

Fields Journal explores this quality of media through an investigation of the concepts of modularity and modification. We define modularity as the repetition, standardization, or recombination of existing forms and ideas across new areas or contexts. Modification, on the other hand, calls on the ability to adapt given materials—including technologies, practices, concepts, and senses of self—to prevailing conditions. Media forge the channels along which modular elements can be disseminated and within which opportunities for modification take root. We are interested in exploring the limits and tensions of modularity and modification, while also thinking through contexts in which they might overlap.

Considering these concepts as an entry point for the study of media in space immediately conjures associations with Michel de Certeau’s opposition between strategy and tactics. If modularity offers the opportunity to expand the “proper place” of the powerful and extend the imposed terrain on which the subjected must move, modification suggests the potential to rework that terrain along tactical lines.¹ The modularity of communication infrastructures and media forms might suggest narratives of spatial and temporal compression and, in turn, buttress colonial narratives that render distant, foreign spaces more legible, accessible, or profitable for powerful interests. Conversely, the modification of modular media genres, formats, technologies, and environments evokes profuse examples of narratives of localized or regionalized difference, adaptation, resistance, and even refusal.

However, such associations between modularity, modification, power, and resistance do not hold seamlessly, and are useful only to the extent that they are contextualized and questioned. Media scholars that engage in this work do not necessarily dispense with familiar associations with these concepts but expose the frictions and counternarratives that arise out of close, critical analysis. For instance, Juan Llamas-Rodriguez coins the term “modular cosmopolitanism” in his study of the expansion of luxury cinema in the United States, India, and Mexico to refer to the ways that such spaces put forward a “privileged form of global belonging” that expands through a “set of standard technology and practices.”² Even as he highlights the power of this standardized cultural site to forge modes of identification that transcend locality, he also stresses the need, at the level of analysis, to move beyond generalization towards the qualities of specific sites and the fissures in ideal forms to understand the way these subjectivities are created and recreated.³ Christian Sandvig also presses at the boundaries of familiar uses of our core concepts by exploring the appropriation of the materials, technologies, and

protocols of internet service by the Tribal Digital Village, an indigenous-run project to connect remote indigenous communities in Southern California to broadband networks. Sandvig emphasizes the importance of experimentation, adaptation, and new ways of thinking in tribes' efforts to connect.⁴ But he also underlines that this appropriation rests on developing intimate knowledge of conventional technologies and pushing the limits of infrastructure designed to expand into new spaces even further than their original creators.⁵ Taking these and other scholars as inspiration, this issue asks: how might we complicate conventional understandings of modularity and modification to uncover or recover their alternative uses and dimensions?

Taking up this question and beginning the issue's first half, Christina Moushoul examines an experimental artwork, *Hole-in-Space* (Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz, 1984), which positions virtual communication technologies in public spaces, allowing users in urban areas to connect to other urban localities via video feed. Moushoul asks whether the video of these communication platforms counts as architecture or if the production of place via video conferencing platforms puts architecture in crisis. Interrogating architectural and media techniques through which space is framed, she shows that architecture acts as a marker of localized space while screens produce virtual, nearly placeless spaces. However, she argues that a combination of architecture and media creates place. Moushoul's contribution examines the expression of modularity through virtual communication technology that localizes spaces through video in the same way regardless of location. She discusses the modularity that occurs when these conferencing technologies are used, noting the way that users position themselves relative to the camera to properly orient themselves within the recorded landscape. Yet, Moushoul shows that the locality of place is not undone by virtual communication technologies. Rather, these videoconferencing platforms can be used to reinforce differences in locality expressed through architecture.

Turning to an investigation of digital space, Mohammed Mizanur Rashid analyzes *Mondro*, a Bangladeshi LGBTQIA+ blogging platform, as a digital counterspace that resists oppressive and heteronormative politics present in more traditional Bangladeshi blogging spaces. They provide a brief history of Bangladeshi blogging, showing that blogging platforms had originally emerged as digital resistance spaces to confront state policies. Despite the communal digital resistance orientation of these blogging spaces, these sites

tended to be indifferent towards or in support of the marginalization of queer subjects. This digital exclusion of queer minorities was exacerbated in Bangladesh around 2014, when media infrastructure expansion allowed for more users to enter digital public and counterpublic blogging spaces. Rashid explains that *Mondro* was created out of the need to provide a communication platform for queer users, but also to create a space where queer expression could occur and be preserved. *Mondro* diverges from the popular blogging model of confronting hegemonic publics and instead operates as a concealed counterspace to maintain the safety of its members. Rashid ultimately illustrates the modification of digital counterpublic community platforms and uses to preserve the past, present, and future of marginalized subjects.

Roxanne Hearn approaches a different kind of screen space to examine how the production of spectacle in film lends itself to innovations both in feminist representation and narrative form. Hearn takes *A Study in Choreography for the Camera* (dir. Maya Deren, USA, 1945) and *Flashdance* (dir. Adrian Lyne, USA, 1983) as case studies and entry points for analyzing phenomenological feminist representation in film. She shows how film styles in the production of the films' dance sequences combine elements of narrative form from both classical and avant-garde filmmaking. This combination of styles allows audiences to access characters' embodied subjective experiences. According to Hearn, the modification and combination of dominant, modular forms of narrative and temporal organization in film allow for the emergence of less prominent feminist representations of embodiment.

Mark Sloane Ebbay takes up this question of creator design and audience experience in another light by contrasting modes of play in contemporary video games designed by game developers with those designed by users, eventually extending this developer-versus-user dynamic to other media, such as film and card games. They identify developer-designed play as a modular form of play in video games and argues that this modularity is expressed in the game's instructional materials and logic, constraining the possibilities of user-designed play. However, they argue that developer-intended play always evades any pure expression of its original concept in the act of users' play, even as users reproduce it. Ebbay discusses glitches and hacks as potential modes in which designer-intended play can be subverted. However, they note that the logics of glitches and hacks are increasingly becoming absorbed into developer-designed modes of play. They also examine patches and mods as methods developers and users

engage to respond to each other's play designs. Ebbay's contribution persuasively interrogates the increasingly indistinguishable boundaries between modularity and modification as developers and users take up and react to each other's intended play styles.

Opening the issue's second half, our invited contributor Juan Llamas-Rodriguez turns our attention more closely to the hegemonic dimensions of modularity and modification through the collision of two symbols of the pandemic era—videoconferencing and shipping containers—in his meditation on Shared_Studios's Portals project. In a dark, sterile mirror of *Hole-in-Space* discussed by Moushoul, the Portals project promises seamless, immersive global encounters through videoconferencing in repurposed shipping containers, whose contradictions Llamas-Rodriguez deftly unpacks in the context of pandemic and pre-pandemic practices of imagination and communication. He demonstrates the ways that modularity of the communication infrastructures, technologies, and practices on display in the Portals practice relies on the modification—even the erasure—of the environment in which each Portals site appears. In the process, he reveals the underpinning of other ideals of cross-space connectivity that bear directly on our “platformized” communication futures.

Taking up another instance of hegemonic valences to modularity and modification, Sarah Foulkes explores the textual and semiotic dimensions of our issue theme, drawing our attention to branding practices, in this case through a keyword analysis of the branding of the streaming services Apple TV+ and Disney+. Situating the shift to streaming in the corporate histories of both companies, Foulkes assesses brand names and the graphic design practices that underscore their meanings, investigating the curious open-endedness of + as a signifier. She examines the way this symbol allows for the modification of existing brand identities, with Apple and Disney employing this “logo equation” to express different valences of its significance to their audiences. Simultaneously, she interrogates the modular quality of this symbol, identifying its ability to graft a wide array of future content into the brand images of these expansive, emerging platforms and shedding light on the way new corporate strategies beget new semiotic approaches.

Nhân Trân-Tiễn's discussion of the interplay between modularity and modification is also affected by the expansion of new streaming platforms, though he approaches this issue through the lens of cultural-industrial forces. Trân-Tiễn examines the underside of Charles Acland's idea of “felt

internationalism" by looking to the escalation of antipiracy enforcement against the filming of bootleg copies in Vietnamese cinemas.⁶ This practice has intensified in recent years to prepare the market for the entry of foreign streaming services with the aspiration of reconfiguring audiences' consumption practices. Here, piratical attempts at modifying distribution structures and increasing access to Vietnamese films for Vietnamese audiences have been aggressively policed in favor of Hollywood's need for smooth, safe market terrain for its modular global expansion, a phenomenon with great relevance to other territories as well.

Finally, Sam P. Kellogg investigates modularity as a characteristic of more explicitly geopolitical power, analyzing the technical practice of port blocking as a tool used by software companies to adhere to the sanctions imposed on Cuba by the United States' trade embargo. Kellogg explores the way the flexibility of this technique enables companies to repair the contradictions between the imagined universality of software distribution and the indiscriminate legal restriction placed on software users within Cuba. In doing so, he exposes the processes by which geopolitical actions and boundaries are systematized, reframing modularity as a technique of interruption that occurs at and creates "chokepoints" and putting forward an illustrative case that expands understandings of "vascular geopolitics" discussed by Elizabeth Cullen Dunn.⁷

In bringing together these authors' contributions, we hope to highlight sites and conditions that prompt complex interactions between modularity and modification, rather than position these concepts in an oppositional binary. Further, we aim to show that media modification and modularity, whether operating alone or together, cannot be properly studied without situating them in larger contexts of media consumption. Finally, we hope to have raised questions about the extent to which media modularity and modification are imposed and freely taken up, and for which purposes.

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Notes

- 1 Michel de Certeau, “‘Making Do’: Uses and Tactics,” in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 3rd ed., trans. Steven Rendell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 29–42.
- 2 Juan Llamas-Rodriguez, “A Global Cinematic Experience: Cinépolis, Film Exhibition, and Luxury Branding,” *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 58, no. 3 (2019): 58–59, doi.org/10.1353/cj.2019.0022.
- 3 Llamas-Rodriguez, “A Global Cinematic Experience,” 51.
- 4 Christian Sandvig, “Connection at Ewiiapaayp Mountain: Indigenous Internet Infrastructure,” in *Race After the Internet*, eds. Lisa Nakamura and Peter Chow-White, (New York: Routledge, 2011), 190–193.
- 5 Sandvig, “Connection at Ewiiapaayp Mountain,” 187–190.
- 6 Charles R. Acland, *Screen Traffic: Movies, Multiplexes, and Global Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 239.
- 7 Elizabeth Cullen Dunn, “Warfare and Warfarin: Chokepoints, Clotting and Vascular Geopolitics,” *Ethnos*, published ahead of print, 14 May 2020, 2, doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2020.1764602.

Mary Michael is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Film and Media Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Her research examines smart city projects in the Arabian Peninsula, particularly as they intersect with histories of data practices, migration, and labor. Mary is also a self-taught media practitioner who experiments with arts-praxis methodologies.

Charlotte Orzel is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Film and Media Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Her doctoral research analyzes the recent history of film exhibition in the United States and Canada, global transformations in the cinema business, and the way shifts in exhibitor practice reflect changing industrial visions of cinemagoers.