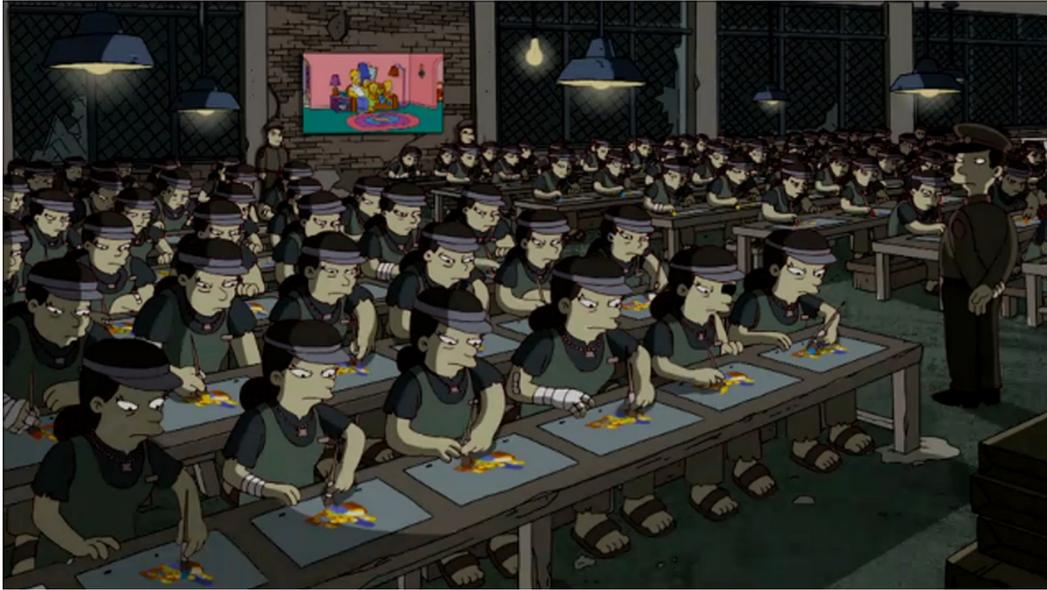


## Media, Labor, Mobility

### Introduction

Hye Jean Chung and Athena Tan

In an opening credit sequence for the animated TV series, *The Simpsons*, which aired in October 2010, the customary shot of the Simpson family sitting on their living room sofa transitions to reveal the show displayed on a large screen above a dimly lit factory floor. Below, row upon row of unsmiling workers in uniform toil over the show's animation (most of which is outsourced to South Korea), while elsewhere in the factory still more workers are shown assembling and packaging ancillary products such as T-shirts and DVDs. This provocative segment by street artist Banksy joins a growing pool of references to the issue of globalized creative labor in mainstream media. Despite its playful depiction of dolphins, unicorns, and giant pandas on the assembly line, it alludes to the subpar working conditions at sites of outsourced labor. These conditions, and the very fact that the workforce is globally dispersed in media production, are usually unrecognized and often masked in media texts through discursive strategies that serve to uphold the fetishization of media commodities.



Video still from *The Simpsons*

Banksy's self-reflexive, tongue-in-cheek representation of the globalization of labor in media industries raises some of the questions central to the theme and contents of this issue of *Media Fields Journal*, "Media, Labor, Mobility." What are the circumstances unique to neoliberal globalization under which workers labor to make images move—to become animated and to circulate? How might digital labor facilitate the movement of media products and information, but not necessarily of laboring bodies? How do new regimes of creative production simultaneously expand and constrict workers' lived experiences? How can the spaces and speeds of film, video, and other audiovisual media illuminate varieties of spatial and temporal disjuncture such as those experienced through "virtual migration"?<sup>1</sup> How can media technologies be used to regulate and to enable the movement of laboring bodies?

In conceptualizing this issue's theme, phenomena such as runaway productions, global visual effects pipelines, and outsourced post-production work that are part of the "new international division of cultural labor" were some of our primary considerations.<sup>2</sup> But beyond the geographical dispersion

of creative labor, the triad “media, labor, mobility” as we conceive of it is also meant to invoke the offshore manufacturing of technologies that sustain the production of moving images, mediations and media representations of mobile labor, and forms of labor arising from the use of mobile media technologies. Our aim in this issue is to offer an examination of labor and mobility from a range of media-centered approaches—to situate issues specific to audiovisual media within the context of older and emerging socio-spatial configurations of production, and to explore ways in which media might be used to portray (to animate, if you will) these configurations.

Popular discourse (e.g., in the mainstream news media) about the global circulation of media texts and the global dispersion of media production and of information and communication technology (ICT)-enabled work celebrates global mobility as a positive and progressive force. *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman has vocally championed outsourcing to companies in India and China as an example of how the world has become “flat” in the era of “Globalization 3.0.”<sup>3</sup> Such approbatory rhetoric, however, often disregards the material concerns and exploitation of human subjects that are involved in transnational production circuits in the digital and information economies. Scholars in various fields across the humanities and social sciences, such as cinema and media studies, anthropology, sociology, communication, and geography, have addressed this elision by foregrounding the material aspects of mediated mobilities through work on geographical nodes of media production,<sup>4</sup> offshore ICT-enabled labor,<sup>5</sup> physical migration and border crossings,<sup>6</sup> the global export of electronic waste,<sup>7</sup> and material infrastructures of media piracy.<sup>8</sup>

Drawing on the rich diversity of scholarship that anchors mediated mobilities to specific sites of labor and laboring bodies, this issue provides a much-needed space to scrutinize some of the manifold ways in which media, labor, and mobility intersect. We believe that the symbiosis of the three terms within the contents of this issue opens many possible paths for reimagining the boundaries between materiality and immateriality; play and work; interactivity and control; production, consumption, and distribution; entertainment and exploitation; online and offline activities; and secular and spiritual practices. Yet while distinctions between “manual” and “mental”

work (and between work and non-work) may have blurred, they have not collapsed altogether. Despite the extensive theorization of creative, digital, user-driven, immaterial, and affective labor,<sup>9</sup> the productive activities that these concepts encompass often continue not to be recognized or valued as such even by the laborers themselves or by those that benefit from their labor (as in the case of free, user-created applications on social networks). Also, a misplaced emphasis on the “dematerialization” or “disembodiment” of such forms of labor not only effaces the materiality of the objects that are produced, the sites and circumstances of production, and the medium itself, it also disavows the multiple capacities in which mediated bodies and subjects (such as, in the contents of this issue, Asian “iPhone girls,” Congolese children who mine the coltan used in electronic devices, TSA agents, and “virtual assistants”) are made productive. Therefore, the material elements of the labor that undergirds the digital and information economies—bodily effects, site specificities, physical infrastructures, tangible inputs and outputs—must not be overlooked or cloaked under a rhetoric of abstraction, automation, and affect.

In this issue, media scholars, anthropologists, filmmakers, artists, and industry specialists ponder a range of conceptions of labor, taking into account modes of production, consumption, (co-)creation, participation, and exchange that characterize digital technologies and spaces in a global information economy. In some cases, contributors to this issue explore forms of labor that create and circulate media products via various media technologies and modes of mediation, including digital filmmaking, screening and surveillance technologies (backscatter X-rays), gaming consoles, virtual worlds (Second Life), digital media devices (iPhones), visual effects production, and telematics (virtual assistant services). In other cases, contributors take up the possibilities of audiovisual media for representing labor and reflect on the ethical responsibilities of (and their own work as) artists in constructing these representations. All contributors consider ways in which the forms of labor they address constitute and are constitutive of different modes of mobility and immobility—economic, social, physical, geographical—that are not always desired, and at times forced (as in the case of migrant workers and refugees).

In their multifarious approaches to the topic at hand, the contents of this issue indicate the significance of interrogating media, labor, and mobility together for all of us that produce, consume, communicate, and seek out sources of pleasure, profit, and meaning within the contemporary global mediascape. The controversy surrounding artist-activist Ricardo Dominguez's Transborder Immigrant Tool, a global positioning system application installed on low-cost mobile phones that guides immigrants crossing the US-Mexico border on foot to safety, points to the stakes that can come into play at the points at which media, labor, and mobility join up—citizenship, the uses of technology, and life itself.<sup>10</sup> While Banksy's *Simpsons* sequence offered a fun and striking glimpse into the dark underbelly of outsourcing creative labor, its critique lacks subversive bite, couched as it is in exaggerated imagery and ironic humor. The sequence begs the question, what to do with this recognition of globally dispersed labor and its technological mediations? This exploratory issue of *Media Fields Journal* only begins to undertake the ongoing, vital task of attending to this pressing question. We anticipate that the assemblage of perspectives that we present here will generate multiple entry points for pinpointing and theorizing the material concerns of mediated bodies and subjects in a globalized workforce.

## Notes

With thanks to Rahul Mukherjee for his comments.

- 1 A. Aneesh, *Virtual Migration: The Programming of Globalization* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).
- 2 Toby Miller, Nitin Govil, John McMurria, and Richard Maxwell, *Global Hollywood* (London: British Film Institute, 2001).
- 3 Thomas Friedman, *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2005).
- 4 See Michael Curtin, "Media Capitals: Cultural Geographies of Global TV," in *Television after TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004) and *Playing to the World's Biggest Audience: The Globalization of Chinese Film and TV* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Susan Christopherson and Ned Rightor, "The Creative

- Economy as 'Big Business': Evaluating State Strategies to Lure Filmmakers," *Journal of Planned Education and Research* 29, no. 3 (2010): 336-52; Greg Elmer, Charles H. Davis, Janine Marchessault, and John McCullough, eds., *Locating Migrating Media* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010); Greg Elmer and Mike Gasher, eds., *Contracting Out Hollywood: Runaway Productions and Foreign Location Shooting* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2005); Jane Landman, "'Not in Kansas Anymore': Transnational Collaboration in Television Science Fiction Production," in *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries*, ed. Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John T. Caldwell (New York: Routledge, 2009), 140-53; Yeidy Rivero, "Havana as a 1940s-1950s Latin American Media Capital," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 26 (2009): 275-293; Allen Scott, *On Hollywood: The Place, The Industry* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); and Janet Wasko, *How Hollywood Works* (London: Sage Publications, 2003). Also see Madhusree Dutta's Cinema City project at <http://www.madhusreedutta.com/>. This bibliography, and those in notes 5-8 below, is by no means meant to be exhaustive.
- 5 See Aneesh, *Virtual Migration*; Radhika Gajjala and Venkataramana Gajjala, eds., *South Asian Technospaces* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2008); Reena Patel, *Working the Night Shift: Women in India's Call Center Industry* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010); and Peter Van der Veer, "Virtual India: Indian IT Labor and the Nation-State," in *Sovereign Bodies: Citizens, Migrants, and States in the Postcolonial World*, ed. Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 276-290.
- 6 See Ursula Biemann, "Remotely Sensed: A Topography of the Global Sex Trade," *Feminist Review* 80 (2005): 180-193; Alan Grossman and Aine O'Brien, eds., *Projecting Migration: Transcultural Documentary Practice* (London: Wallflower Press, 2007); Laura Gutierrez, "Sneaking into the Media: Judi Werthein's Brinco Shoes and Post-Border Art, Illegal Immigration, Global Labor, and Mass Media," *Spectator* 29, no. 1 (2009): 11-22; Hamid Naficy, ed., *Home, Exile, Homeland: Film, Media, and the Politics of Place* (New York: Routledge, 1999); and Ginette Verstraete and Tim Cresswell, eds., *Mobilizing Place, Placing Mobility* (Amsterdam: Rodopi B.V., 2002).

- 7 See Toby Miller and Richard Maxwell, "E-Waste: Elephant in the Living Room," *Flow*, December 2, 2008, <http://flowtv.org/2008/12/e-waste-elephant-in-the-living-room-richard-maxwell-queens-college-cuny-toby-miller-uc-riverside/> (accessed February 5, 2011); Lisa Parks, "Falling Apart: Electronics Salvaging and the Global Media Economy," in *Residual Media*, ed. Charles R. Acland (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 32-47; and Jonathan Sterne, "Out with the Trash: On the Future of New Media," in Acland, *Residual Media*, 16-31.
- 8 See Lawrence Liang, "Porous Legalities and Avenues of Participation," *Sarai Reader* 2005, [http://www.sarai.net/publications/readers/05-bare-acts/02\\_lawrence.pdf](http://www.sarai.net/publications/readers/05-bare-acts/02_lawrence.pdf) (accessed November 17, 2007); Brian Larkin, *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure and Urban Culture in Nigeria* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008); and Rolando B. Tolentino, "Piracy Regulation and the Filipino's Historical Response to Globalization," *Social Science Diliman* 5, nos. 1-2 (2008-2009): 1-25.
- 9 See Mark Andrejevic, *iSpy: Surveillance and Power in the Interactive Era* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2007); Michael Hardt, "Affective Labor," *boundary 2* 26, no. 2 (1999): 89-100; Maurizio Lazzarato, "Immaterial Labor," in *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, ed. Michael Hardt and Paolo Virno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 133-147; Andrew Ross, *No-Collar: The Humane Workplace and Its Hidden Costs* (New York: Basic Books, 2003); and Tiziana Terranova, "Free Labour," in *Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age* (London: Pluto Press, 2004), 73-97. These citations only scratch the surface of existing scholarship on these concepts; for a more extensive bibliography, see the website for the conference The Internet as Playground and Factory, held at The New School, New York, in November 2009: <http://digitallabor.org/>.
- 10 Ricardo Dominguez, an associate professor of visual arts at the University of California, San Diego, came under investigation by the UC system in 2010 for allegedly misusing university funds granted to him for the development of the Transborder Immigrant Tool. The investigation followed criticism from California state representatives that Dominguez's project supported the entry of undocumented workers into the United States. Ayelet Bitton, "Dominguez Cleared in Investigation," *The Guardian* (UC San Diego), September 26, 2010,

<http://www.ucsdguardian.org/news/dominguez-cleared-in-investigation/> (accessed February 5, 2011).

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