

FIRST FORUM CONFERENCE 2024 – CALL FOR PROPOSALS
DIVISION OF CINEMA AND MEDIA STUDIES
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA
SEPTEMBER 27TH AND 28TH

Infrastructure and Abstraction

“The immaterial has become... immaterial.”

– Lord Cutler Beckett, *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End*

A turn to infrastructure in media studies has drawn attention to important lines of inquiry about materiality, environments, elemental media, and infrastructures' frequent entanglements with capitalist and colonialist projects. But this turn, at times, also risks occluding no less important questions about the work of abstraction in media and adjacent considerations of representation, affect, and the ephemeral. Such thinking reduces the real to the material and renders abstraction immaterial. For instance, Melody Jue's powerful emphasis on the milieu-specificity of thought, which proceeds via a submersion of media studies into the ocean, turns on the abjection of *abstraction*. For her, media studies' usual definition of an interface as a surface forming a common boundary between two bodies is *unhelpful because abstract*, referring to nothing in particular, a metaphor stripped “of the properties of any particular fluid.”¹ We take Jue's critique as usefully illustrating the epistemological hierarchy operating across interlinked turns to matter, environment, elements, and infrastructure. Askance of this hierarchy, we begin with the provocation that presumed divisions between infrastructure and abstraction, and the values they embed, ought not be taken for granted. Rather, such divides issue from specific epistemological roots that dictate what the discipline is inclined to label “material” versus “immaterial,” “visible” versus “invisible,” “tangible” versus “intangible,” “concrete” versus “abstract.”

Decolonial thought writ large is particularly well-positioned to re-orient such epistemological underpinnings. Reflecting on Indigenous theories of relationality and reciprocity, scholars like Jordan B. Kinder characterize kinship with land, water, and the more-than-human as infrastructural. Such kinship constitutes a set of material commitments, even as colonial thought has historically defined these relational networks and accompanying placed-based knowledge systems as “merely” spiritual, cultural, and fundamentally intangible. Kinder argues, “Infrastructures are better understood as that which mediates between and among human and more-than-human worlds.”² Meanwhile, Laura Marks offers a way to rethink what it is we take to be material and worldly versus immaterial and imaginary. Drawing on the writings of the 16th/17th century Persian philosopher Mullā Ṣadrā, Marks traces an alternate history within the development of the Western concept of the imagination via the concept of the *imaginal*, “an audiovisual world that is both intangible and more real than matter.”³ Situated between the sensory on the one hand and the intelligible on the other, the imaginal is “a radically pro-image concept, affirming the importance of poetry, art, and images in motion” including the affective domains of dreams, visions, and hallucinations.⁴ In this way, the imaginal values the worlding

¹ Melody Jue, *Wild Blue Media: Thinking Through Seawater* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2020), 40.

² Jordan B. Kinder, “Indigenous Infrastructuralisms? Grounding Materialisms Along and Against the Pipeline,” *symplokē* 21, nos. 1-2 (2024): 113.

³ Laura U. Marks, “Real Images Flow: Mullā Ṣadrā Meets Film-Philosophy,” *Film-Philosophy* 20, no. 1 (2016): 24.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

powers of abstractions rather than deriding them for their immateriality; indeed, it retools our very understanding of what does and does not count as material, as well as the value we accord to materiality. Kinder expands our sense of what counts as infrastructure; Marks offers a way of affirming images as real and worldly; both turn on fundamental transvaluations of materiality and immateriality, concretion and abstraction. These and other media studies scholars working along similar lines demonstrate just some of the ways that the discipline can rework the coordinates of infrastructure and abstraction to highly generative ends.

The organizing committee of the 2024 First Forum Conference invites papers and creative projects from graduate students that navigate generative oppositions between infrastructure and abstraction as they relate to a wide range of media objects and sites of mediation. We encourage submissions that address the unstable borders between these two concepts, perhaps at times even reversing their usual connotations. Where can infrastructure be described as “abstract,” taking the form of social relations, genre patterns, aesthetic modes, etc.? What happens when media studies accounts for epistemologies where forms of abstraction – storytelling, representation, affective responses, etc. – have a particular material or infrastructural quality? What, in short, do terms like infrastructure and abstraction do for media studies (independently as well as in conjunction with each other), and in what ways might the discipline attempt to re-order the ontological commitments that saddle the very words “infrastructure” and “abstraction”?

Prospective participants are encouraged to submit abstracts for papers or creative projects that playfully yet rigorously examine, interrogate, problematize, and/or upend these two polysemous terms. We embrace projects that emerge from a wide range of theoretical and methodological contexts not just in media studies but within the humanities and social sciences more broadly.

Proposal topics may address (but are not limited to):

- Media and the environment; nature as infrastructure
- Media as infrastructures of being/critiques of the same
- Aesthetics, the senses, and the real
- Affect theory and/against representation
- Presence, absence, metaphysics, physics
- Indigenous theories of kinship, relationality, caretaking, and reciprocity
- The Undercommons and infrastructure
- Infrastructures of colonialism and capitalism (invasion, extraction, exploitation, settlement, etc.)
- New materialism(s) and historical materialism(s)
- Anti-materialisms
- Abstract versus representational arts; assumed aesthetic hierarchies
- “Alternate” epistemologies/ontologies/cosmologies
- The public/private divide and infrastructure
- World-building and world-destroying
- Substructures and superstructures
- Strikes, industries, and infrastructural disruption
- Breakdown, glitch, failure, collapse

- Digital environments; interactivity
- Elemental media
- Infrastructure's promise of futurity
- Indexicality and abstraction
- Abstraction and value
- Vernacular modernism
- Place-based knowledge and abstractions/appropriations thereof

Please submit an **abstract (-300 words)** and a **short biography (-150 words)**. Conference presentations will be 15-20 minutes. **Applicants must submit their materials by July 14, 2024 to firstforumgradconference@gmail.com**. Please include "Name + First Forum 2024 Submission" in the subject line. Alongside traditional academic papers, we welcome non-traditional projects, including but not limited to video essays, short films, and art exhibitions.