Letter From the Editors

Welcome to the 2011 edition of Cultural Fields, the official newsletter of the Australian Cultural Sociology Thematic Group. We have quite a few items inside including a review of the recent event we held in Melbourne where Ron Jacobs spoke on the media narratives of the Global Financial Crisis. We were privileged to have this event form part of the Thesis Eleven ‘Word, Image, Action: Popular Print and Visual Cultures’ festival and also to be funded by TASA and Charles Sturt University. The lecture was a success with a small but engaged crowd enjoying Ron’s excellent discussion and Luke Howie’s eloquent response. Two postgraduates Theresa Sauter and Geraldine Donoghue were lucky enough to win scholarships from TASA to attend the event and their report is inside.

In this letter however, we wish to discuss some of the challenges and subsequent changes that the thematic group is now undergoing. Firstly, due to the change in TASA’s policies regarding thematic groups, we have attracted a whole host of new people to the group. We have also lost a few on the way. This is both welcome and slightly frustrating. Secondly, it is probably no surprise that establishing and running a newsletter for ‘free’ is by no means easy. We tried our best to keep interest in Cultural Fields going but in the end, we have decided to take the route towards the ‘new media’. In particular, we will be establishing an ongoing ‘blog’ which will be updated frequently with new material and of which the group will be advised through the mailing list. We appreciate that blogs are also hard work, but we feel this allows us breathing space and also immediate results for articles, calls for papers and so on that come our way. We hope that you will find this a worthy resource in the future and will update you with web addresses and so forth soon.

Finally, we welcome to the convening team Ms. Theresa Sauter from QUT who has come on board because Kate Maher has had to take leave. We appreciate all the work that Kate has put into this venture including her work on the website and newsletter and wish her the best. She will be returning to the role in due course.

Lastly, it is sad that we cannot continue the newsletter. The ASA inspires us with their thematic groups, but here in Australia, we understand newsletters are not career enhancers. Maybe in the future, this will change!

Nick Osbaldiston and Catherine Strong.
From June 7th to 15th the Thesis Eleven Centre for Cultural Sociology at La Trobe University directed by Peter Beilharz put together an impressive and varied programme of public lectures, cultural events and master classes under the theme ‘Word, Image, Action: Popular Print and Visual Cultures’. The generous scholarship we received from TASA through the Cultural Sociology Thematic Group enabled us to visit wintry Melbourne for a couple of days to attend some of the highlights of the festival, including a forum on ‘Does WikiLeaks Matter?, a half-day event ‘On Bauman’, and a public lecture by Ron Jacobs on ‘Media Narratives of Economic Crisis’.

The forum on ‘Does WikiLeaks Matter?’ explored the impact and wide-ranging implications of the recent WikiLeaks phenomenon for the dissemination of information and journalistic practice, for politics, democracy and security, for the workings of companies and institutions and for innovation. The panel consisted of Robert Manne, Eleanor Townsley, Guy Rundle, and Peter Vale and was chaired by Peter Beilharz. The general consensus among these esteemed international scholars was clearly “Yes, WikiLeaks matters”, however not simply as an occurrence in its own right, but rather as symbol of a general process of transformations occurring within modern Western politics and society alongside the effects and impacts of the internet revolution. Manne, Professor of Politics at La Trobe University, spoke first and questioned Julian Assanges’ claims of wanting to improve the state of journalistic practice, suggesting that Assanges’ intentions were to initiate global political and moral revolution with his leaks. Manne asserted that the danger of WikiLeaks was that it became ruled by automaticity rather than judgement and by the assumption that life can be led without secrets. While Manne questioned the long-term, direct influence of WikiLeaks, he imagined (and welcomed) the emergence of more specifically focused whistleblowing sites sponsored by NGO’s or human rights organisations. Eleanor Townsley, Assistant Professor of Sociology at Mount Holyoke College, USA, followed Manne and interestingly explored WikiLeaks as an institutional story, suggesting that the functioning of WikiLeaks was based on traditional understandings of journalism such as the notions that access to information will make us free and that collaboration in the communication and publication of information is of great importance. Peter Vale, Professor of Politics at Rhodes University then assessed the implication of WikiLeaks for our heavily American-based perception of security and surveillance. He pointed out that there are many people struggling against American-centred ideals in Africa and Asia who are equally as heroic as Assange, but have not received the same level of acknowledgement. The final speaker was Guy Rundle, co-founding editor of Arena and frequent contributor to The Age, The
Rundle conceptualised WikiLeaks as counter-conspiracy to the inherently corrupt, conspiratory nature of some modern governments and companies. He referred to the example of the collapse of Iceland’s economy two years ago, where WikiLeaks published secret banking documents leading to mass demonstrations and the eventual establishment of a new government, which made deals for reduced repayment of debts to Western powers. In doing so, Iceland appears to have been saved from facing the economic depression that countries like Ireland and Greece are currently confronted with. Rundle suggested that this proved the potential for WikiLeaks to stimulate positive political and economic change. Rundle’s stance summed up the general sentiment of the panel discussion, namely that WikiLeaks matters because it raises questions of what should, can, and is possible to remain secret today and who might be the messengers that are able and permitted to reveal certain secrets in the future.

A further highlight of the Thesis Eleven Festival was the half-day event ‘On Bauman’. The symposium began with a touching commemoration of Janina Bauman, Zygmunt’s lifetime companion and muse through Sian Supski and Peter Beilharz’s paper ‘To Love and To Be Loved: Janina Bauman’s Ordinary Life’. Supski and Beilharz reviewed, in an intimate way, Janina’s books and portrayed these works as historical memoirs which remained very private and in which Bauman herself tells her story as one of an ordinary life which was lived in extraordinary conditions. Following this touching introduction, were engaging presentations by Dr. Mark Davis, director of the in September 2010 established Bauman Institute at the University of Leeds, and his colleagues Dr. Chris Till and Dr. Tom Campbell. Davis began with his paper ‘When Elephants Fight, Pity the Grass...’ which described how Bauman applied his framework of liquid modernity to understand the recent global financial crisis, suggesting that Bauman sees the impact of the GFC on modern consumerism not as indicative of the failure of modern economics but rather as the proof that global capitalism was working. Davis stressed that contrary to common portrayals of Bauman as pessimistic, his work should be understood as guided by a sense of hope, and Bauman himself should be seen as a ‘sociologist of possibility’. Following Davis, Dr. Chris Till spoke ‘On Bauman and Human Value’, recounting Bauman’s evaluation of the holocaust as the result of the ethical indifference characteristic of modern subjects brought about by rational bureaucratic processes. Till emphasised Bauman’s belief that morality should be shaped by, and concerned with, taking unconditional responsibility for our conduct with others. Hence, for Bauman, it is through living with others that we become subjects. He pointed out that Bauman sees the indifference and disconnectedness that characterise modern technocratic life as a threat to this way of constituting ourselves and our morality. Finally, Dr. Tom Campbell addressed Bauman’s views on temporality in his paper ‘The Choice and Temporality in Liquid Modernity’. Campbell reviewed Bauman’s point that today, the bonds between individually conducted life politics and political actions of human collectives are not only being weakened but evaporated. He emphasised the importance of remaining grounded in our own historicity in order to assume responsibility for the other and not to fall slave to the compulsion/addiction to choose constantly without having the time to reflect on our choices, a style of life that would result in narcissism. All three papers were riveting and in combination provided a broad overview of some of Bauman’s multifaceted work. They provided an interesting insight into the important work that is emerging from the new Bauman Institute.
The presentations were followed by a special pre-screening of a shortened version of the documentary *The Trouble With Being Human These Days*, the final version of which will be released in September of this year. The preview provided a great taste of a thought-provoking documentary on liquid modernity and uncertainty and of an intimate portrait of Zygmunt Bauman, revealing his constant questioning and searching for possibilities for a better future. The half-day event was wrapped up with a stimulating pre-recorded Q & A session between Bauman and Keith Tester.

A further noteworthy event featured at the Festival of Ideas was presented by Associate Professor Ron Jacobs from the State University of New York, Albany. His public lecture on ‘What’s wrong with Television: Media Narratives of Economic Crisis’ highlighted how different opinion media outlets – including newspaper op-ed pages, political talk shows and evening cable-news television – work to shape the public’s understanding of the events they portray. Jacobs drew on his and Eleanor Townsley’s new book, *The Space of Opinion* (forthcoming, 2011), presenting their case study of the interpretations by and reactions of various opinion media outlets to the collapse of Enron in December 2001. Jacobs and Townsley interpreted vast amounts of samples of media reactions to the collapse from various US newspapers and television shows such as ‘The News Hour’ and ‘Hannity and Colmes’. They were thus able to identify key differences between newspaper and television narratives that emerged about the crisis. For example, they found that both political talk shows and cable-news television largely ignored the technical aspects of Enron’s collapse, favouring a political critique of the issue. This meant that rather than reporting on what contributed to the collapse of Enron (e.g. questionable accounting practices, derivative trading), the television programs Jacobs and Townsley looked into focused on debating the question of political corruption – particularly allegations that members of the Bush administration were in receipt of political contributions in exchange for favourable treatment and policy input. Conversely, Jacobs and Townsley found that newspaper op-ed pieces tended to provide more diverse, complex and less politicized analyses of the crisis, which focused on its technical aspects. Newspaper op-ed pieces were also more reserved and conservative in their narration of the crisis, whereas political talk shows developed a more confrontational and partisan approach with hosts often framing the responses of their guests by asking leading and morally charged questions. Given that many of the newspaper op-ed pieces were written by academics (e.g. Paul Krugman), Jacobs and Townsley’s investigation also revealed the value of the academic presence in the media in terms of improving the quality of information in the public discourse. Jacobs’ talk sought to
emphasise that rather than being a neutral channel for the dissemination of information, media contribute to shaping how social, economic, and political occurrences are received and talked about.

Jacobs’ lecture was followed with an interesting response from Dr Luke Howie, lecturer in Sociology in the School of Political and Social Inquiry at Monash University. Howie reflected on the recent global financial crisis and the various media discourses that surrounded it. He emphasised that opinions are problematic because not all opinions receive the same coverage, stating that although mainstream media portrayed the crisis as unpredictable, random and arbitrary, there were those who somewhat predicted that the crisis was looming (e.g. American Psycho author Bret Easton Ellis or anti-globalisation protestors) but were ignored in mainstream media conceptualisations of the event. Although brief, Howie’s discussion provided a refreshing enrichment to Jacobs’ Enron case study, offering a more recent example of how the contemporary space of opinion media impacts on the narrative of crisis.

We are grateful to the Cultural Sociology Thematic Group for making it possible for us not only to experience these interesting and inspiring talks and socio-cultural events, but also to treasure some of the little joys that Melbourne has to offer, including some shopping, gallery hopping, laneway viewing and sampling of great cosmopolitan food and coffee!

Theresa Sauter and Geraldine Donoghue

The Cultural Sociology Thematic Group would like to thank the following people and institutions for their efforts and support in this year’s public lecture event:

Ms Tina Soundias (The University of Melbourne)
Ms Sally Daly (The Australian Sociological Association)
Ms Christine Ellem (Thesis Eleven)
The Department of Resource Management and Geography (The University of Melbourne)
The School of Humanities and Social Science (Charles Sturt University)
The Australian Sociological Association
The Thesis Eleven Centre for Cultural Sociology
Postgraduate Spotlight: Nicola Pitt

**Supervisors:** Lenore Manderson and Dennis Woodward

**Institution:** School of Political and Social Inquiry, Monash University

**Research Interests:** Sociology of Mothering, Sociological Methodologies and Knowledge Practices, Sino-American Relations, Psychoanalytic Sociology

**Working PhD Title:** The (Never) ‘Good-Enough’ Mother in 21st Century U.S. and China

**PhD Synopsis:** The proliferation of material that is available online on the subject of mothering can certainly be a good source of information for mothers, or any interested individual even; but the onslaught of advice, commentary and opinion can also serve as a sort of ‘information-overload’ insofar as the topic is concerned. Take for example the recent media frenzy in response to American/Chinese mother Amy Chua’s article in the *Wall Street Journal* titled, ‘Why Chinese Mothers are Superior’ (‘Saturday Essay’: January 8, 2011). These printed excerpts from her book *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (2011) generated over 8500 comments in
response to the online version of the article alone. The article also sparked online debate around the world (both online as well as in other non-digital coverage) to do with the sorts of cultural differences (specifically between the US ‘West’, and China’s ‘East’) in regards to what ‘good’ mothering means for contemporary women in the 21st century. And then supposedly, who is ‘right’?

My argument here is that this information offers an insight into the sorts of tensions and anxieties concerning the complex cultural practices and differing understandings of good mothering looks like, as well as what it might entail for different groups of people living in increasingly globalised situations. The purpose, or intended contribution of this thesis therefore, is to question whether globalisation and the politics of online digital technologies have actually transformed our understandings of what constitutes good mothering (i.e. that with seemingly more information available does it then become more obvious and better understood that there is never going to ever be one, single, right way to mother and/or to achieve this completely)? Or, whether the effects of technology and increased online media communication have instead, only further intensified the ideals into even more unrealistic and unachievable standards then ever before? It is my aim to understand and make sense of these questions through an analysis of US-Sino relations and the sort of underlying cultural anxieties between them as fostered through debates such as what it means to be a ‘good’ mother in the 21st century.
What tales would clothes tell if they were able to speak? What secrets would they reveal? And what role do clothes play in constructing the reality of arts works, and everyday life, more generally? The everyday life of clothing is an area of sociological investigation that arguably remains under developed. Compared with other topical concerns, the social study of clothing to many a sociologist remains a periphery concern. However, what happens when we turn our attention to these ostensibly benign materials that help inform our social judgements and provide frames through which we ascertain the value and quality of others? Is it not fair to say that when we do assume a focus on clothing, we begin to see clothes as not merely material fabric, but arguably gain a sense for the extent to which clothing is inextricably woven into the fabric of societies.

The power of garb is even plainer to see when considering costumes. That is, clothing specifically designed to be viewed as part of a character and that more significantly, works as a type of casing that assists in the construction of narratives. However, costumes are not merely the purview of the creative arts, but moreover facilitate purposeful communication of scenes and the way characters or roles interact with one another (think for instance the power of the medical scrubs or the proverbial business suit). Through costume, we are implicitly provided with sociological tools for interpreting what is happening and who is who, within a given creative work or situation. Therefore, clothing becomes very much a part of the presentation of self that we not only present throughout our everyday lives, but also that which occurs on stage.

The National Gallery of Australia recently demonstrated this by showcasing many of the costumes created and used in performances of the Ballet Russes Company. The Ballet Russes – probably considered the greatest ballet company of the 20th century – in this instance provides the stage upon which the clothing of this company adorns centre stage. Over 140 costumes from 34 productions from 1909 to 1939 are included in the exhibition which importantly coincides...
with the 100th anniversary of the Ballets Russes. The Ballets Russes made its first appearance in Paris in the 1909 and the major creative energy behind the force of the company was the Russian-born artist Sergei Diaghilev. It was in particular Diaghilev’s wide spread interest in the arts that lead to his desire to include new and upcoming composers, visual artists and designers in the Company. Diaghilev sought performances that invested in all components of ballet — dancing, choreography, music, stage and costume design and publicity.

The logistical efforts required to amass this type of event warrants particular mention. Though one might not think of clothing as a particularly difficult item to display, in this instance, it reportedly did present difficulties in setting up, hanging and maintaining the exhibition. Clothes, in someway, are far more unstable and venerable than the material of canvass or glass that galleries are generally more accustomed to dealing with. Moreover, the costumes were never designed to be constantly displayed in position, because to do so, places stain on the seams that would usually be worn for only select periods of time. The frailty of these costumes therefore makes it a delight to see these pieces. In addition, knowing these items will not last forever and seeing this frailty all too clearly, makes the experience of views these artefacts all the more special.

But the idea of creating an exhibition devoted entirely to the costumes worn by the dancers of this prestigious company is perhaps at first glance, unusual. Why would audiences want to view only costumes? Surely the components of the moving body and music – that the company is most famously known for – would be worth focusing on? The focus on consumes turns out to be precisely the unanticipated delight of the exhibition that became clear to me when wandering through the exhibition spaces. Here, clothing that usually is judged as complementary are presented in such a way that showcases the craft and ingenuity of the designs. The social life of these significant costumes truly pays homage to the creators of these works of art in their own right.
Call for Papers

Crossroads in Cultural Studies 2012

Hosted by Sorbonne Nouvelle University with the support of the French National Commission for UNESCO

We are pleased to announce that the 9th International Conference Crossroads in Cultural Studies will be held in Paris, France, from July 2nd to 6th, 2012, hosted by Sorbonne Nouvelle University with the support of the French National Commission for UNESCO.

The city of Paris has a long and complex history as a crossroad between cultures and peoples. Paris has played an important role in the development and circulation of the works of authors and thinkers that have shaped the postcolonial imagination in a significant way. Drawing on their tradition of comprehensive and critical thought, the organizers seek contributions in the form of papers and panels that will continue to examine the intersection between culture, power and knowledge from within the framework of Cultural Studies.

The conference will also be hosted by UNESCO, the international organization that has always championed cultural diversity and difference. Given the long association between Cultural Studies research and UNESCO, this conference should be an occasion for Cultural Studies to look back on its own evolution as well as explore new scholarly insights. We believe UNESCO will also offer an exceptional platform to discuss important current issues and contribute to the visibility of Cultural Studies in France and Europe.
• **12 WORLD-CLASS KEYNOTE SPEAKERS FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD** will address the conference at keynote and plenary sessions. Among them, *Sara Ahmed, Marie-Hélène Bourcier, John Erni, Jeremy Gilbert, Achille Mbembe, Walter Mignolo, Bobby Noble, Phaedra Pezzullo, Françoise Vergès*. With the participation of *Stuart Hall* and *Jacques Rancière* (to be confirmed).

• **STATE OF THE ART CONFERENCE TOPICS.** All topics relevant to Cultural Studies, especially new and innovative areas of research are welcome. See a list of possible topic areas.

• **SUBMIT YOUR PROPOSAL NOW USING THE ONLINE FORMS!** The call for papers and organized panel proposals is now open. Check the submission guidelines and submit a proposal using the online forms - session submission or paper submission - before September 30th, 2011.

• **ACS ASSISTANCE SCHEME FOR CROSSROADS 2012.** The Association for Cultural Studies will offer a small number of grants to assist participants from ACS under-represented regions with travel accommodation or registration expenses.

• **ATTRACTIVE AND CONVENIENT ACCOMMODATION IN THE HEART OF THE CITY OF PARIS AND CLOSE TO THE CONFERENCE VENUES.** Cheaper campus accommodation will also be available close at hand at the International Paris University Campus.

• **SPREAD THE NEWS!** Please forward this message to your colleagues and friends! We look forward to seeing you in Paris in 2012!

For more information visit: [http://www.crossroads2012.org/?q=en/node/26](http://www.crossroads2012.org/?q=en/node/26)
Call for Papers – TASA Conference 2011, Local Lives/Global Networks

The University of Newcastle, Tuesday 29th November to Thursday 1st December, 2011

Since the late 1960s, much prominent and influential social theory has been united by one common theme: social relations have individualised whilst economic relations have globalised. The TASA Conference 2011 – Local Lives/Global Networks – will explore the nexus between global economic, social and political discourses and the localised experiences and emotions that these forces engender for individuals faced with ever increasing uncertainty. As new inequalities arise and as traditional inequalities remain but are commonly obfuscated, a publically engaged sociology is well placed to make interventions and provide understanding in complex times. We invite papers and abstracts from all who would like to contribute to this enterprise.

KEY DATES:

- General Paper/Work-in Progress Paper - CLOSES Monday, August 29, 2011

For more information see the TASA website, or email TASA2011@newcastle.edu.au

Final Word

At the Cultural Sociology Thematic Group, we strive to make sure that we are one of the more productive and efficient groups in TASA. We are grateful for all the efforts of those around us who make the Thematic Group a success. It seems a shame that we have now had to discontinue the newsletter, but we think that the blog is something that can keep things rolling effectively. However, this cannot operate so without your efforts. We encourage you to let us know of call for papers, articles of interest, videos, etc, that we can place up for the group’s perusal. We will also be keeping the mailing list active. By all means, let us know if you would like to be removed from this.

Finally, we will be holding our usual meet and greet at TASA this year. We hope you will attend and welcome any advice, feedback or future possibilities for the group. As always, we are here to promote Cultural Sociology in Australia!

Catherine Strong and Nick Osbaldiston