Introduction: At the Edge

Jeremy Moore and Nicole Strobel

Since its inception, *Media Fields Journal* has sought to explore timely topics with a spatial emphasis, and our current issue continues this mission by focusing on the edges of media in all forms. We ask: If spaces are constituted and mediated by social, cultural, and technical processes, where do these spaces end, blur, and/or run together? We are after media at the edge.

We began with Hunter S. Thompson’s classic provocation: “The edge . . . there is no honest way to explain it because the only people who know where it is are the ones who have gone over.”¹ The edge as a heuristic for media studies offers several possibilities for approach because of its dual denotations; it can act both as a form of speculative orientation that provides boundaries or points of entry, and as a threshold that offers the possibility of “going over.” Scholars such as Adrian Mackenzie, Lisa Parks, and Mél Hogan have explored media technologies through the lens of what might limit or alter their typical use.² Edward S. Casey writes that edges supply “a species of boundaries, that is, porous edges that take in as well as give out—in contrast to borders, which act to delimit institutions and concrete practices in the life-world.”³ Casey’s provocation suggests that studying media at the fringes or peripheries of society necessitates a discussion of the edges that construct their marginality. In this way, exploring media technologies and practices “at the edge” can help locate speculative or imagined horizons that inform the boundaries of identity, community, and globality.
Academic disciplines and fields of practice are often invested in shaping “a species of boundaries” around objects, methods, and modes of inquiry. Thus, meditating on the edge not only calls into question the boundaries that constitute media forms, but also inquires what cuts across disciplinary lines. While sociological work has most explicitly grappled with the edge through the notion of edgework, our goal was to see what this heuristic produced across a variety of disciplines that study media and space. By folding the edge into media studies, we are attending to the ways that these vital interests map onto considerations of media objects, practices, and institutions. Doing so can help us better understand the ways boundaries are drawn through technological, social, or environmental assemblages, the ways we ourselves draw boundaries and distinctions around the things we study, and the potential costs or rewards of crossing these boundaries or going over the edge.

In response to this call, we received a wide range of papers that expanded our own thinking about the heuristic value of the edge. Some authors consider edges in a variety of forms, such as seams, lines, peripheries, and barriers. Others explore texts and technologies that challenge conceptual edges, showing that accepted boundaries around notions of time and space; presence and absence; virtuality and reality; human and machine; technics and aesthetics; natures and cultures; and pasts, presents, and futures are constantly called into question by both emergent and persistent cultural practices and media technologies.

In the first section of this issue, our contributors explore how edges function in the production and exhibition of cinematic film. Aaron Dowdy and John Winn consider *Twentieth Century* (dir. Howard Hawks, US, 1934) as an example of classical Hollywood cinema’s tension between linear narrative action and “lineal” aspects of the film that threaten to destabilize the spectator’s linear understandings. For them, this film demonstrates how the lineal in cinema can actually work to order the linear, rather than simply opposing it. Steven Schoen examines affective practices in documentary filmmaking through *Into Great Silence* (dir. Philip Gröning, Germany, 2005), which presents the daily lives of Carthusian monks seeking transcendence. The predominantly austere, slow-paced film, Schoen argues, works to emphasize the presence of intense spiritual experience through the absence of traditional documentary practices. Dowdy, Winn, and Schoen all approach “the edge” as a demarcation point for filmic composition and content, thus
studying the relationship between opposing yet essential cinematic forces to conclude how they ultimately function via contrast and balance.

Jenna Ng and Zeke Saber each take up the materiality of the screen itself, using its edges to enhance understandings of film theory. Ng considers how canonical male film theorists and filmmakers have projected gender onto the potential “revelations and protections” provided by either transgressing or maintaining the edges of the screen. Through a feminist reading of *Ringu* (dir. Hideo Nakata, Japan, 1998), she turns these gendered cinematic understandings on their head. Ng argues that Sadako’s refusal to stay within the edges of the diegetic screen enacts a moment of female empowerment that challenges the traditions of women as on-screen as objects of male transgression or visual pleasure. Saber examines how the oft-neglected theater exit sign works as a peri-phenomenological object that structures the edges of the film image. By demonstrating the persistent and significant role of the exit sign throughout cinema’s history, as well as its ongoing battle with the encroaching totality of the screen, Saber argues that cinema itself “is haunted by its edgy ontology”—one where the experience of the cinematic apparatus is forever constituted and reshaped by what is welcomed at its peripheries.

The next section of this issue turns to edges associated with new media technologies, and Shane Denson’s invited contribution helpfully bridges the cinematic with digital media more broadly. Denson uses a scene from *Blade Runner 2049* (dir. Denis Villeneuve, US/UK/Hungary/Canada/Spain, 2017) in which the holographic Joi is projected onto the corporeal Mariette to ground the problem of edge detection, a computational term he productively applies to broader questions of perception in the digital age. In addition to the technical process of perceptual coding by which algorithms determine the “edge” of human perception to eliminate as much pixel data as possible from video files, Denson gestures to the disturbing trend of “DeepFake” pornography, which uses similar processes to take advantage of the perceptual edge and generate explicit sexual imagery featuring celebrities. The edge here serves as a speculative limit that has at stake both the expansion of digital technology and the human capacity for parsing digital images. Edge detection implicates not just the future of film as a medium but also questions of authenticity and manipulation in all still and moving images.
Ryan Ikeda also takes up the question of human perception, but with a spatiotemporal approach. Ikeda uses augmented poetry, in particular Amaranth Borsuk and Brad Bouse’s *Between Page and Screen* (2012), to demonstrate how digital media can blur traditional spatiotemporal edges within the aesthetic experience. *Between Page and Screen* is a physical book containing only QR codes; it requires a digital device to access, thus implicating reader action within its consumption. The poems gain form not through the materiality of the page but through a temporal order of events and physical alignment of disparate objects. Ikeda’s exploration of digital art form and consumption generates the framework he calls “immediate delay,” which emphasizes the breaking of edges in time and space as fundamental to emergent aesthetic practices.

Allison Ross looks even further ahead, using “San Junipero,” an episode of the anthology series *Black Mirror* (2011–), as a gateway for investigating conceptions of queer and crip futures in technological utopias. Her close examination of the episode, in which individual consciousnesses can be stored in an eternal digital afterlife, troubles a surface-level understanding of the happy ending by suggesting that, even in utopian fantasy, these empowering futures can be achieved only through death and artifice. Ross’s work demonstrates that speculative conceptions of queer and crip futures can rely on stark contrasts between the real and the virtual and between life and death that problematize clear distinctions between the utopic and the dystopic; staunchly maintaining such a jagged edge ultimately obviates important historical contingencies and questions of agency within these communities.

Melissa Forstrom returns our attention to present technologies. Her invited contribution focuses on spatiotemporal representation within geographic museum maps and questions its potential for propagating ideological biases. Through analysis of the Louvre’s *Art of Islam* exhibition (2012), Forstrom draws attention to the illuminated areas that claim to illustrate the historical spread of Islam from 1500 to 1800, suggesting that these areas’ “moving edge” not only flattens the historical diversity of Islamic cultures into a monolithic entity but also places Islam in a misleading opposition with “European expansion.” Forstrom’s analysis shows how edges mobilized to represent territory can impact historical understanding of art and cultural objects through implicit biases and connotations, especially in assumedly objective educational spaces.
In the final section, the authors take up Casey’s provocation to consider how societal fringes or peripheries invite discussion of the edges that construct, define, or deny their own marginality. Each author engages with the question: What determines the edges of environments, and how do these edges mediate our relationships to media, technology, nature, or even life itself? Jack Manoogian begins this set of essays by contemplating the boundaries between infrastructures of waste and nuclear precarity and the cultural imaginaries that normalize them as techno-aesthetic objects. Using the San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station in Orange County, California, Manoogian explores the affective dimensions of the surf-driven “OC lifestyle” that shift the imaginaries around nuclear infrastructures. Through his attention to the layered representations of the site in historical and contemporary media, Manoogian maps out the bleeding edge between safety and danger that normalizes nuclearity.

Next, both Théo Lepage-Richer and Adam Fish interrogate the edges that define and mediate relations between environments, objects, natures, and cultures. Lepage-Richer sees epigenetics as a way to meditate on the porous boundary between the objective paradigms imposed on genetics by scientific study (codability) and the environmental factors that impact such seemingly rigid structures. Since mediation between edge environments and organisms spans both biology and media studies, Lepage-Richer offers that both fields are invested in mapping “a semiotics of life” between what he terms “life forms” and “forms of life,” albeit one that extends far beyond media studies’ investment in modern media and technologies and that challenges the often deterministic goals of biological studies. Similarly invested in mediation and environments, Fish shifts the discussion towards reconsidering the ontologies scholars ascribe to technologies like drones. He argues for a more dynamic understanding of technological capacity by pushing back against an essentialist description of drones that sometimes overreaches by emphasizing connections between drones and military power. Instead, Fish offers that technologies are much more complexly related to the assemblages in which they are made, used, and operated, showcasing this mediatory flexibility through his work with environmental drone operators “at the edges of ecologies and networks” in Indonesia.

In our final invited contribution, Jason Pine also draws our attention to the edges between forms of life and experience, although here he explores the indeterminable nature of these edges within the convergent spaces of meth labs. Through his vivid depictions, we see these blurred boundaries
materially represented in the array of quotidian objects used for both alchemical and mundane purposes within the lab itself, as well as in the affective state of “anticipatory pleasure” pursued by meth users. Pine thus illustrates the lack of coherent edges or boundaries within “late (cottage) industrialism” as demonstrated by the multimodal spaces of the meth economy (the “kitchengaragelivingroom”): time and space; materiality and potentiality; life, anti-life, and non-life; and aspiration, fatigue, and stasis all blur together within these spaces that are at once peripheral and central to contemporary life.

By inviting this issue’s contributors to meditate on edgy media, to promote a consideration of boundaries, and to ultimately focus on how edges shape and impact media practices past, present, and future, we hope to demonstrate edges’ key role in defining institutions, objects, practices, and imaginaries. The authors featured in this issue have a shared interest in the definition and location of the edge within their respective areas of study, as well as in what such constructions of marginality and tangentiality might imply about established methods for understanding the edges of media studies. Crucially, they have attended to the impact of moments when edges blur or are by their very nature difficult to locate, as well as the costs and benefits of calling into question, moving beyond, or going over the edge. We argue these provocations are crucial for gaining a comprehensive, nuanced perspective of media fields and the ways that they are constituted. By somewhat paradoxically centering our inquiry at the margins, we hoped to have demonstrated the value of understanding the whole by exploring what’s found at the edge.

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Notes


4 Stephen Lyng describes in the introduction to *Edgework* how leisure practices centered around risk are paradoxically treated as a form of individuality and resistance to a neoliberal society that itself demands economic and social precarity more and more often. Despite this paradox (or perhaps because of it), both individual and systemic risk—living on the edge—can be viewed as a means of exploring broad cultural spaces and their boundaries, such as those between safety and precarity, inclusion and exclusion, and life and death. See Stephen Lyng, ed., *Edgework: The Sociology of Risk-Taking* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

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