

Introduction

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That is why I am unable to choose a single symbolic act to represent this most recent stage of the movement; our direction is so clearly paradoxical that no one can say just where we are now, let alone prophesy where we may be headed.

Gene Wise

With this fourth edition of *aspeers*, we once again follow our ambition to showcase young scholars' work beyond the graduate classroom and to offer a sphere for interdisciplinary discussion, debate, and exchange across national borders. As we believe that outstanding graduate scholarship hardly receives the appropriate amount of recognition for its contribution to the developments in American studies, we want to give voice to emerging scholars—not because their work can “prophesy where we may be headed” (Wise 317), but because it can give us a sense of where young scholars want to go.

In addition to our goal to present the diversity of the upcoming generation of American studies, this issue also aims at highlighting a core theme of the discipline: the dynamic relationship of nature and technology. We ‘revisit’ this topic with new perspectives resulting from the discipline’s various turns in a topical section consisting of two academic contributions, a selection of artwork, and our Professorial Voice. With a second part of academic contributions, we try to give a snapshot of graduate American studies in Europe that is not exclusively grouped around a certain topic but rather is intended to mirror the field’s diversity. On the following pages we would like to introduce our readers to the topical spotlight of Nature and Technology, Revisited, and to the entire scope of academic and creative contributions as well as to the Professorial Voice.

Ever since the emergence of American studies as a discipline, the notions of nature and technology and their influence on US culture have been discussed.

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Especially early American studies, most notably the Myth and Symbol school, based their discussion of American national identity on investigations of how nature, technology, and science figured within American culture.

Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden*, which exemplifies the Myth and Symbol school's interest in this particular dynamic, is one of the important pieces of writing in American studies reflecting on the impact of technological advancement in the 'American Garden.' Reinterpreting the United States in the Atomic Age through the use and analysis of widely known and canonized pieces of American literature (Meikle 148), Marx argues that the authors of these canonized texts had "addressed the social impact of the machine in terms that remained vital for the final decades of the twentieth century" (Meikle 156). However, what is important for contemporary studies about *The Machine in the Garden* is not simply its specific reading of the role of the machine for the 'American Pastoral,' but that it was the starting point for later explorations of cultural dynamics. A concept that proved particularly productive in this sense is that of the 'sublime' and the intricacies of this concept addressed by scholars such as Fredric Jameson, Carolyn Merchant, David E. Nye, and Joseph Tabbi.

The notion of the sublime originally describes a feeling of awe stemming from a manifestation of the laws of nature that can be understood by reason but is beyond the expression of language. In the original concept, as theorized by Enlightenment philosophers Immanuel Kant and Edmund Burke, the confrontation with the natural sublime leads to an elevated state of mind that transcends mere sensory perception (Nye 8). In contemporary culture, nature has been "too effectively tamed to play such a role in our imaginations" (Helmling 113). In consequence, the role of providing an overwhelming experience has now been taken over by technology, allowing newer studies to read technological superiority as a source of a 'technological sublime.' Scholarship concerning the technological sublime has become increasingly popular in American studies.¹ Fredric Jameson, for example, in his *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, invoked the notion of the sublime in an analysis of phenomena typical of postmodernity. In Jameson's view, the feeling of awe is comparable to that described by Kant or Burke, but is "fundamentally conditioned by the historical event of postmodernity" (Redfield 152). What constitutes this fundamentally conditioned state is that technology has taken over the role of nature.

Apart from such reformulations of well-established concepts, scholarship has also begun to revisit the relationship of nature, technology, and culture in entirely new (sub)disciplines. Ecocriticism and environmental studies are just two examples of such attempts to return to this crossroads in a way that accounts for the changes in the

1 For more information on the sublime in the context of American culture, cf. Shulevitz.

presence of technology in US society.² These new fields exemplify a diversification of academia and the resulting proliferation of new interests and subfields. They also reflect the rising cultural awareness for the tensions between a more and more restricted nature on the one hand and increasingly far-reaching technological advances on the other.³ Thus, these new scholarly areas are emblematic of the continuing productivity of an interest in nature and technology for discussions of contemporary American culture.

This continuing importance has led us to direct this year's thematic spotlight on these two concepts. We do so not in order to pin down nature and technology as a binarism, an opposition, or a symbiosis, but to think of them as two notions which constitute a dynamism that includes oppositions as well as symbioses—hence entering into a multitude of possible relationships. The development of American studies has opened up a whole range of new perspectives as well as new ways of interpretation and reinterpretation of this dynamism, and it allows to shed new light onto a topic that forms a mainstay of the discipline.

ART CONTRIBUTIONS ON NATURE AND TECHNOLOGY, REVISITED

While one of our goals is to promote academic exchange between European graduate students of American studies, the art section of *aspeers*, allowing for contributions from all over the world, is aimed at displaying even more diverse responses to this year's topical spotlight. The art contributions of this issue all engage in the dialogue of approaches and voices which we find in the academic section and the Professorial Voice, and attest to the multiple facets of Nature and Technology, Revisited.

As they all use the technique of photography, our artists take a particular interest in the notion of reproduction that is in line with the observation that, in art, postmodernism has “shifted emphasis [...] to reproducible media, such as film, photography and video” (Marien 487). With their contributions, Pamela Dewey, Simon Cazzanelli, Ina Müller, and Monika Linzmaier reimagine the dynamic relationships of nature and technology in acts of (re)creation by addressing the topic through reproduction or alteration of photographic images. In this context, they also challenge the assessment by Roland Barthes that “in the photograph, the event is never

2 For one of the less established roads of inquiry, refer to ‘ecosexuality,’ featured in an exhibition at Ohio University, Athens, in November 2010 (Knoth).

3 One could, in fact, read the media responses to natural catastrophes, such as Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill, as indicative of the increasing cultural awareness for a tension between nature and technology, or even as an indication of how this tension becomes a cultural symbol for social conflicts.

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transcended for the sake of something else” (20). Digital cameras and digital image processing provide new artistic possibilities and minimize creative boundaries for they create infinite possibilities for the artistic expression, the reproduction, and the recreation of realities.

We arranged the four art contributions in two contrasting groups: One emphasizes the destructive and harmful qualities of the dynamic, the other depicts relationships of nature and technology characterized by calmness and serenity. The first group of contributions thus captures a state of harsh tension, an inharmonious relationship which negotiates the idea of destruction through a forced and strained interaction of nature and technology. Both Pamela Dewey and Simon Cazzanelli take up the approach of modified reproduction and thereby create innovative new images.

The first contribution by Pamela Dewey touches upon the issue of environmental disasters by addressing one of the most prominent topics of 2010—the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. With her “Oil Spill Food Chain” series, she creates a hybrid of photography and oil painting using photographs of the California coastline taken over the last decade as ‘canvas’ for oil paint. The two images depict two sides of the catastrophe: the event itself, with oil gushing under huge pressure, and the time after the disaster with oil slick on the surface of the water.

Using image-processing software, our second contributor, Simon Cazzanelli, also reworks an image to demonstrate a harmful relationship between nature and technology. His “Into the Woods” shows several logs with a rough surface, an inset plastic plug, and a power outlet. The smooth plastic surface of the technological device contrasts the natural rough shape and surface of the logs, creating the first impression of a ‘positive technology.’ Yet it is the plug that is forced into the wood evoking a strained relationship of nature and technology.

In contrast to the dynamism characterized by force and disruption, as portrayed by the first group of contributions, the second set of photographs depicts a productive coexistence of nature and technology. The series “Hinterland Autobahn” by Ina Müller shows a natural environment that has been altered with by highways and wind turbines as an entity full of serenity and calmness. In her photographs, Müller captures the impression of nature and technology in a beneficial, harmonious interdependency. Her work, then, invites the viewer to aesthetically revisit the relationship of nature and technology, emphasizing a possible pastoral peace.

Another form of coexistence of nature and technology is depicted in the photographs by Monika Linzmaier. In her close-ups of structures in an abandoned and decaying industrial building, details of a technological system become echoes of organic forms. It appears as if this site of former technical precision is reconquered by nature as technology has failed to dominate it. Indeed, Linzmaier’s photographs

suggest, technology now has to adapt to nature, imitating it and thus ultimately reversing the process. Transferring the viewer to the mesmerizing world of a technological landscape, Linzmaier provides yet another perspective on the dynamics of nature and technology.

The artistic contributions in the 2011 issue of *aspeers* invite our readers to take a look at Nature and Technology, Revisited, by presenting four different approaches to a visualization of this dynamic. In their unique way of capturing the relationship of the two concepts, the artists give us a guided visual tour through the topic, characterizing it as both potentially destructive and harmonious. Displaying their work in *aspeers*, Pamela Dewey, Simon Cazzanelli, Ina Müller, and Monika Linzmaier make a major contribution to our effort to bring academic analyses and art into a transdisciplinary dialogue.

PROFESSORIAL VOICE

For the fourth edition of *aspeers*, we are honored and pleased to feature an interview with Professor David E. Nye, who teaches American history and culture at the University of Southern Denmark in Odense. His outstanding academic achievements in American studies, his particularly interesting perspective on the discipline as a US scholar living and working in Europe, and his research focus on the impact of technology on American culture make him a perfect Professorial Voice for this issue.⁴ Professor Nye is a central figure for American studies in Scandinavia, one of the most prolific regions of American studies scholarship in Europe. A truly transnational scholar, he has held a chair in Denmark since 1992, but has also taught at renowned universities in the United States such as Harvard and MIT, and throughout Europe, for example in Oviedo, Spain, and in Cambridge, England. Thus, Professor Nye has greatly contributed to the intercultural exchange that is essential to European American studies.

In addition to his teaching and research, he has also helped to further the development of American studies in Scandinavia with his work both as President of the Danish Association for American Studies and as Vice President of the Nordic Association for American Studies. Moreover, he launched the OASIS (Odense American Studies International Series) publication series in 1992. From 1997 to 2003,

4 *aspeers* aims to mirror current graduate scholarship, and the Professorial Voice serves as a platform to discuss recent developments in European American studies. Previous issues featured a creative contribution by Professor Marina Camboni and interviews with Professor Rob Kroes and Professor Alfred Hornung.

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Professor Nye coedited the *American Studies in Scandinavia*, the journal of the Nordic Association for American Studies. Most recently, Professor Nye was the editor of *Beyond the Crisis in US American Studies: Scandinavian Perspectives* (2007), which looks back at the history of American studies in Scandinavia and stresses the role of transatlantic communication.

At least as impressive as his contribution to the development of European American studies is his publishing history. Among his various international publications are *American Technological Sublime* (1994), *Technology Matters: Questions to Live With* (2006), and *When the Lights Went Out: A History of Blackouts in America* (2010). In addition, he engages with new media, having contributed as a scriptwriter and narrator to the Danish series *Inventing Modern America* (1989), and by operating a blog on his thoughts and opinions on current political and cultural issues in the United States and the world.⁵ Hence, Professor Nye actively responds to the traditional call of American studies for academic exchange beyond the classroom. As a special honor, Professor Nye received the Leonardo da Vinci Medal, the highest recognition from the Society for the History of Technology, in 2005.

In the interview with *aspeers*, Professor Nye talks about the continuing relevance of American studies in light of the constant changes in the United States—developments which prove to be of lasting global academic interest. Additionally, Professor Nye encourages students of American studies to go abroad and underlines the necessity to study foreign cultures to be able to evaluate one's own. In this context, he sees exchange programs as particularly valuable for gaining a comparative perspective, especially since his own career path has been characterized by constant experiences with other cultures as well. Talking about his upcoming projects, Professor Nye mentions that he is writing a book on the cultural history of the assembly line. Furthermore, he is currently involved in working for the NIES, the Nordic Network for Interdisciplinary Environmental Studies, and is organizing a conference for this association.

ACADEMIC CONTRIBUTIONS

At first glance, the choice of this year's academic contributions might seem to lack coherence—an impression that is contradicted by a closer look. Within the topical section on Nature and Technology, Revisited, the two submissions chosen for publication steer clear of what one would consider an obvious connection to this

5 We strongly recommend the blog. It is available at <http://aftertheamericancentury.blogspot.com>

topic, such as the BP oil spill or new fields of study like ecocriticism. Instead, they display approaches which deal with our topic in a more abstract and, to some extent, even more creative way. Both Stephen Koetzing's "The Trespassing Cyborg: Technology, Nature, and the Nation in *Wild Wild West*" and Julian Henneberg's "Something Extraordinary Hovering Just Outside Our Touch': The Technological Sublime in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*" analyze the relationship of nature and technology. However, they do so in reference to two different kinds of 'texts,' and not through a reference to nature or technology as such. Our nontopical section opens up an even broader variety of interests: trauma in post-9/11 literature, gender construction in vampire fiction, and the historical and cultural history of African Americans and basketball. Therefore, our contributions represent exactly what *aspeers* is all about: They are a snapshot of current research in European American studies and of its remarkable diversity.

The interest in using literary texts for their analysis unites the papers on Nature and Technology, Revisited, by Henneberg and Koetzing, connecting them to our comments on *The Machine in the Garden* above. What is different from Leo Marx's approach to the subject of nature and technology, however, is that this year's topical submissions do not turn to canonical and well-established texts for their analysis but rather use a contemporary novel and a Hollywood movie to make their argument. With that, they support our individual experiences and impressions of current American studies, namely that literary studies is generally very important in commenting on American society and culture.

Literary studies has always been prominent in the history of *aspeers*, thus it is no surprise that this year's non-topical papers predominantly originate from this field. This is particularly evident in the methodological similarities as all papers, with the exception of Martin Domke's "Into the Vertical: Basketball, Urbanization, and African American Culture in Early-Twentieth-Century America," use the close reading of texts (either a movie or a novel) as an analytical tool.⁶ Moreover, it is remarkable to see that, once again, popular culture is the main subject of analysis. In fact, the fields of popular and contemporary culture seem to allow for the best interdisciplinary exchange among students of European American studies, not least due to their accessibility. Disciplines like political science or history, on the contrary, have always held the position of a minority in the previous issues of *aspeers*, which corresponds to our own impression that political science and history are not as common as literary

6 In that, they are representative of the complete body of submissions we received for this year's issue of *aspeers*. Only a fraction of the papers was not concerned with cultural or literary studies but dedicated to, e.g., history or political science. Therefore, the choice of articles in this issue of *aspeers* is not just a product of editorial policy but also a representational cross-section of the papers submitted.

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studies in the teaching of European American studies. In effect, students appear to feel more comfortable in researching a literary text than a political or historical event.

Another characteristic feature of all our contributions is their shared approach of employing well-known secondary impulses (e.g. by Sigmund Freud and Michel Foucault) to look at contemporary culture. It is worth mentioning that none of the contributions build their analytical framework on wholly unexpected theoretical approaches; they rather base their groundwork on canonical theorists' concepts and ideas. This gives us the impression of converse developments in literary studies: On the one hand, there is an anticanonical tendency in emerging scholarship toward researching popular or contemporary culture; the theory applied in the papers, on the other hand, is drawn directly from the scholarly canon. A possible reason for this might lie in the teaching of European American studies: While canonical texts that are omnipresent in today's seminar rooms might seem overresearched to students (and, therefore, less interesting than more contemporary or pop-cultural texts), established theoretical writers present a 'safeguard' in the analysis of noncanonical texts. In the context of a theoretical framework, the canonical theory graduate research is heavily relying on might just provide the accessibility that students also find in popular culture texts as their primary sources.

Apart from similarities concerning the methods and sources, we can cluster our papers according to the topical interests they take. For example, the majority of our papers is concerned with the representation of marginalized groups in terms of race and gender. Two of our articles deal with the role of African Americans in American society and history. Interestingly, there could hardly be more different approaches to this topic than we find in our articles "The Trespassing Cyborg" and "Into the Vertical." While the former argues that in the movie *Wild Wild West* the stereotypical figure of the cowboy finally crosses the color line, the latter traces the influence of African American culture in one of the most American sports: basketball. Race as an analytical category has been a prominent subject in American cultural studies; hence, it is not surprising that it is also reflected in our issue.

Similarly, questions of gender feature strongly in two of this year's contributions. Regarding the novels *Dracula* and *Twilight* from the perspective of power relationships, Jutta Schulze's "A 'Truth Like This': Language and the Construction of Power and Knowledge in Vampire Fiction" emphasizes the role gender plays in their construction. The question of gender is also brought up in the paper "The Trespassing Cyborg," with the analysis of the characters of Jim West and Rita Escobar, and with the challenge of the stereotypical masculinity of the cowboy/pioneer figure. With their arguments, both papers underline the statement by Judith Halberstam that gender studies, due to its flexibility and in combination with other fields of study, "has always been [...] a particularly generative site for new work that, at its best, responds creatively

and dynamically to emerging research questions and cultural forms” (119-20). These contributions, then, take an interest in tying different notions of Otherness and marginalization to diverse accounts of popular culture, showing how group identities can be constructed.

In their approaches to discuss American culture, all our contributions share a concern for the signifying work of cultural artifacts. By reading a movie for its ability to express, satirize, and work through the role of the frontier for American national identity, and by tracing the notion of the sublime in a piece of postmodern fiction, our contributions on *Wild Wild West* and *White Noise* go beyond literary analysis and are also interested in the role of their primary works as cultural signifiers. Similarly, albeit more unexpectedly, “Into the Vertical” looks at the history of basketball not simply in terms of a historical development but as an expression of ‘verticalization’—an intersection at which various cultural processes meet and inform each other. Lastly, two of our contributions take an even more direct interest in cultural signification and, more specifically, its limitations: Anke Geertsma’s contribution “Redefining Trauma Post 9/11: Freud’s Talking Cure and Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*” upholds that traumatic experiences can only be expressed in the Symbolic, “the dimension of articulation” (“Jacques Lacan” 1159) and the sphere of the signifier. “A ‘Truth Like This,’” on the other hand, deals with a system of signification that creates the power to define the vampires and change them into definable entities inside the vampire hunters’ discourse. In this sense, both papers investigate the construction of reality or truth, respectively, as a matter of finding or creating a signifier that then, in turn, defines reality. Despite such shared, broader concerns, our contributions vary greatly in the specific interests they take and in the way they pursue them.

The submission “The Trespassing Cyborg” takes a look at how the movie *Wild Wild West* challenges the image of the white national hero by having an African American cowboy fight a cyborg—a “self-regulating man-machine system” (Clynes and Kline 27).⁷ Moreover, Stephen Koetzing observes that the protagonists in the movie are only able to win the fight against the cyborg by incorporating both nature and technology in their adventure in the American West. Casting the cyborg as an “antipioneer” (36), the paper reads this figure as an embodiment, a literalization, of the clash between nature and technology, and as a threat intruding into and endangering the American Garden. Therefore, the cyborg figure itself already references the ambivalences around the construction of identity based on the dichotomy between wilderness and civilization. Further, the contribution sets itself apart in that it reads a

7 Manfred E. Clynes and Nathan S. Kline were the first to coin the term ‘cyborg’ in the context of space travel. In contemporary society and popular culture, the cyborg is most prominently known from literature and film, particularly from science fiction.

film as a cultural artifact by applying the methods of literary studies, which allows it to take a particular interdisciplinary angle.⁸ Referencing the well-established framework of Marx's *The Machine in the Garden* and the Myth and Symbol school as a foil against which to develop its own argument, this contribution is a particularly convincing example of the method we described above: It takes an established, canonical framework and uses it to investigate a piece of contemporary culture which, at first glance, would not necessarily seem to invite any deeper analysis.

Julian Henneberg's submission on the technological sublime in Don DeLillo's *White Noise* analyzes the apocalyptic novel *White Noise* to show that, in a postmodern world, it is not nature but technology which constitutes the sublime. Henneberg analyzes the novel's 'airborne toxic event' to investigate the transfer of sublimity from the realm of nature to that of technology. As a theoretical framework, the author uses the classic accounts of the sublime by Kant and Burke as well as accounts of the postmodern and contemporary sublime by Jameson, Tabbi, and Lyotard. Focusing on sight and sound, the paper introduces two ways of experiencing technological sublimity. The protagonists in *White Noise* experience the airborne toxic event through visual perception and thus encounter sublimity in a most direct way. Investigating a more subtle presence of the technological sublime in the environment of the novel, Henneberg draws on perceptions of sound, mirroring observations by Philipp Schweighauser, who stresses the significance of *White Noise* as "a novel about *acoustic ecology*" (109). By thus analyzing the sublime, Henneberg's article reads contemporary literature with canonical theory to trace a core concept of previous discussions of nature and technology.

In her paper "Redefining Trauma Post 9/11" Anke Geertsma delivers an analysis of how post-9/11 trauma is depicted in the novel by Jonathan Safran Foer, an example of post-postmodern literature. Geertsma's reading of Foer's work shows how the unconventional form of the novel challenges contemporary trauma theory. Looking at the crucial topic of 9/11 trauma, this contribution in its analysis of *Extremely Loud* focuses on aspects of Freudian psychoanalysis and the talking cure in particular. It argues for a continuing relevance of this theoretical concept by examining the novel's experimental form which involves the reader in working through the character's traumatic experiences. The attacks of 9/11—the proclaimed end of postmodernism (Bennett 9)—"signified the moment 'when-it-all-changed'" (Kelly 314). Accordingly, literature had to change to the effect that in post-postmodernism empathy became the focus of texts. Geertsma combines a reintroduction of Freudian trauma theory, which was marginalized in the light of the deconstructionist trauma theory of the Yale

8 Bill Nichols, for example, has argued that film and literary studies encompass the fields of "philosophy, semiotics, sociology, cultural history, and other zones of thought" (3).

School, with the important topic of 9/11 trauma and therefore shows the productivity of this psychoanalytic approach in light of post-postmodernism. Hence, “Redefining Trauma Post 9/11” serves as another example of how aspiring scholars of American studies apply well-established, canonized theories to new currents in literature.

According to Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, “you would have to live in a coffin not to have your path regularly crossed by vampires” (4). As the exploration of the vampire theme proves to be an “incredibly adaptive [survivor], flourishing in the media and thriving in the popular imagination of modern societies” (Day ix), this popular topic of contemporary scholarship in American studies is also represented in *aspeers* with Jutta Schulze’s “A Truth Like This.” By analyzing the cultural ramifications of vampire lore in regard to the Foucauldian notions of power, discourse, and knowledge, Schulze explores the gender and power relations in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* and Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight*. To do this, she first investigates how, in *Dracula*, the patriarchal discourse prescribes legitimate subject positions for women, while vampirism destabilizes this order by pointing out its gaps and inconsistencies. She compares her findings to *Twilight*, in which she then traces the female empowerment in the mediation of patriarchy’s power through Bella’s narrative voice. Here, language develops into a site not only of gender oppression, but, despite Bella’s dependence on a male vampire, also becomes a source—or at least an opportunity—for liberation and empowerment.

The paper “Into the Vertical” connects the notion of ‘verticality’ to the process of urbanization and the effects it had on the organization of city space. Martin Domke uses the vertical dimension to explain how the urban development of North American cities influenced the evolution of basketball in the inner city. Verticality, moreover, is used as an analytical dimension for the social mobility of African American basketball players in the beginning of the twentieth century. The establishment of organized basketball games and league systems, in Domke’s view, added a vertical dimension to the sport as it offered to African Americans the opportunity to rise in their social status by climbing up the league system. With his article, Domke employs an angle on American popular culture which has not been explored sufficiently yet and hence contributes another valuable example of the diversity of American studies to this issue of *aspeers*. The author introduces verticality as a concept that allows him to read seemingly distinct developments as being connected. Turning to space as an analytical category, “Into the Vertical” follows a move that recently has become a prominent one in American studies, not only in geographical terms but also in a cultural sense. His methodological step of reading spatial movement both literally and metaphorically could prove productive for future research as well.

With this current issue, *aspeers* revisits not only one of the core topics of American studies, its makeup also aims at spotlighting the diversity of contemporary ambitions and interests in European scholarship. Our two topical academic contributions, our

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imaginative art contributions, and the Professorial Voice by David E. Nye represent a snapshot of multifaceted approaches to Nature and Technology, Revisited. Simultaneously, our nontopical academic contributions, in their reflection of different influential developments, add variety to a thrilling dialogue of aspects of 'classic' American studies and popular culture. It is this dialogue of diversity that we want to encourage and display with our project, and it is in this regard that we invite our readers to explore this fourth issue of *aspeers*.

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