Extended abstract:

Feminism, cultural studies and queer theory
An unfinished conversation

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This very ambitious conference title, *Mediated realities – global challenges,* addresses some vital issues for today's scholars in media studies and beyond. How are these scholars to make sense of current so-called 'realities' – cultural, social, economic and political? And how are these 'realities' inextricable from the multiple forms of mediation through which they are constituted? What does the coupling of the terms *mediated* and *realities* suggest? And how does the invocation of *'global'* challenges require scholars to rescale their frameworks to respond to the mediated realities they may wish to address?

These are disorienting political times to which it is proving hard to respond through usual critical and conceptual vocabularies. Since the double shock of the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom and the election of Donald Trump as president in the United States (and there are many other examples from different national and transnational contexts), scholars find themselves in a disturbing world in which *mediated realities and global challenges* have increased in political significance. Lauren Berlant has referred to the current political moment as a 'situation' (the way the police say, 'We've got ourselves a situation here'). As she puts it: a situation is a 'state of things in which *something* that will perhaps matter is unfolding amid the usual activity of life … [and this] produces a sense of the emergence of something in the present that may become an event' (Berlant, 2011:7). Written before the election of Trump, Berlant's diagnosis has become even more prescient today.

Trump has oddly usurped the traditional media studies positions of Left, feminist, anti-racist and queer criticism by questioning the ideological investments of the 'realities' of mainstream news media accounts, which he refers to as 'fake news'. In wanting to challenge the myths and falsehoods that fuel current racist, sexist and homophobic hatred and violence circulating in the media, scholars may find themselves defending the truth-telling media, even though they know this model is problematic. Meanwhile, in what might feel like the continuing madness of current populisms, it has become ever more vital to theorize *the power of fantasy* in current political landscapes: scholars must *account for*, not just *dismiss*, the appeal of the irrational. In a world characterized by precarity and obfuscation, desires for transparency and legibility increase. But, on balance, the model of mediated realities that promises to hold so-called 'reality' steady enough to examine it under an academic magnifying glass should be rejected; our com-

plex realities cannot be reduced to a static object of study, like an insect caught and held still in order to be apprehended as an entirety or examined under a scientific microscope. This model of the media as transparent communication, making 'realities' ever more legible, is a wish and not a viable methodology, and it should be read symptomatically.

In post-Brexit Britain, observers are witnessing increasing racism and xenophobia, which chime with the disastrous unfolding of Trump's administration. Across Europe, the rise of populism circulates racial and religious hatred and intolerance as a response to on-going economic instability. In trying to understand this current instability (which binds the economic to the cultural), Berlant has identified the 'retraction, during the last three decades, of the social democratic promise of the post-Second World War period in the United States and Europe' (Berlant, 2011:4). Here, she argues that everyday life is now characterized by the ordinary failures of 'the good life' promised by post-war social democracies: upward mobility, reliable intimacy and political satisfaction. This is not restricted to the United States and Europe; rather, according to Berlant, this is as 'transnational as the circulation of capital, state liberalism and the heterofamilial, upwardly mobile good-life fantasy have become' (Berlant, 2011:11). So when 'the good life' narrative – that keeps people striving, keeps them working, keeps them hoping – no longer holds traction, how is it possible to make sense of this failure? This 'situation', she argues, means that the present has begun to appear as *historical,* and it does so precisely *when it is not possible to respond to it through the usual affective genres* (Berlant uses 'genre' to refer to how modes of sociality are connected to media forms). The sense of the historical present, *as a temporality*, becomes most available when it falls apart – when 'reality' fails to live up to its promise. This is when its particularities become visible. It is the everyday failures of 'the promised good life', she argues, that require people to keep adjusting and adapting to the precarity of the historical present. For Berlant, precarity – the discursive organization of precariousness – is the current genre shaping Western social democracies. Precarity connects aesthetic forms to genres of political subjectivity. Even the privileged now have to adjust and adapt. Precarity is not only structural; it circulates through personal, sexual and affective genres.

In her most recent writing, Berlant has introduced the concept of 'genre flailing' to consider 'social/aesthetic form in relation to the mass vulnerability lived by persons, populations, and nations' (Berlant, 2017: 4). Etymologically, to flail means: to wave or swing wildly, to flap about or move erratically – if a person falls into a lake and cannot swim, the person will flail. Berlant argues that currently, 'The violence of the world makes us flail about for things to read with, people to talk to, and material for inducing transformations that can make it possible not to aspire to feel at war or to be right, but to be disturbed together, to thrash with and to create value through a shift in the object' (Berlant, 2017:6). As she puts it: 'Genre flailing … arises after the first gasp of shock or disbelief, or the last gasp of exhaustion. We genre flail so that we don't fall through the cracks of heightened affective noise into despair, suicide or psychosis' (Berlant, 2017:2). As people flail, she writes, their defensive projections mean their own 'aggressions and irrationality and out-of-scaleness are put on to other objects', while viewing their 'own commitments, as non-distorted, flexible, receptive, and thoughtful'. In the context of the 'failure of the political world to be worthy of our attachment to it' (Berlant, 2017:1), those individuals in the humanities might be experiencing a kind of *genre flailing* in relation to objects of study, as they direct their aggression towards these objects in an

attempt to anchor themselves. Berlant extends an invitation to reflect upon how the current situation requires people to think about the precarity of their political landscapes and upon how their critical orientations and objects of study are subject to becoming unstable and disorientated.

This author's plenary talk discussed these ideas through four examples. It began by looking at Marcus Harvey's portrait *Maggie,* in his 2009 exhibition *White Riot*.[1] If *Maggie* at first appears to be a large-scale, black and white reproduction of a close-up photograph of Margaret Thatcher as prime minister, as the viewer moves closer her photographic appearance fragments into a densely populated high relief, composed of thousands of plaster-cast objects (15,000, to be precise).[2] Protruding towards the approaching viewer is a bizarre mixture of disproportionate vegetables, skulls, piles of coins, pointing fingers, missiles, phalluses and cartoon masks of Tony Blair and Thatcher herself. The visitor to the gallery can change Maggie from photograph to assemblage of objects and back again just by moving around the gallery space. There is a vengeful pleasure in shattering *Maggie*'s apparent integrity and returning her to a precarious state – just as she inflicted precarity on others. This short reading considered the work's play with precarity, in both literalizing and metaphorical ways. In *Maggie*, Thatcher is finally made precarious, embodying the disintegration of Britishness itself.

As the centrepiece, *Maggie* is placed at the head of altered symbols of Britain's 'pathology of greatness', as Paul Gilroy has called it (2004). Together with the other artworks – *Victoria* (sporting greatness is deflated), *The Lord High Admiral* (national authority desecrated) and *Nike* (military prowess transformed) – *Maggie* signals the lament of the end of empire and the struggle to reclaim its greatness. This rescaling connects viewers to the wider political landscapes and longer colonial histories, pulling them out of the gallery and into the current 'global challenges' of the postcolonial world.

To continue this thread of exploring the global challenges of rescaling, a second example was a stunning three-screen installation about the life and work of Stuart Hall directed by John Akomfrah: *The Unfinished Conversation* (2010).[3] In contrast to the common conceptualization of the *global* as the omnipotent view of ourselves from the outside, the plenary talk focused on this work to explore a different world view, one pioneered by the late Stuart Hall, who is the focus of this installation. Challenging the universalizing discourse of 'the global', the talk argued that to constitute oneself *as a global subject* is to produce an illusory unity with which to identify.[4] Instead of this model of the global (as an omnipotent view from above), *The Unfinished Conversation* shifts scale in order to explore 'the making of Stuart Hall as a category that *could come into being'* (John Akomfrah, 2013) and to ask: what were the historical and cultural formations that produced this Jamaican-born writer, academic and critic who became a co-founder of the New Left, the director of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham from 1968 to 1979 and broadcaster of more than 8,000 hours of television and radio?

In making Hall into 'the subject of his own ideas' (Akomfrah, 2013), *The Unfinished Conversation* thwarts the fantasy that cinema's relationship to history is one of capture and revelation. Instead, the viewer is immersed in the incommensurate scales of time and place, of the personal and the political, which move between and across the triple screens. These offer an aesthetic experience of hovering on the edge of flailing (to use Berlant's term): too much, missed that, rewind, hang on a minute, can't take it all in. As critics, we submit to this experience of genre flailing (which is perhaps the opposite of media capture),

but at least we are in it together. *The Unfinished Conversation* performs aesthetically what cultural studies sought to achieve intellectually: exploring the strikingly incommensurate scales that constitute culture (rather than capturing the 'reality of global challenges and mediating them').

Third, the plenary talk offered a reading of Sally Potter's *YES* (2004), a love story in which a couple's future depends upon their capacity to be open to each other's cultural differences and unequal geopolitical histories. Taking the heterosexual couple as its trope for geopolitical conflicts and placing a cosmopolitan promise at their feet, *YES* introduces a desire for the subject's capacity to compensate for historical violence and injustice. Potter's film explores cosmopolitanism aesthetically as well as thematically: with its elegant formalities of scripted rhyming couplets, slowed montage sequences and exhilarating camera movement, *YES* presents less a direct political vision and more an aesthetic wish fulfilment. Its cosmopolitan imaginary traces not only love's potential but also its failure to heal conflicted political histories. The prejudices within and beyond the couple's intimacy are the potential obstacle to their future.

This film is interesting because it stages the shared *wishful ground* of love and cosmo-politanism. Two key ideas have characterized discussions of cosmopolitanism (Binnie, 2006:13): the wish to engender a sense of belonging, that feeling of being 'at home in the world' (Brenan, 1997) and an affirmation of living easily with cultural diversity, what Gilroy has called 'convivial culture' (2004). Cosmopolitanism flourishes in the context of what this author has called 'an ease of proximity to the unfamiliar' (Stacey, 2014). But, as Jacqueline Rose has argued, it is necessary to be cautious about the ways in which cosmopolitan visions risk 'idealising the psyche' and offering the 'flexibility of individual psychic processes … as the answer to the rigid identifications of political life' (2014:42-43). Cosmopolitanism mobilizes 'the individual – in a strikingly pre-Freudian incarnation … as a corrective to the perils of the group' (Rose, 2014:42-43). The danger of cosmopolitan ideals is that they individualize the burden of social harmony, repress ambivalence and antagonism, and take for granted a neoliberal ideal of the self-made subject. *YES* constitutes a yearning for the conditions of possibility that make politically transformative antagonistic encounters through love imaginable.

The plenary talk's final example was taken from this author's new work on Tilda Swin-ton's whiteness. The analysis here draws on Richard Dyer's argument that whiteness has historically provided the universal to the particularities of non-whiteness. Since the white subject has been 'positioned as the overseeing subject without properties', he suggests, this 'may lead one to wonder if one is a subject at all' (1997:207). Dyer identifies a fear of emptiness in the white subject that is denied and projected elsewhere. If anything is genre flailing today, it is surely the white subject, in its frantic disavowal of responsibility for the consequences of its history, in a world it has sought, and still seeks, to dominate and exploit.

Swinton offers an extensive image repertoire of strikingly pale whiteness: in Derek Jarman's *Edward II,* her whiteness underscores her ruthlessness as Queen Isabella; in Sally Potter's *Orlando*, the chalky paleness of her white skin anchors her in the mask of imperial Englishness, as he/she time-travels across the centuries and across cultures; in Susan Streitfeld's *Female Perversion*, Swinton's pale whiteness is extended into the fetishistic *mise-en-scene* of feminine desirability; in Luca Guadagnino's *I Am Love*, her sculpted pale perfection confirms the surface appearance of bourgeois serenity about to crack; and in *Only Lovers Left Alive*, Swinton's pallor is aestheticized as vampiric

desirability. The plenary talk's discussion of Swinton looked at whether her embodiment of an *over-presence of whiteness* can be read as *making visible the emptiness of the white subject*. Is this emptiness surfacing more generally in culture: the failing, or even flailing, genres of white subjectivity?

As a conclusion, the plenary presented the following provocations for discussion:

1. *Things are falling apart to such an extent that scholars are genre flailing.* (Berlant on the current 'situation': a structural and affective disturbance, making adaptation to unpredictability into an ordinary adjustment requirement)

2. *The social democratic fabric is now fatally torn, undermining the capacity of familiar affective genres and usual media analyses to work anymore.* (*Maggie*'s precarity as symptomatic of her legacy)

3. *It is vital to scale-shift in the analysis of mediation (remembering that the 'global' is a discursive construction and not a point of view on the world from the outside, which is illusory).* (scaling up and down in *The Unfinished Conversation*)

4. *Idealizations repress antagonism and ambivalence, which cannot be wished away – the repressed will return.* (love and cosmopolitanism in *YES*)

5. *Whiteness claims its place as the universal with no particular properties, but is the white subject now genre flailing*? (Tilda Swinton's paleness makes visible the white subject's internal otherness that is usually denied or forgotten.)

Notes

1. For a detailed account of this work, see Stacey (2010).
2. 'High relief' is the term that best describes the form of this portrait.
3. For a fuller account of this installation, see Stacey (2014).
4. For a discussion of the problems with the discourse of the global, see Franklin, Lury & Stacey (2000).

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