Aca-Media Episode 70: Jordan Sjol on Medium Specificity

[Opening music]

Christine Becker 00:11
You are now listening to the Aca-Media podcast which is brought to you, courtesy of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies. And I am one of your hosts, Christine Becker.

Michael Kackman 00:21
And I am Michael Kackman at the University of Notre Dame.

Christine Becker 00:25
And I guess it's probably the last time I'll get to say not at the University of Notre Dame for me, I'll be back in the classroom in January. So all good leaves must come to an end.

Michael Kackman 00:34
Yeah, but you know, the classroom is calling out to you.

Christine Becker 00:38
Is it?

Michael Kackman 00:39
Yeah. (faintly) Come back...

Christine Becker 00:41
Oh, okay. Well, and also, you know, a couple podcasts ago, I sort of touted about how I would be here as it was getting colder in South Bend, and I'd be down here in Georgia, and I'd be happy. Literally the same temperature today, where I'm at, as it is back in South Bend. I've been robbed. I've been sold a bill of goods.

Michael Kackman 00:59
It's like 48 degrees and sunny here right now.

Christine Becker 01:03
Exactly. 48 and sunny.

Michael Kackman 01:05
So I'm gonna go out and go for a swim and, it'll be good.

Christine Becker 01:10

Yeah, I'm not going to do that.

Michael Kackman 01:12
But we're living the dream here in sunny South Bend. Why do you why do you think they call it *South* Bend?

Christine Becker 01:18
Right. Yeah, I guess maybe, you know, climate change is gonna change the whole polarity of, you know, what it's like to live in these places, so.

Michael Kackman 01:28
Yeah, probably. All right, we have a new episode here, obviously, that's why we're we're talking, but we also have a new interview from one of our new co-conspirators. Lots of good stuff. It's a good kind of think piece that also has all kinds of very, very concrete material consequences.

Christine Becker 01:42
Yeah, a new voice brought to the podcast. And so this is Jonathan Nichols-Pethick. And he is interviewing one of his colleagues at DePauw University, Jordan Sjol, who wrote an article for JCMS, it has a very long title which they're going to deconstruct, so I'll let them go through the whole title. But it's about media specificity, a defense of media specificity. And then Sjol is also co-writer of the 2022 film *How to Blow up a Pipeline*. So they talk all about that. Super smart conversation here. One contextual note, Jordan Sjol is a member of the WGA. and this interview took place back when the writers' strike was still going on. So just a heads up about that. But their discussion is really less about the strike itself than tech companies in the entertainment sector and the issue of AI for writers. So it's still relevant to this moment, and for better or for worse going forward.

Michael Kackman 02:39
All right, take it away.

[Interstitial music]

Jonathan Nichols-Pethick 00:00
I'm Jonathan Nichols-Pethick producer for the Aca-Media podcast. And I'm here with my colleague, Jordan Sjol, who is an assistant professor at DePauw University, where full disclosure, I am also a professor of Media Studies. So, we are true colleagues in that sense. And I'm here to talk to Jordan about, 1). his article in a recent edition of *JCMS*, which is called "A Diachronic, Scale-flexible, Relational, Perspectival Operation in Defense of Always-reforming Media Specificity," which I think is a tremendous article. And I also, of course, want to talk to Jordan about his role as a co-writer of the recent film, *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*. And so we're gonna get into all of that and see if we can find those connections between two modes of production. So, Jordan, welcome to Aca-Media.

Jordan Sjol 00:49
Thanks very much.

Jonathan Nichols-Pethick 00:50
So again, like I said, I really thought that your article was a tremendous piece. And of course, I'm really interested in it, because to tell you the truth, it's the kind of thing I think about a lot with my position here. So just a background as at DePauw, as you know, we have a Film and Media Arts program, but we also have a Communication Department and an English Department. And film and media are taught in kind of different places or have been in the past. Within the film community, I get referred to as, well, "You're more of a television guy." And but I also studied film, as you know, in college and in grad school. So, I never quite know where to put myself. And that idea of medium specificity has always sort of vexed me. At the same time, of course, as you mentioned, in your piece we are experiencing right now a moment that will be with us forever. Where those different media, those different material media have, in fact, started to converge and collapse into one another in digital spaces. So, I guess, having divulged what made me think about it, I wanted to get a sense, first of all, what started you thinking about medium specificity in this kind of era where digitization has led to this kind of rapid convergence?

Jordan Sjol 02:02
Yeah, thanks for that. And I can very much relate to this feeling of sometimes being out of place with what you want to study and then finding the institutional home for it. I did my graduate work and Duke's program and literature, which media studies makes a lot of sense there: there are a lot of people doing it. But then when somebody else says, "Oh, what do you what kind of literature did you do?" Well, how are we gonna start this conversation? This article emerged out of an earlier exam answer that I did, so I was thinking sort of meta-disciplinarily about cinema and media studies and why cinema and media studies are together, if they belong together. And I think two problematics really launched me on that. One is this idea of the digital convergence, right? So much of the history of cinema studies in particular, but even our approach to media has to do with thinking about the actual material substrate of this medium: what are the specificities of it from its very ontology? From the very beginning of cinema theory, the Soviet montage theorists thinking about, you know, film being a particularly well suited medium to instantiate dialectical materialism. Of course, Arnheim, you know, arguing that, in fact, film could be an art because it was not identical with the way that our perceptual apparatus presented the world to us, right, so, so medium specificity really goes back to that and really has this material basis, that, of course, gets up-ended, you know, as D.N. Rodowick talks about in *The Virtual Life of Film* that really gets up ended almost exactly the same time that film studies starts to get a foot in academia, which has been seen as presenting a big crisis to the field and one that I think we're still, I think, still obviously, still grappling with. So thinking about that, and then at the same time thinking also about the way that media studies has started to take on a greater and greater variety of objects of study. You know, when I got interested in the field, it was still called "New Media Studies," and still very much about digital media very particularly. But at the same time, you know, in the years since then, we've seen media scholars taking John Durham Peters working on dolphins and oceans and Jussi Parikka. working on insect media and Keller Easterling approaching international standards regimes. There's actually a I think JCMS just closed a CFP for their first ever special issue called "But is it media?" jumping off from the same problematic;

I think they use the examples of shoes and file cabinets and colors and sex toys, right? So, trying to think about well, you know, if cinema studies has this difficulty with digital convergence, and if media studies is all of a sudden studying everything from dolphins to garden gates, what's something that might actually explain some sort of sense of coherency about the discipline? And for me, the way that I've always found my way into this, my own sort of sense of belonging is has always been medium specificity. As media scholars, we study these individual media, not just in themselves, but sort of as they are themselves, as they have different affordances, different particularities, and considering what the medium itself does, as opposed to just the content.

Jonathan Nichols-Pethick 05:32
Right. So it sounds like a way to answer the question: "well, what do we deal with, dust or oceans?" is the way we think about it in that specific way. What does it allow us to think about? And so it sounds like, in some ways, thinking about medium specificity or media studies does have a way into these kinds of questions, and we can open up to these other moments of thinking about things pretty far-flung as media. Is that accurate?

Jordan Sjol 06:00
Yeah, I think that's absolutely accurate. I start my article by talking about an earlier "In Focus" dossier from *JCMS* put together by Lucas Hilderbrand, I think in 2018, called 'The C and the M in SCMS," which I thought was a great title. And in that, I think I think it's Elena Gorfinkel, I'm sorry, I'm getting the name wrong. But I think Elena Gorfinkel has a piece, talking about how media scholars need to go get our shit back because now everyone from cultural studies to business studies to anything is working on movies and TV, working on whatever. And at the same time, I think that's a very well taken point, and that we should claim to have some sort of expertise about these fields. But at the same time, like media and digital media, as we've all seen, are becoming more and more intimate in everybody's lives, right? This is just the truth of our everyday reality. And so it seems like people from many different sorts of different disciplines should be studying all of these things, and that we shouldn't be trying to wall ourselves off and say, "Well, if you want to do this, you have to do it from a media theory perspective." But if we do that, we also need to answer, you know, why? What is it? What's special about the way we're doing it? What can we offer that other people aren't offering? And I think that that is really when getting into thinking about the medium in itself, what it actually does, what it can do, what it can't do, how it helps to form subjectivity in particular ways, how it relates people, right. All of these things, I think, are very media-theoretical questions. And when you start to be able to generalize that as an approach, something that fits everything, from things we typically recognize as media from, like the news media, like film, like TV, to dolphins; when you abstract that, I think you start to get a really capacious toolset for understanding the way that mediation comes into our lives everywhere.

Jonathan Nichols-Pethick 08:00
And I think that does bring up the question that you raise, you raise this distinction - and I wonder if you could talk more about it - in the article about specificity versus specialization. Could you break that apart for me?

Jordan Sjol 08:12

Yes. And that that emerges also from my sort of jumping off point, which is this "In Focus" about field organization. And I think across that there had been an argument that media scholars being balkanized around particular objects of study - you being a TV person, and this person, being a film person, and that person, being a documentary person - isn't necessarily the way forward for the discipline. In part, I think, for the reasons that we're saying, because mediation is coming into more and more of our lives. And also, because, I mean, is John Durham Peters a "dolphin person" now? So for me, that would be something like medium specialization, something that is actually meta-disciplinarian about the way that the field is organized, as opposed to medium specificity, which is I think an approach, which is a toolkit, which is a way of thinking, but isn't necessarily a field organization.

Jonathan Nichols-Pethick 09:13
I may be wrong about this, but it also strikes me - I was thinking about this as I was preparing for the interview - even within something as specialized as you know, television studies, I was thinking about a picture, maybe an old picture of a family sitting in their suburban living room watching a TV show, and I thought, well, if you use that picture as a jumping off point, you can start to think about, well, you know, there's the programming, there's the content, there's the technology, there's the audience, there's the setting, there's the suburban living room, there's the house, there's the family unit, and there's the regulation of what you can see on TV and who can watch it. And there starts to be all these ways to sort of build out from it and start to think about all these different elements of the world around you based on this one kind of moment. And it strikes me - then again, maybe I may be wrong about this - but it strikes me is that that's maybe an example of thinking about medium specificity: that, you know, when you're approaching the object, you might need to be specific about what you are looking at. What angle are you taking? Is that sort of close to it?

Jordan Sjol 10:20
Oh, absolutely. So you read my rather unwieldy title. I've got these four adjectives in the title: diachronic, scale, flexible, relational, and perspectival, which are ways that I think that if medium specificity is going to be able to do this work of helping explain why cinema and media studies scholars are together, I think we do need to consider them in these ways. And what you're talking about here, I think really goes along with the relational. There is, sometimes this impetus to say, well - I think comes from a time in which media forms were much more stable and much more bounded - to want to say, alright, there's this one level at which we can say this is TV and that's film and that's radio. And we know what they are, and they're relatively bounded, and so we can consider them alone. And I think as we've had the digital convergence, as the media ecology has become much more complicated, it's become clear that that wasn't ever really true, and certainly isn't true now. So we absolutely have to consider media within this greater ecology, we have to understand them as part of a global and in some ways, totalizing system of mediation. And only through doing that, are we actually going to be able to drill down and say, "Well, why is this feature of that different from that feature of that?" Joshua Neves has a great short piece on an earlier "In Focus" - I think it was maybe 2013 - called "New Specificities", where he's talking about the transition from, you know, classically 70s apparatus theory, thinking about the specificity of the cinematic apparatus itself, of going and sitting in a dark room with the bright screen, into a more reception based an audience based studies. And his point is that the apparatus theory in some ways was too specific and not specific enough. Too specific, because it only

wanted to look at this material apparatus, without the context of where it was in the world, who the people were. Not specific enough for not bringing in the concrete realities of the audience, of reception, of context, of all these things. And so I think that if you take a relational perspective where you can see that, yes, that cinematic apparatus is absolutely a crucial part in forming subjecthood, but only within the context of where it's made, where it's received. And it can again, start to see these things as isolated units for analysis in a greater relational economy.

Jonathan Nichols-Pethick 12:58
So let's drill down on those things a little bit. So we've talked a little bit about the relational part of your title. So we also have, we have diachronic. So let's drill down a little bit on these different elements. So when we talk about a diachronic approach, I know what the word means, but what does that mean to you in this in this context?

Jordan Sjol 13:18
Yeah, so I like thinking about this back with D.N. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film*, you know, in this moment in which film studies is gaining its foothold in the academy at the same time that the material substrate changes, right. And that signaled such a crisis for a film theory apparatus that had been based on you know, a very stable material substrate that had existed in the same way for quite a long time. And Rodowick's point is, well, we have cinema, and we also after digital media have something that's still recognizably cinema, right? So instead of saying, old cinema is dead, and now there's a new cinema, and we have to sort of keep them separate, we might ask: well, okay, what has changed about cinema's medium specificity? But also, what unites cinema across that divide, right? So being able to think: alright, I can, I can see that there's a specificity before and a different specificity after, I can also see that there's a specificity that holds those two things together. I think Alanna Thaine has a really great article from I think 2010 called "Anarchival Cinema" and where she's taking up you know, the rise of Walkmans and iPods and mobile entertainment. And she's thinking through apparatus theory, and has this great little bit about how for her the sort of primary figure of cinema stops being the like immobilized viewer in the darkened room with this sort of simulated sense of movement and becomes an actually mobile viewer with the simulated sense of being still, and changing the sort of figure from the, you know, the dark room to the set of earphones. Which I think is lovely and doesn't say that, okay, there is no cinema and now that the material substrates are changing, we can't figure out what's specific about it anymore. It's saying, let's think about this as it changes over time. And let's see what those changes can tell us about both the nature of what's uniquely cinematic, but also what our media ecology is doing around cinema that changes.

Jonathan Nichols-Pethick 15:30
So this object that we're talking about changes over time. So this idea of the death of something or the end of something is really sort of overstating the case, when it's really just the change of something that we now need to reconsider again.

Jordan Sjol 15:45
I think the idea of the death of something is very much based on believing that its existence is reducible to its materiality. But yeah, I think that that associating cinema simply and exclusively with the celluloid strip was productive at a certain time in film theory, but you also have to figure out where that has its limits.

Jonathan Nichols-Pethick 16:08
Right. So let's move on now to then the scale flexible part of this. Let's talk about how you approach that.

Jordan Sjol 16:15
And so this, I think, actually has a lot to do with what we're talking about with materiality and levels of abstraction. Way back in 1985, [Kittler](#) does his take on this convergence thesis, which is saying that the fiber optic cable is the medium to end all media because everything is going to have the same material substrate. And this is an idea that he later recants on, but definitely persists as something of a commonplace in Film and Media Studies that I also want to refute. I use the example of Lev Manovich, who, in ["Media After Software"](#) writes that there is only software, pointing out correctly that you can't talk about the different characteristics of digital film or digital video or websites in terms of their digital nature, that what really separates them as the software environment. And so that's where we can sort of stabilize the level of medium specificity. And we could even potentially start taxonomizing and all of this great stuff that you can do when you stabilize your object of study. But I think that has a couple of problems. You know, one, it can't really take account of what's different in film becoming digital compared to textual production becoming digital, right? Those are two very different transitions. So that sort of fails in the diachronic test. But also, you know, the question that there's only software obviously brings up is, well, what about hardware, right? I think to believe that all digital things are equivalent, we have to actually lose track of the materiality, we actually have to start to think about information is this free-floating thing, where it doesn't matter what we instantiate it on. And [Wendy Chun](#) and [Katherine Hayles](#) both make this point strenuously many times over the course of their careers, that this depends on an imagination of the sort of seamless and frictionless information that's exactly the same as binary, right? Whereas when you actually get down to it, these processes, these digital things, have very different material structures, and that those material structures themselves also lend to different modes of operation, different subject formation, all the things that we talked about when we talked about medium specificity.

Jonathan Nichols-Pethick 18:36
So it struck me as interesting that, you know, that hardware gets left out of the equation when hardware is so often a very real part of the experience.

Jordan Sjol 18:44
No, I think completely and the I mean, you know, Manovich is having this argument, you know, with the Kittler assertion of now there is only hardware, which I think also the point, but you know, Kittler, saying that once the sort of universal Turing machine is described, then every hardware instantiation is theoretically interchangeable. Except, as he says, the Turing machine doesn't exist outside of Turing's paper. And so when we're in the real world, everything does have its particularities. And yeah, so again, trying to get to get away from this immaterialism.

Jonathan Nichols-Pethick 19:17
Yeah, the idea of compatibility seems to sort of underscore that right away. It also made me think of something that you mentioned in the article about everything digital having an analog ground Is that right? That digital isn't just something that exists, right? It has to be sort of made

into the digital world. And that's strikes me as just a very interesting part of this, that we often want to, again, sort of push the analog to the background or get it out of the room completely, when in fact, there is no digital information without an analog input somewhere.

Jordan Sjol 19:52
Absolutely. Yeah. And Wendy Chun writes about this when she writes about "sourcery and source code." But yeah, you know, it feels like we're getting down to the brass tacks when we're saying: "Oh, everything's becoming digital, right? Everything's made of zeros and ones now." You're like, really? Where? Show me those zeros and ones. They're actually electrical charges that are stored sometimes on silicon chips, sometimes on tape on all sorts of different substrates. They're only turned into logical units through threshold definition. And then when they're transmitted, they're transmitted as continuous electronic signals, right? We don't really have many things in nature that exist in discrete format. Certainly down at the level where we're transmitting information. So yeah, the digital is always something that we produce out of the analog.

Jonathan Nichols-Pethick 20:38
Right, even to the point where, you know, I was just reading an article today about Elon Musk and AI and what shouldn't have struck me weird, but did, was the idea that well, they had to make a deal with Nvidia who makes the chip which run the AI software programs. Oh, yeah, of course, a physical thing that is made by humans. So we now move the to the perspectival, because we've covered the relational. So talk about that a little bit.

Jordan Sjol 21:03
Yeah. So the example that I like to use, I like to use the John Durham Peters example in this one because, first of all, I think it's nice to get a little bit far from the things that I typically talk about whether they're digital media or film. And he has this slightly confounding quotation that's extremely recursive and goes back on itself. He says: "Let's try this difficult definitional work one more time: a medium reveals a medium as a medium."

Jonathan Nichols-Pethick 21:27
Right! I did stop on that.

Jordan Sjol 21:32
"Without other media, a medium is not a medium. Is the ship or the sea the medium. To dolphins the sea could be a medium, they are their own ships, but only non-dolphins can see that the sea is a medium to them. And undisturbed medium is rarely understood as a medium. So perhaps anthropogenic intervention in the oceans has made its medium specificity clear to cetaceans. To us, the ship is clearly a medium. But if it is a medium that reveals and makes navigable another medium, the sea." And the thing that I really like about that is that he's pointing out, which I think goes along with all of the rest of the points that I'm trying to make about diachronic and scale flexible and relational, about everything, that a medium is only a medium to something; it's only a medium in a particular place; it's only a medium in a particular function. And that understanding the medium specificity of something is very much going to depend on who you are, where you stand, how that thing functions or doesn't function in your life, what you can or can't do with it, whether you have hands or flippers, all of these things, right. And so I'd say, you

know, even since writing this article, I started to think a little bit more about characteristic modes of mediation, rather than even medium specificity, but certainly, rather than like an ontology of a medium, and I think what I'm really trying to get at is trying to take much more of a functionalist approach to thinking about media and mediation, rather than a substantialist one. Rather than saying, over here we have this object and over there we have that object, and you know, we can taxonomize them based on their materiality, based on their substance. I'd much rather say these two different things that have very different substances participate in a similar mode of mediation. And if we're going to do any sort of taxonomization, that seems like a much more fruitful place to do it to me. How can things that are very disparate do things in similar ways, and how are things that seem very similar actually doing very disparate forms of mediation?

Jonathan Nichols-Pethick 23:31
Oh, I like that. It's starts to suggest to me, oh, there are many more questions to ask. We just maybe need to adjust our approach a little bit. It does open up a whole new world of questions for me and gives me a reason to keep going and teaching and researching. So, thank you.

Jordan Sjol 23:50
I appreciate that. That that is about the best praise I've gotten. Thank you.

Jonathan Nichols-Pethick 23:54
So the last thing I want to talk about with this article is a very important point you make which is about the political work that media studies can do, cinema studies can do, that can be a little bit endangered if we sort of move away from medium specificity. I wonder if you could explain that a little bit.

Jordan Sjol 24:12
Yeah. So in the article identify what I think are two really important strains of political thinking that run all the way through cinema and media studies all the way back to early cinema. One is this concern for subject formation, right? This is, you know, we can see this in all sorts of places, but I think it's very pronounced in apparatus theory, and feminist applications of psychoanalytic theory that go along with apparatus theory, thinking about how this particular configuration is formed by and forms particular subject formation. And that has always been enormously political in the field. It's one of the first places that feminist film theory really started cracking ground, and I think something that people have really come to understand: the way that media enforce sort of gendered ways of looking at the world, and this goes very much along with a lot of other post-structuralist thinking about gender formation. So there's that strain. And then there's another strain that I talked about as being about technological logics. So this is looking at ways that there are sort of homologous operations that work in media and maybe in other spheres. So Alex Galloway and Eugene Thacker have talked about protocol, trying to think about how power operates in a society that something like what Deleuze talks about as a control society, right? And for them the answer is it operates homologously to the technological operation of protocol. So you don't have any central actor, you don't have anyone overseeing everything. And yet, you can still propagate requisite behaviors across the field of operation. And these come together for me. And I think one example of Mar Hicks wrote this absolutely fantastic book called *Programmed Inequality*, about the history of computing in Great Britain. And they write about how, because most of the available labor that was able to do a lot of computing were women, and

it was becoming a more professionalized discipline that was supposed to be full of men, that a very high degree of centralization got built into computing mainframes. And that that goes to continue to build and reinforce and advance a very gendered, subjective form of understanding the world. And I think those are…you would lose sight of that completely if you weren't able to think through medium specificity. If you were to believe that, you know, digital convergence means that everything is all just this universal medium, you wouldn't be able to see the hardware aspect of how this is actually built into the hardware system.

Jonathan Nichols-Pethick 26:53
It reminds me very much of some of the great work that's being done right now. Safiya Nobles work, *Algorithms of Oppression*, you know, these kinds of things, looking very, very closely and narrowly at search engines. How can we understand the persistence of racist, sexist ideologies inside these digital technologies? And how do we start to combat those things? Right. I mean, on one hand, we can ask much different questions, but also to continue that important political work that goes beyond just, you know, knowing how this stuff works.

Jordan Sjol 27:28
Right. And that, yeah, and that is, so much of the reason that Kate Hayles and Wendy Chun are interested in in refuting this immaterialism. Because the moment that you start to think that all digital things are equivalent, you start to think that they are therefore neutral or scientific or any of these things, right, that makes it almost impossible to see the ways that they construct and enforce structures of power that we really would rather not have constructed and enforced.

Jonathan Nichols-Pethick 27:56
Right, and that have themselves very material consequences. So speaking of politics, I'm going to shift gears here and move into your other identity as a screenwriter, as a filmmaker. So you are one of the co-writers of the film, *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*, which is an adaptation, and maybe the first one I've known of an academic book with without a particular plot. Which itself is a fascinating undertaking. So I wonder if we can start to think about how, first of all, just about that film and how you approached it, but also maybe some connections to what you do as a scholar? So first of all, just maybe we can talk about the film itself. What got you involved in that film? How did you all approach that task of creating – and no spoilers here - but a very taut thriller? A really good film.

Jordan Sjol 29:00
Thank you.

Jonathan Nichols-Pethick 29:01
And I'm not just saying that because I'm in a room with you. I loved this movie - out of what is essentially a political manifesto.

Jordan Sjol 29:09
It was, it was hard. And I think a very fun challenge. And it felt sort of spiritually right from the beginning. And I think maybe a good way of saying why it seemed to make sense to me is talking about it as a genre film in particular, and specifically as a heist movie, right? So this is a movie that is structured very much classically like a heist movie, and we're adopting Andreas

[Malm's Verso manifesto](), the basic point of which - to oversimplify a little - is that almost every successful social justice movement in history has used property destruction as one of its tactics, and that the absolute admonition on that in the environmental movement is counterproductive. And so we knew we wanted to make a movie out of this that was in some way going to be about eco-terrorists, and one in which we could get audience members to at least think about why they were doing what they were doing in a way that wasn't necessarily jumping to be like, "Well, I disagree with what they're doing. So I won't think about it." And the nice thing about something like heist movies, you don't watch a bank heist movie and spend the whole movie going, "Wow, this is really fun. But I don't think that these people should be robbing banks, because that's illegal, and this money belongs to somebody." It's that that there's something in the genre built in where you want to go with the characters, and you even want to root for them. And so we were trying to make a movie that would be accessible to people who didn't already hold the opinions that are in the book, and that might be fun and enjoyable, and that might, they might find themselves rooting for eco terrorists. Right? And to maybe leave the theater and think about what that might mean about the state of the world or about that.

Jonathan Nichols-Pethick 31:00
Right. And I love the fact that the characters themselves are under no illusion about what they're doing. They know they'll be called terrorists. In fact, some of them think, "Yeah, that's what I'm doing. And here's why I'm doing it." I was fascinated, thinking about your work and thinking about like, taking somewhat far-flung ideas - you know, as we think about media as these sort of possibly wildly different things - the film is a group of fairly far-flung people who come together within a framework that doesn't really essentialize them as a certain kind of person, but constitutes this kind of new unit based on the conditions at hand. I wonder if you could talk about thinking through those characters and how you how you all wanted to build that unit?

Jordan Sjol 31:45
Yeah, I think that's a very interesting perspective, because there's certainly a way in which these characters are a little bit schematic in a way that I think is useful. You know, as, as you're talking about, we're turning nonfiction, no plot, no character thing into a character-based narrative drama. And so part of what we were doing is trying to translate some of the ideas in the book into a lived experience, right. And I'm really interested in this connection between the, like, highly theoretical, and lived experience, too. We were trying to do that transformation. And the way that we started just going about the process was, you know, reading the book. And Andreas put us in touch with many activists, and many people who had been impacted by the fossil fuel industry, not just through climate change, but also through pollution and land dispossession. Talking to people in our lives, we know who had been impacted, and trying to think about ways of representing those lived experiences in character lives. So again, without spoilers, the characters all have their moment in the film in which their reason for being there is explained. And, again, something that works in a heist movie it's the part of the movie where we're getting the crew together, right? And it's, "Oh, who's this person? Why are they there?" And so it gives us enough time to say, "Well, this is the impact on this person, and that's the impact on that person." And trying to build from that something that feels representational of a broad swath of reasons to be there, that can be a schematic in that way without reducing the people into something that's not about who they are, that's not about their lived experience.

Jonathan Nichols-Pethick 33:28
Right. There are members of this unit that you wouldn't think would go together. But they work together because they have this common cause.

Jordan Sjol 33:34
Yeah, I think that that's definitely part of what we wanted to do politically with this. We are in a political situation in which the people in power benefit enormously from us believing that we have no common cause with each other. And wanting, again, to have this very broad representational structure. And to say that, okay, the character who codes is probably being conservative, and who's mad about eminent domain and land dispossession, doesn't have to agree with the rest of the characters, doesn't even have to believe in climate change to want to still fight back about this industry. And so we're very used to narratives about the impossibility of coming together to do things, right. And if we're talking about media and subject formation, we know that the stories that we tell will start to affect our understanding of the way the world works. And so to have stories that are also about people from different cultural backgrounds, you know, who signify their identity in extremely different ways, learning that they have common cause and coming together and it not being a constant argument or struggle. These characters know what they want to do, and they're trying to do it together,

Jonathan Nichols-Pethick 34:44
Which I'm going to use as another segue to talk about - if you wouldn't mind - and I don't know if you are a member of the WGA or not…

Jordan Sjol 34:51
Not long standing. Yes, I am a member.

Jonathan Nichols-Pethick 34:54
So you are on strike.

Jordan Sjol 34:55
I am on strike.

Jonathan Nichols-Pethick 34:57
So I wouldn't mind talking about the strike a little bit and how it impacts, first of all, what you think is at stake in the strike and why, you know, what it means to you, but also how we might think about, from your perspective, how the strike impacts you this film. And anything else you want to talk about with that?

Jordan Sjol 35:14
Yeah, I've started thinking about the strike very much in terms of digital media, actually. And obviously, there's the streaming aspect of it, but it seems to me that tech companies have come into many industries, right. And I think Uber is a very clear one. And the way that it generally works is: it's a tech company, so they have lots of VC backing, because they're bright and shiny. And they come into an industry to disrupt it. And they do that by using an unsustainable business model that they can only use because they have a lot of VC money behind them. And taking what had been established there, and usually established with significant labor struggles to create

some sort of a steady job, some sort of way of, you know, having benefits, something that you could retire from. And then the tech company will bash that apart with their unsustainable business model until everything that was structured there dies and goes away, and then they'll raise prices back to the level from before their disruption, except none of the workers get any of the protections that they had. And we've seen that in many industries, and I think that is what tech companies are trying to do and film as well. And labor and film is still very well organized, and so there's some ability to push back against this. I think it's partly why the strike is going so long, and it's going to probably continue to go so long, is because the labor is asking for a different business model. Netflix and Hulu are not in the same business that Warner Bros. has been in for a long time. They are in the business of having a high stock price and making a large return to their investors. And so when writers ask for something like residuals on viewership numbers, a tension is introduced where you want as high viewership numbers as possible to juice your stock price, but you want as low as possible viewership numbers to have to pay people. So I think that we are seeing something where the rubber is really hitting the road on these business models and on what they're about, and on how labor can get into that. And I think, too that…I was going back and reading some of the coverage of the 2007 writer's strike, and it was much less sympathetic than the coverage of this writers strike. There was a feeling that these Hollywood writers are being so whiny, they're the elite, they're, you know, XY and Z. And this time there is a lot of solidarity coming from lots of different directions, and I think people even just in general, people who are not even themselves in unions, understand that the ways of us having solid and comfortable lives is being disrupted largely by tech companies, digital media companies, and that if we're ever going to fight back against that we do need to organize.

Jonathan Nichols-Pethick 38:05
It strikes me too, as you're talking, this specter of AI: I wonder if that has something to do with a more popular sentiment toward the writers because there is this element of "technology gone too far" - this fear of something that is going to be used for the wrong purposes. I mean, do you do you agree with that?

Jordan Sjol 38:26
Yeah, I definitely agree with that fear. But I disagree in that I don't actually think it's that ridiculous to imagine a world in which most of our media is written by AI for lots of different reasons. I mean, the technology at this point, obviously, is not there. But these things develop much more quickly than we do, they share knowledge with each other. And with the way that we've constructed the internet, they're going to be able to run hundreds of millions of repeated trials in order to optimize themselves. And as we create unsupervised machine learning models that have absolutely no oversight and go off and let them do things, I think they're going to get profoundly good at manipulating human sentiment; I think much better than even the most talented, manipulative writers that I've ever met. And so my worries about that go way beyond Hollywood writers not being able to get their paychecks. And I think Cambridge Analytica – though we've seemed to largely have forgotten about it - is a bit of a pre-sentiment of this. I think we are going to get to a place in which - in all sorts of ways that we don't expect yet – language-based machines are going to be able to manipulate human emotions for I would say, if we keep going the same way we are, almost exclusively nefarious ends.

Jonathan Nichols-Pethick 39:53

Well, on that happy note…

Jordan Sjol 39:56
Yeah, we got into my speculation! I will say I'm writing a syllabus on digital pessimism right now…

Jonathan Nichols-Pethick 40:04
Perfect and perfect,

Jordan Sjol 40:05
…and have been ensconced in some of this stuff.

Jonathan Nichols-Pethick 40:07
So, Jordan, thank you so much for taking time to talk with me today. I'm so thrilled to have you as a colleague here at DePauw, and so glad you agreed to talk to us for Aca-media.

Jordan Sjol 40:18
Yeah, this has been fantastic.

[Interstitial music]

Christine Becker 43:16
Alright, so many great scholars, and so much great work cited in that conversation. And one quick thing, if you want to find any of the sources that they talk about, Jonathan compiled a really extensive list of links on our website. So you can go check that out at, I think it's aca-media.org. But yeah, super smart, really interesting conversation there.

Michael Kackman 43:35
Yeah, good stuff. And this conversation sounds kind of a little esoteric and theoretical at first, but honestly, I feel like I'm beating my head against this. Every single day in class, you know, like you and I teach a lot of broadcast TV history. And I feel like I just have to keep going back to maps and concrete objects and literally bringing various old television sets into class and asking people to interact with them and really think about that, the materiality of that interface. Because the impulse more broadly, culturally, is to just see all of this stuff as dematerialized content that comes out of the content extruder, which obscures all kinds of important things that we should be paying attention to.

Christine Becker 44:33
Yeah, well, that includes that the larger question beyond just our research and our teaching, but the orientation of our departments, because we've had some of these conversations, we have... Our department's called Film, Television and Theatre, and we've had conversations about like our intro class, which combines film and television, and then we have separate tracks for each of those concentrations. And we're talking about like, well, how do we match those up so that

they're even, but you know, one of the really tricky things is, well, what do you do then with digital media? What do you do with gaming? Like, is that TV, because that's more screens? Or is that film, where we've kind of gone like screen culture with film. And so that question of the orientation of departments going forward is going to be a huge question that we have to grapple with.

Michael Kackman 45:13
It will. And every single institution has kind of a different matrix of political and cultural and personal histories that are underlying all this stuff. And so some of us work in Humanities departments in Colleges of Arts and Letters, and some are in the Sciences, and some are in the Arts. And there's no particular rhyme or reason to the way that those structures kind of fall into place. You know, the Tetris game is sort of not rational.

Christine Becker 45:47
Yeah. And it's also a combination of institutions and then, of course, individual people. As I thought, another fascinating thread of that conversation is individuals making choices about what they want to research and what they think is relevant to the questions that they think need to be answered. And so just real quick, the research project I'm working on right now, is about a television show that aired on a local NBC affiliate WNDU in South Bend that was owned by the university. And so it was partly seen as this like educational project, and they originally had this notion of creating a four-year television course of study at the university. And it basically didn't happen until our department was kind of christened in 1998, FTT. And then even that, it took a few years after that. But it was this history of like the first version of it, they put a guy in charge who was a print guy, and he hated TV. And so he didn't do anything to develop television at the university. And then they put, you know, a theater guy in charge who doesn't like film, and then they put a film guy in charge who doesn't like theater. And it takes until like the late '90s, you finally have a couple of chairs who see the compatibility of, among these media, but also then the value of still carving out separate concentrations. And so that question too, about like, what are we going to put together? What are we going to separate? You know, I saw it play out in history, then, looking through my own department history.

Michael Kackman 47:05
And I think we all have those histories, you know, every, most academics have exposure to multiple departments. And so we can all reflect on the different kinds of structures. You know, back at University of Wisconsin, where we both went to grad school, film and TV studies lived in the same department. You and I were in different areas within that department. But they had a pretty rigid dividing line in terms about legitimacy of objects and theoretical approaches and stuff. And then there was an entirely separate department, one floor down in the same building of Comm Studies, which had a bunch of media scholars but with animosities and conflicts and, you know, sometimes just different orientations that were every bit as pronounced as those between

the film and TV scholars in our own department. And of course, then that changes again when you go to a different institution. But all of this stuff is kind of ad hoc and idiosyncratic.

Christine Becker 48:06
Yeah. But then there becomes a lot at stake in defining yourself. So you know, as you mentioned, that I was in the film studies part of the department. I did a dissertation that had something to do with TV, then applied for the job at Notre Dame, which was, again, the evolution of our department was I was supposed to teach film, but start a television program. And I had to bill myself as a TV scholar, and I didn't like I sat in on one Julie D'Acci class, right, like that was my bona fides, but I just sort of, like taught myself those bits and pieces and especially like having, you know, the colleagues that I had, who were in Telecom, as it was called back then of, you know, Jason Mittell and Derek Kompare and, you know, these, these really great people. I basically learned from them, but you do kind of, then you reinvent yourself along the way, you know, partly to get jobs and partly based on your interest. You know, and one thing about the name of our department in doing that research, I had a conversation with Don Crafton, who was brought in as chair in '98 and turned the name of the department from Communications and Theater, into Film, Television, and Theatre. And he was telling me about the process of renaming the department and he said it would just you know, of course as academics, right, it takes forever to do anything and so the debate about okay, well, we have these three mediums, like what order should the department name be in. and he said, there's like all kinds of discussion about well, film is the biggest or theaters the most prominent or whatever, television isn't barely started, and then decided on Film going first, because of the alphabet. That would be listed higher in a list of departments, film would be first so that was better than being down in the Ts. So if we did add dolphins, we would want to put dolphins first, so DFTT.

Michael Kackman 49:12
And so clearly we are the people who are best equipped to help others navigate these complicated, thorny, difficult political, economic, cultural morasses about medium specificity.

Christine Becker 50:03
Yep, more asses indeed.

Michael Kackman 50:05
Yeah, more asses right here. So I hope you've enjoyed this episode of Aca-Media where you can come for more asses and the critical analysis thereof.

Christine Becker 50:15
Yes. Which actually. then, is a nice segue into something I wanted to mention, because we've got an episode retitling project going on. Because back when Bill was picking like fun names for our episodes, totally something involving "more asses" would have been in the title of this episode.

But if you're searching for a podcast on media specificity, you would not have gotten a hit on that. If you're searching for "more asses," we'd have quite a new influx of listeners, I think, at least passing through. But to that point, David Lipson, who's now one of our co-producers, he pointed out that the SEO, you know, success of our podcast would be much higher if we actually call the episodes what the content was, or at least gave them subtitles with the content. So I want to just give a shout out to David for doing that, he is retitling our old episodes. So it'll have like the funny cutesy name, and then in parentheses, the actual content like the guests and the topic, so that if you were searching for something like media specificity, you would find it and not find more asses.

Michael Kackman 51:23
You know, that makes perfect sense.

Christine Becker 51:25
It really does.

Michael Kackman 51:27
Like, yeah.

Christine Becker 51:28
But shout out then to Bill Kirkpatrick for his great work in the old titles of our episodes, and then he is helping David out with making those changes on the website. So thank you, Bill.

Michael Kackman 51:40
All right. Yes, indeed.

Christine Becker 51:43
Oh, and one other project I want to tell that we're doing is a transcription initiative for accessibility purposes, especially but also then, you know, coming in handy for searchability is making transcripts of all our episodes. So every episode going forward will arrive with a transcript along with it. And then we're going through old episodes and converting those into transcripts. It's laborious work, we have a service that gives us like an 80% accurate thing, but you should see how many different ways it reads Aca-Media or Kackman. Like, it never gets Kackman, it's, you know, Capman, and

Michael Kackman 52:21
That's okay.

Christine Becker 52:21

All kinds of things. All kinds of variations. You know, "a comedian" is a very common one for Aca-Media. So we've got to go through them and you know, kind of fix some of those bits and pieces. So it isn't quick work, but it's important work, and we want to do it. And just note, if there's a particular episode you are very interested in if you want it for, again, accessibility purposes, or if you are doing research on that topic, and you want to be able to quote someone and have a quotation to copy-paste, let us know. We have a form on our website, if you go to the website, aca-media.org, click Transcripts, and there's a form where you can request an episode, and we'll prioritize that in the queue.

Michael Kackman 53:01
Please do reach out about that, because, you know, the, the software is going to have a, it's probably going to take months to get through this episode. That's gonna it's gonna generate a lot of noise and not a lot of signal. So please do reach out about that. Aca-Media would not be possible without the support of the University of Notre Dame and the Society for Cinema and Media Studies. But we are also the product of a fortunately growing group of co-conspirators and producers. Todd Thompson down at the University of Texas at Austin provides the golden ears that make it all sound good.

Christine Becker 53:43
We have our old hands still on deck. Stephanie Brown is at Washington College and Frank Mondelli at University of Delaware.

Michael Kackman 53:49
We're also especially grateful to Jonathan Nichols-Pethick at DePauw both as a producer and also as interviewer for this segment.

Christine Becker 53:58
And thank you to his interviewee Jordan Sjol, also at DePauw. And another thank you to David Lipson, University of Strasbourg, and then we also have back there waiting in the wings Michael Newman at UW Milwaukee who is going to be helping us out more as we go.

Michael Kackman 54:10
Yes. Aca-Media, navigating more asses since ... 2012?

Christine Becker 54:16
'13.

Michael Kackman 54:17
'13, okay.

Christine Becker 54:18
Which hey, 10th anniversary

Michael Kackman 54:20
Whoopeedoo!

Christine Becker 54:21
Yeah, 10 years of more asses.

Michael Kackman 54:23
Yeah, that's right. That's us. All right. Stay warm out here. Enjoy the season and those of you who are grading, condolences.