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# Institution, Time-Lag, Globality

**Brett Neilson**

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It is no secret that academic studies of contemporary culture lag behind the events they analyse. Think about cyberpunk science fiction, which attracted large audiences in the early 1980s, but emerged as an object of critical commentary only later in the decade.[1] Or what about an event like the 'Rushdie affair', which generated wide publicity in the global media, but whose scholarly analyses could neither keep pace with its popular reportage nor apprehend its daily unfolding.[2] Such belatedness is endemic to all critical practice, but in this age of increasingly rapid information exchange, it has a special relevance for cultural studies. Not only does it raise important questions about the efficacy of cultural analysis as a mode of political action in the current technological environment, but it relates the internal debates about cultural studies' "institutionalization"; and "professionalization"; to wider issues concerning space, time and the transnational circulation of knowledge. Perhaps it is because cultural studies has largely embraced a version of postmodernism that stresses the concreteness and producability of space (as opposed to the modernist and poststructuralist emphasis on time) that there has thus far been no systematic account of this cultural delay.[3] Yet time and space are surely mutually implicated categories, since changes in the experience of time have always involved changes in the experience of space and vice versa. Indeed, it was my own geographical mobility that first drew my attention to the question of time-lag in cultural studies.

Over the past four years I have lived and worked in four different cities: New Haven, USA; Bologna, Italy; Perth, Australia and Miami, USA. This itinerancy, induced both by labor market forces and my personal affective relations, has left me with a heightened sense of the temporal and spatial parameters involved in the mobility of contemporary cultural forms. Searching unsuccessfully for a recently published US journal in Bologna, seeing a Hollywood blockbuster on a transatlantic flight before its Australian release, dealing with "lag"; on the Internet while "talking" from Australia with my partner in the US; these experiences have shown me that even in the age of Netscape and satellite television there are still significant delays (and barriers) involved in the transnational flow of culture. Clearly, any analysis of cultural studies' detained temporality must account for the dual effects of space and time in these processes of intercultural exchange, both as they affect the

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[1] The two set pieces of this important science fiction genre, Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* and William Gibson's *Neuromancer* hit the market in 1982 and 1985 respectively. Not until the early 1990s, however, did critical work in this area begin to appear in bulk. See Kuhn (1990), Ross (1991) and Bukatman (1993).

[2] The Ayatollah Kohmeini imposed the *fatwah* on Rushdie in February, 1989, but it was over a year before the publication of academic books dealing with the situation. See Ruthven (1990) and Pipe (1990).

[3] Under the influence of Henri Lefebvre, the idea of "social space" has provided cultural intellectuals with a means for studying everyday life in the context of postmodern culture and oppositional politics. See, for example, Morris (1988) and Grossberg (1992).

distribution/reception of popular goods and the circulation of information within the field itself. The importance of such an investigation is paramount at a time when cultural studies is reassessing the implications of its "success" both its continuing institutionalization in the academy and its international spread. There is a growing tendency to understand this "success" as a "failure" and to view cultural studies itself as a thing of the past (ceasing to exist, as it becomes legitimate). But little attention has been paid to the temporality implicit in this rhetoric of "failure". To speak of an "after" to cultural studies is to invoke the logic of the "post-", a relation not necessarily of subsequence but of deferral and revision. The present paper studies the operations of this "post-", not as it impacts upon some putative "post-cultural studies" practice, but as it structures the material conditions (of communication and institutionalizaton) that (over)determine the movement's "failure/success". In particular, it examines cultural studies' long standing engagement with popular culture, arguing that academic and popular activities establish rhythms that frame their spatiotemporal workings. I aim to register the divergent temporalities of academic and popular practices without drawing a categorical distinction between them, as in a high/low culture split. The challenge is to explain why these discrepancies in rhythm exist, and to understand their relevance for the global reorganization of space, without submitting to the fetishization of speed or its attendant politics of growth and progress (Virilio 1977).

## Institutionality as Lag

The relation between academic and popular practices has usually, and I believe quite rightly, been treated as an ethnographic matter. From the early 1980s at least, cultural intellectuals have been well aware of the difficulties of interpretation and power that arise when they begin to study popular and/or subcultural forms from a theoretical perspective. Not only have they invented some innovative techniques for conducting a more polyphonic ethnography (Radway 1984; Ang 1985), usually involving the positioning of the researcher as a fan, but they have contributed to the critique of scientific objectivity in ethnographic practice (Clifford 1988; Rosaldo 1993). It is thus surprising that they have paid little attention to the temporality of their own practices, especially since one of the most useful critiques of 20th-century anthropology stresses the tendency of ethnographers to relegate the cultures they study to temporal spaces prior to their own (Fabian 1983). To be sure, the strategy of fanship, which, as Andrew Ross (1992, 553) remarks, threatens to become a requisite mode of legitimation for cultural studies, sets out to overcome the "denial of coevalness" that Fabian attributes to traditional anthropological discourse. Nonetheless, it partakes in another form of temporal distancing; i.e. the delay required for the ethnographer to write his/her field notes into a publishable treatise. Even if the researcher is a fan, there will be a time-lag between the reception of popular goods and the publication of critical work about them. This is largely due to the spatiotemporal relations that place cultural studies in a larger social field, articulating it to a certain set of institutional positions. Consequently, it is necessary to understand how the movement's institutional placement affects its modes of agency, pacing its modes of production, distribution and reception against the (generally) faster and more variable rhythms of popular culture.

With important exceptions, the bulk of work in cultural studies today is mediated and enabled by the institutions of the university and the publishing industry. While there is increasing activity on the Internet and multiple deployments in other spheres of "public access" (Berube 1994), most practitioners position themselves within the academy. Whether one accepts Stuart Hall's (1992, 281) view that cultural studies exists in expectation of a "conjunction"

with an "emerging" group of organic intellectuals or argues with John Frow (1995, 129) that the movement must "be taken seriously in relation to the specific interests of the class of intellectuals" this placement submits cultural studies to certain technobureaucratic constraints. In some cases (e.g. the recent recognition of cultural studies by the Australian Academy of the Humanities), these organizational structures merge with state bureaucracies, providing perhaps increased funding but also greater susceptibility to regulation and centralized power. To note this, however, is only to make the obvious point that cultural studies is implicated in institutional structures that are not entirely within its control; locked into a trade-off between containment and possibility. Assertions about cultural studies' institutionalization are always potentially reversible, commuting "success" into "failure" and vice versa. The truth is that cultural studies has always had its institutional forms, and that these gain significance only in relation to other social practices.

In essence, this is the realization of "cultural policy" intellectuals who articulate their work to the policy-making activities of governments. But in the contemporary world the primary sphere for the negotiation of cultural meanings and values is not that of government but of popular culture and the mass media. Cultural messages circulated in this sphere can travel with great speed across a wide spatial reach, creating ever more complex audience formations and modes of reception. By contrast the texts of cultural studies have a limited spatial uptake (restricted primarily to British ex-settler colonies) and slower mechanisms of temporal dispersion (regulated by the rhythms of academic production and publishing). The disjunction between these "mediascapes" gives rise to what I am calling the academic time-lag; i.e. the delay that separates a popular event from its academic enunciation. While there is no evidence to suggest that the more rapid publication and distribution of cultural studies' materials, on the Internet perhaps, would increase the movement's political effect, this time-lag cannot be simply discounted. It describes the conditions of possibility for a cultural studies that takes stock of its institutional placement, interrogating its modes of publicity and communication while gauging its shelf-life in the academic fashion system. At stake is not a chronological measure (a fixed quantum of time that separates one event from another) or a qualitative difference between academic and popular cultures, but a differential movement that unsettles linear/causal models of social change. The effects of this time-lag cannot be analyzed in isolation from the processes of globalization, since the current global renegotiation of space and time underlies the spatiotemporal workings of institutions and vice versa.

## Institution and Globality

While the idea of globalization has informed cultural studies' interest in transnational cultural forms, there is little ground for claiming that the movement itself is genuinely global. Jon Stratton and Ien Ang (1996) argue that cultural studies barely deserves the label "international," since its influence can be traced only to a handful of countries, and there exists a tendency to identify the nation-state as its privileged site of particularity; thus the designations Australian cultural studies, Canadian cultural studies, Taiwanese cultural studies, etc. Like most critics who tackle this problem, they call for a cultural studies that is both transnational and local at the same time, a critical practice that keeps track of its transnational transportability without losing sight of its specific contextualities. Yet to what extent would a cultural studies that crosses the transnational/local divide rely on institutional forms that are particular to its academic placement ; e.g. the international conference (Stratton and Ang ground their discussion in an analysis of three of these). At least one

commentator suggests that the coexistence of local and transnational sensibilities is an unequal possibility for academic and popular practices. Thus, Ulf Hannerz (1989, 70) observes that in “the areas of scholarship and intellectual life... we hardly take conflict for granted between the transnational flow of culture and local cultural creativity the way we do with popular culture.” Is this merely a fantasy of intellectual cosmopolitanism? Or does it spell out a constitutive difference between academic and popular practices?

Following Bruce Robbins in *Secular Vocations* (1993, 188-90), I would argue that this type of thinking reflects the self-interest of scholars, that the discourse of cosmopolitanism describes the localism of intellectuals. Still, Hannerz’ arrangement of the differentiations academic/popular and local/transnational in binary terms attests a prevalent, if little commented upon, association between the ideas. To distinguish popular from academic forms he must also posit a distinction between transnational and local cultures. By this logic, a questioning of one of these divisions would necessarily destabilize the other. It is precisely this type of destabilization that I want to effect by identifying academic and popular cultures not according to a constitutive difference but by their (institutionally mediated) spatiotemporal operations. Such a contestation of the academic/popular divide might also assist in understanding the mutual implication of local and transnational cultures. By studying these schemes in tandem, I want to show that academic/popular and local/transnational modes of differentiation cannot be easily superimposed; e.g. local culture versus intellectual cosmopolitanism or the “global popular” versus locally situated intellectual work. The relations between these terms are far more complex, involving a disorganized intertwining of time-space relations, transforming each other against the untidy background of everyday life.

Within the literature on globalization there is increasing recognition that local cultures cannot be understood as privileged sites of resistance to homogenizing global trends.[4] While nobody denies that cultural forms are interpreted differently in various localities (as demonstrated repeatedly by audience ethnography), attention has shifted to the complex interpenetration of local and global cultures, and especially toward the global institutionalization and construction of local particularisms. One commentator who has been influential in this regard is Roland Robertson (1995, 28), who hijacks the term “glocalization” from Japanese business jargon to argue that “we live in a world in which the expectation of uniqueness has become increasingly institutionalized and globally widespread.” Citing examples of both “weak institutionalization,” like the worldwide spread of suburbia, and more formal modes of organizing and promoting locality, such as the work of the International Youth Hostel movement or the World Health Organization, Robertson contends that the forms of institutionalization and globalization are inextricably linked in the contemporary world. Surely, this argument must also bear upon the institutionality of cultural studies, particularly when there is a growing international “network” in the field.

The idea of the “network” is significant here because it implies a loose association of cultural studies programs, operating with some degree of mutual determination but without an overarching shelter of corporate or professional affiliation. While there do exist some formal organizations of cultural studies scholars, such as Network Cultural Studies, these institutional bodies (mainly devoted to conference organization) have not yet reached the bureaucratic levels of international organizations like the Youth Hostel movement or even more established academic groups such as the Modem Language Association. Still, they

[4] See Wilson and Dissanayake, eds. (1996) or Grossberg (1996), which complains of a "fetishization of the local" in cultural studies.

display a higher degree of routinization than the processes of “weak institutionalization” described by Robertson, and it is entirely possible that they will begin to organize the celebrated diversity and openness of cultural studies in ever more predictable ways. Doubtless, there is a sense in which cultural studies is becoming professionalized, having started as a disunited array of intellectuals working (largely unwittingly of each other) in various national circumstances to become an international movement with journals, conferences, appointments and (arguably) a recognizable style of work. With this has also come an (often involuntary) mobility for its practitioners, many of whom travel or relocate frequently, conducting research, attending conferences or simply following the work.

This is particularly true for younger scholars who confront, at an international level, an academic system diminished by the withdrawal of state funding and increasingly staffed by temporary labor. For all the talk of professionalism and institutionalization, cultural studies is more and more often practiced by people who feel insecure in and move between diverse institutional settings. One effect of this situation is that it becomes difficult, if not impossible, for practitioners to identify their work with a single program or institutional project, since their thought is fashioned by an attempt to negotiate between the institutional forms they encounter. Working in different contexts involves constantly shifting relationships to the state, to markets, to local communities, to funding bodies, to traditional academic disciplines, etc. With these circumstances arise a new set of challenges for cultural studies, questioning or at least dislocating the claims to particularism made in its various local contexts. At stake is a renegotiation of the movement’s emphasis on global/local relations. Cultural studies scholars must continually assess the terms of this mobility, not just at the institutional level but in relation to popular and everyday practices. The difficulty is to understand how these processes of transculturation relate to the contemporary modes of globalization, and to the institutional forms that organize them at both local and transnational levels.

## Everyday Lag

The question of academic time-lag opens up these issues since it forces a consideration of cultural studies’ institutionality with respect to the workings of transnational cultural transmission. Still, within the literature on globalization, there has been a reluctance to take up this question. While globalization theorists acknowledge that contemporary cultural practices defy the Enlightenment separation of space and time, their main concern has been to counteract theories that understand globality as a consequence of modernity; i.e. as a general homogenization of institutions and experiences in a temporal/historical mode. Consequently, there has been a corrective emphasis on space, which, while not completely blind to the correlative operations of time, has tended to obscure the interrelation of space and time in contemporary forms of social/cultural exchange. Even the most sophisticated models of transnational flow have difficulty in accounting for the kind of cultural delay that I am calling the time-lag.

Consider Arjun Appadurai’s (1990) scheme for explaining how cultural artifacts, people and ideas move about in the world. Identifying five dimensions of global flow (ethnoscapes, technoscapes, finanscapes, mediascapes and ideoscapes), he finds the workings of transnational exchange to be “radically contextual,” governed by the unpredictable “disjunctures” between these imagined topographies. Nonetheless, he falls back on a totalizing narrative of late capitalist development, calling on Frederic Jameson’s view of postmodernism as the elision of history, “nostalgia without memory,” to explain the Filipino

enthusiasm for dated American popular music. The question of time-lag in transnational cultural exchange highlights a difficulty in his work, which is also the source of its great suggestiveness. As the Swedish anthropologist Jonathan Friedman (1995, 84) writes, Appadurai "wants to maintain a vision of a global system within which cultural processes occur." But he never explains how the totalizing aspects of his argument (borrowed from Jameson) can be reconciled with the "disjunctive" nature of transnational cultural flows. This problem becomes even clearer if contrasted with another attempt to describe the "disjunctive" effects of transculturation, Homi Bhabha's (1994, 236–56) idea of a "postcolonial" time-lag.

Unlike Jameson's (1991, 279-96) notion of a "post-nostalgia aesthetic" which was originally formulated to describe the "post-generational" allegory of Hollywood films like *Something Wild* and *Blue Velvet*, Bhabha's model of "postcolonial" temporality seeks to account for the politics of cultural difference from its inception. This is important when studying things like the Filipino enthusiasm for Kenny Rogers, since this kind of intercultural reception is regulated not only by the rhythms of popular musical distribution, but by the complex cultural systems of postcolonial mimicry, irony and repetition. For Bhabha, the "disjunctures" inherent in transculturation are the effects of a more general "doubling" of time in the act of cultural signification, a version of the iterative difference that Jacques Derrida finds to circulate in language. His idea of a "postcolonial" time-lag avoids the totalizing aspects of Appadurai's model, but only by drawing on discursive schemes that tend to elide the social referent. How are we to make sense of these two powerful theories of transcultural delay; the former maintaining a Marxistconcept of totality while studying the "disjunctures" of global flow and the latter forwarding a poststructuralist model of difference as a means of understanding the concrete inequalities of transnational capitalism?

A solution to this dilemma emerges if we acknowledge that these spatiotemporal complexes are accorded social meaning only in the context of everyday life. In this regard, it is useful to recall Henri Lefebvre's (1991, 97) understanding of the everyday as a sum of human relations that brings "into play the totality of the real, albeit in a certain manner which is always partial and incomplete." This double facility, which registers both the differential variety of human experience and the concrete totality of social relations, provides a point of convergence for the theories of Appadurai and Bhabha.[5] More importantly, it suggests that everyday life involves an experience of time-lag. Lefebvre (1991, 230) is quite explicit about this. Comparing a hydroelectric station in the Pyrenees with its adjacent peasant communities, he writes that everyday "life is lagging behind what is possible, that it is retarded." In its initial formulation, then, the idea already registers Bhabha's ( 1994, 242) claim that a process of "lagging" gives "the practice of everyday life its consistency as being contemporary". Yet, because it assumes a spatial proximity (hydroelectric stations next to peasant communities), it cannot yet explain the transcultural delays of contemporary globality. To develop a concept of everyday life suited for these purposes, we must ask how the "retarded" time of cultural difference is produced not only within but between localities. This means abandoning the scheme by which everyday life is articulated locally to explore the possibility of a "translocal everyday."

As I conceive it, the idea of the "translocal everyday" describes a discontinuous series of social and cultural relations by which people in the contemporary world can live (or are

[5] See Osborne (1995, 189-96) for a discussion of how Lefebvre's idea reconciles a Marxist concept of social totality with a poststructuralist model of cultural difference.

forced to live) their lives non-synchronously in a number of different locales. Such modes of translocalism could be facilitated by the technologies of communication or transport, or they might function at the affective level of memory, desire or anticipation (as in cases of migration, exile or diaspora). Whatever their means of operation, they serve to disarticulate the idea of everyday life from that of cultural locality. This is not to deny that opportunities for translocal mobility are unequally available to members of different classes, races, nations, etc., but it is to question the scheme by which the concreteness of everyday life is articulated to specific "places." Whether they involve limited movement between a small number of localities or attempts to inhabit the world as a whole, translocal forms of everyday life are no less particular or situated than those available to less mobile individuals or communities. Once this is acknowledged, a whole new set of possibilities emerges for understanding global/local relations. It becomes possible to register the potentiality of living in the world as a concrete "place" (as in privileged cosmopolitan lifestyles) or producing the local as an abstract"space" (as in the differentiation of local markets by the producers of so called "global culture").

If this is the case, it is necessary to ask why cultural studies intellectuals, particularly those involved with the study of popular culture, have vested interests in articulating the idea of everyday life to that of local culture. One example here (in so far as it stands for a whole tradition in cultural studies) is the work of John Fiske (1992), which stresses the "bottom- up" construction of everyday life in order to contrast it to the universalizing tendencies of what he calls the "academic habitus." In setting up this binary, Fiske identifies local culture as the site of particularity and agency, working to exhibit the "resistant readings" he finds to mark quotidian engagements with popular texts. Yet by what ontological sleight of hand can he map the relation particular/universal so neatly over the distinctions local/global, concrete/abstract and popular/academic? According to Robbins (1993, 181-88), this type of thinking reflects the ideology of a specific group; i.e. intellectuals who celebrate the local in order to claim a sense of agency and political representativeness for their work. When it comes to cultural mobility, Robbins argues, we must drop the "conversation-stopping, always reversible charge of 'privilege'" and instead "discriminate degrees of complacency" (188). By corroborating this analysis here, and contesting the identification of everyday life with local culture, I do not mean to go the other way and propose a stance of free floating cosmopolitanism or global citizenship as a critical intellectual strategy. The idea of the "translocal everyday" is far less ambitious than these. As lived experience, it is always "partial and incomplete," predicated on contingent and shifting relationships that provisionally link a varying number of cultural communities. Nonetheless, it is historically and socially structured, providing a sufficient, if unstable, ground to contrast social practices whose institutional forms produce the time-lag of cultural difference.

In this way the practices of everyday life can be opened up to temporal differentiations that deny neither their existence in "social space" nor their underlying experiential unity. What the idea of the "translocal everyday" entails is the abandonment of the scheme by which the "retarded" temporality of daily life is an external feature generated by its relation to more technologically elaborated practices (as if Lefebvre's peasant villages lagged behind the hydroelectric station on some independent line of progress). By treating everyday life as a "residual" unity that can articulate cultural differences across wider spatial/geographical distances, the concept calibrates the time-lag not by external measurement but by gauging differential relations between social practices that are unevenly positioned in the global economy of space. This opens the possibility that more specialized or structured activities

might lag behind the more quotidian performances (e.g. domestic activities) usually associated with everyday life. In effect, this is what I have been claiming for the spatiotemporal relations between academic and popular practices.

Often in popular cultural studies, practices such as television viewing are identified with everyday life in a straightforward way that overlooks the quotidian contexts in which academic work is produced; i.e. the everyday life of the academy. By arguing that the temporality of academic production lags behind that of popular culture, I have tried to complicate this view. A technobureaucratically elaborated practice such as academic criticism, by virtue of its institutional/professional forms, can be figured as retarded with respect to popular cultural activities. Yet this is a lag that is internal to everyday life, or, more specifically, articulated between the everyday life of the academy and, say, the everyday life of television viewing. Even in situations where these differentiations inhere within a local community (e.g. when a researcher studies her/his own habits of cultural consumption/fanship), their effects must be studied on a translocal basis, since academic and popular texts are both subject to mobility. This means the time-lag can be explained neither by analysis of cultural studies' local institutional forms nor by examining its modes of transnational distribution. Only by studying the mutual implication of these factors is it possible to understand this cultural delay.

To appreciate this is to realize that the recent alarm concerning the institutionalization and professionalization of cultural studies also registers an uneasiness with its modes of "international" dissemination; an uneasiness that can all too easily construct the local as the only possible site of resistance and agency. By noting the interdependence of local and transnational forms in the workings of the time-lag, I hope to have suggested why cultural studies should stop fretting about the neutralization of its politics in order to use its international connectedness to greater oppositional effect. This would not entail the abandonment of local action so much as the realization that this is not the only sphere of political agency. Often we have heard the charge that cultural studies' transnational forms implicate it in the operations of transnational capitalism (Parry 1991; Miyoshi 1995). Yet at a time when global capital has adapted the 1970s slogan "think globally, act locally" to its own ends, there is a real sense in which local resistance is no longer strategic. Transnational capital might better be resisted transnationally, whether this involves the deployment of new information technologies, the mapping and exploration of alternative geographies, or the establishment of international networks of resistance (not just in cultural studies but also, say, in trade unionism). The problem is to invent new possibilities for social change without becoming enthralled by the global technologies of ideological transmission and cultural consumption, to devise a critical transnational practice that does not simply buy into the values of transnational capitalism. Such an effort might haul cultural studies out of the "bad infinity" of "success" and "failure," but only at the price of transfiguring it into something that might no longer be called cultural studies.

## Notes

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