurt and Birmingham schools are fairly well defined – one a neo-Marxist critique of 'the culture industry' that pits the negativity of avant-garde art against illusory freedoms produced by an all-encompassing 'mass culture,' the other centered on populist notions of reception that put their anticapitalist hopes in acts of 'participation' (understood as either countertotalitarian resistance or democratic meaning-making) – the field of 'neo-vitalist' approaches (…) is less distinct. (…) From their perspective, popular series are likely to be seen as expressions of utopian transgression or (media) philosophical conjecture, to be distinguished from the managerial, 'practico-inert' seriality depicted in neo-Marxist models like Jean-Paul Sartre's (1960). Early manifestations of this argument described television series as the epitome of a postmodernist aesthetics of multiplicity (Nelson 1997, relying on Eco 1962). Following Deleuze (1968, 1969), poststructuralist and posthumanist approaches in particular have shown a strong affinity for neo-vitalist positions, portraying seriality as a fundamental life force of culture. Currently, there is an energetic intellectual market for diverse *post*-isms that value seriality as a transcendence-bound principle of nonlinear intensity or speculative temporality, sometimes with barely concealed metaphysical or religious associations" (10-11).

Jared Gardner's *Projections: Comics and the History of Twenty-First-Century Storytelling* (2012) and Jason Mittell's *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television* (2015) provide thoroughly researched aesthetic-institutional analyses of American serial comics and post-broadcasting American television, respectively, without subscribing to hermeneutically-suspicious, agency-extolling, or media-ontological master plots. Christina Meyer's *Producing Mass Entertainment: The Serial Life of the Yellow Kid* (2019) re-conceptualizes "modernity" from the media-historical vantage point of digital-age seriality studies, mapping a vast social aesthetic of proliferation in nineteenth-century newspaper comics. Ruth Mayer's *Serial Fu Manchu* (2013) investigates processes of "spread" in early twentieth-century popular culture with the help of a non-symptomatic notion of ideology, tracing adaptive media operations without having to invoke a scenario of remote powers working behind the scenes. In fact, this scenario becomes visible now as a storytelling convention that the critique of "mass culture" has borrowed from popular culture itself.[23] Similarly, Ilka Brasch's *Film Serials and the American Cinema, 1910-1940* (2018) discusses silent and sound-era Hollywood serials as filmic forms that do not conceal their industrial-commercial conditions but derive from them their – characteristically modern – self-understanding as "narrative engines" of contingency management and meta-medial "detection." Maria Sulimma's landmark study *Gender and Seriality* (2020) explores affective practices of neoliberal gender and identity politics in early twenty-first-century cable television series, distinguishing discrete "feedback modes" (beyond Mittell's primarily "forensic" definition of "the operational aesthetic"), among them a specific type of "thinkpiece seriality" which might also shed some light on the writings of columnists like McNamara and Petersen. Daniel Stein's *Authorizing Superhero Comics: On the Evolution of a Popular Serial Genre* (2021) offers a compelling concept of popular authorship that disturbs classical distinctions between production and reception, resulting in a model of genre evolution centered on "authorization conflicts" (Kelleter and Stein 2012). Felix Brinker's *Superhero Blockbusters* (2022) asks how the interactive consumption practices of platform capitalism (consumption as immaterial and cognitive labor) interrelate with Jenkins-inspired theories of "participatory culture." Identifying distinct evolutionary stages of "a politics of audience engagement" in the "hyper-referential style," the "fan management," and the "cinematic populism" of Marvel and DC franchises, this analysis of

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23 Compare Boltanski, *Mysteries & Conspiracies* on the interpenetration of crime fiction and modern sociology. Similar investigations could be launched for political economy and sentimental fiction, phenomenology and the romance, ontological metaphysics and the horror genre, network philosophies and the picaresque novel.

digital entertainment – not a culture of narcissism – registers transformations of popular and populist culture that are not reducible to a scheme of power and resistance. The same can be said about Sören Schoppmeier's *Playing American: Open-World Videogames and the Reproduction of American Culture* (2023), which brings together perspectives from Game Studies and transnational American Studies, with crucial consequences for our understanding of digital world-building. This book not only reconstructs how the contemporary gamification of popular culture remediates "American culture" in a database logic (modularizing iconographies, genres, "myths," etc.), but it also demonstrates how digital gameworlds have been changing the nature of popular storytelling itself – and with it the atmospheric "ambience" of "America" as an imaginative space for play where "freedom" manifests concretely as "choice." In a related vein, Shane Denson and Andreas Sudmann's "Digital Seriality: On the Serial Aesthetics and Practice of Digital Games" – a much quoted essay in Game Studies – maps the terms and conditions of "an experimental aesthetics of modern life" (282) that bridges the (alleged) conceptual opposition of narratological and ludological theories of gaming. Denson's *Discorrelated Images* (2020), in turn, rethinks the phenomenological tradition for post-cinematic media ensembles, moving phenomenology away from the re-active transmission temporalities suggested by the dyadic model of spectator and film. In a more activist register, Madita Oeming's *Porno: Eine unverschämte Analyse* (2023) turns to the most popular body genre of them all, probing its sensory, social, and political resonances and engaging for this purpose, among others, Sarah Schaschek's pioneering *Pornography and Seriality: The Culture of Producing Pleasure* (2014). Simon Strick's work on "reflexive fascism" (2021) employs praxeological methods of social media research, because the "mass culture" model of fascist manipulation is clearly out of touch with current media-political realities. Till Kadritzke's forthcoming *Losing Control: New Hollywood, Countercultural Whiteness, and the Politics of Expressivity* examines the interplay between postmodern theories of emotion and the cinematic styles of the New Hollywood, thus offering "an alternative perspective on the historiography of the 1960s and 1970s" that elucidates the forgotten contributions of countercultural (affect) aesthetics and "existential hipness" to the formation of New Right sensibilities ("from the agency panic of midcentury to the panic about new agencies in the 1970s"). Kathleen Loock's forthcoming *Hollywood Remaking* expressly refrains from casting commercialism and aesthetics as competing critical alternatives, reconstructing instead how changing remaking practices have shaped the culture's "memory" systems – and how Hollywood's special affinity for retrospective serialization has inflected American meanings of (media) history. There are

book-length studies about digital television's impact on contemporary under-
standings of intelligence and survival (Maxi Albrecht) and racial incarceration
(Lee Flamand). Other projects include works-in-progress that analyze the
media-ecological conditions of "celebrity feminism" in contemporary pop music
(Annelot Prins), online "reactivity" as a televisual adaptation and remediation
strategy (Maximilian Stobbe), the self-historicization of the sci-fi genre in times
of climate change (Fabius Mayland), the complicated affective structures of
right-wing feminisms – or "trad femininity" – on digital platforms (Alexandra
Deem), military entertainment's narratives of gender (Ali Tuzcu), serialization
strategies of indigenous media activisms in Oklahoma (Esther Prause), the
history of YouTube's self-performances as a "new medium" (Maya Blumenfeld),
narrative conventions in neoliberalized popular culture (Simon Schleusener),
and the infrastructural imagination of post-1945 California noir (Maxime
McKenna). There are also works on the media-aesthetic self-reflections of
American literature from the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries, such as
Alexander Starre's *Metamedia: American Book Fictions and Literary Print Culture
after Digitization* (2015) and Martin Lüthe's forthcoming *Wire Writing: Media
Change in the Culture of the Progressive Era.*

Is this all just "stuff about stuff"?[24] I mention these particular projects because
they have originated at, or have been produced in cooperation with, the John F.
Kennedy Institute of North American Studies at Freie Universität Berlin, Win-
fried Fluck's home institution. They do not form a school. They are not unified by
a shared methodology. They certainly do not propose a revolutionary counter-
narrative to whatever story constellation is thought in need of replacement.
What they do have in common, however, is a present-day sense of shifting
media-historical exigency which also reconfigures our understanding of the
past. Like other recent contributions (from other contexts) they are engaged in
a project of re-description, looking for plausible ways to conceptualize what
confronts us as the "contemporary reality" of "American culture." Fluck's essay
points to a potential risk involved in this undertaking: the deceptive belief in a
stance of pure description. Given the culture's current state of differentiation, it
is not surprising that ontological relativism has emerged as a strong temptation
in many of its academic self-considerations (especially in some, though not all,
Latourian approaches). Going forward, twenty-first-century researchers will
therefore want to continue reading Winfried Fluck, minding his call for critical
meta-reflection. What is to be avoided, after all, is a study of (popular) culture

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24   To quote Michael Bérubé's quip (9) about what some might call the clutter studies
     industry.

that finds itself, in the words of Stuart Hall, "so mesmerized by 'everything' that it cannot explain anything" ("Race, Articulation and Societies" 242).[25]

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25   The full quotation is about "the Scylla of a reductionism which must deny almost everything in order to explain something, and the Charybdis of a pluralism which is so mesmerized by 'everything' that it cannot explain anything" (ibid.).

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