
Depicting Destitution across Media

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Nassim W. Balestrini, University of Graz
Katharina M. Fackler, University of Bonn

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Nassim W. Balestrini – University of Graz

Katharina M. Fackler – University of Bonn

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Introduction: Depicting Destitution across Media

Nassim W. BALESTRINI and Katharina M. FACKLER

University of Graz and University of Bonn

Poverty and destitution are real material conditions with actual physical consequences on humans' bodies and minds. At the same time, they are thoroughly mediated phenomena, whose forms, meanings, and implications are established, defined, and negotiated in public discourse and in the arts. The aesthetics and affordances of different media fundamentally shape the public imagination of poverty. They mold “the knowledge, values, attitudes and emotions with which societies and individuals perceive poverty and take measures against it” (Korte and Zipp 2). This imagination, in turn, impacts social policy (Asen 11-15). It can reinforce prejudice and inequality, but it can also drive positive social change.

The growing field called the “new poverty studies,” which emerged in the face of a rapidly widening economic gap in the neoliberal era, has remained strikingly relevant in times of a global pandemic. It challenges scholars of multiple disciplines to examine “the relationship between material and non-material aspects of poverty” (Christ 36). This challenge is met, among others, by social and political scientists, psychologists, economists, philosophers, historians, and scholars of all art forms and cultural practices. Importantly, the field has generated studies on the representation of poverty in literature, photography, television, film, the news, and other media.¹ This special issue complements these studies by presenting research from an intermedial

¹ For surveys of the field, see Christ; Lemke; Schmidt-Haberkamp.

perspective. The contributions gathered here do not focus on one medium but on the interferences, gaps, and tensions between at least two different media. Exploring the intersections between the new poverty studies and intermediality studies' concern with borders, in-between spaces, and locations of meaning production (as theorized in, e.g., Rajewsky, "Border Talks"; Müller; Bem), our contributors ask what happens in the interstices between and intersections of media when poverty is represented.

Defining Poverty and Destitution

Official definitions of poverty and of its life-threatening extreme, that is, destitution, are usually based on rather straightforward economic measures. They tend to categorize those people as poor whose income and assets lie below a certain poverty threshold. The poverty threshold can either be an absolute amount or relative to the average wealth in a society. These economic approaches have been complemented by the perspectives of sociologists, philosophers, international organizations, and others. Their concepts take into consideration the experience and implications of poverty as well as its causes. While it is beyond the scope of this introduction to render the full range of the debate, we will briefly introduce two concepts that we consider especially relevant for literary and cultural studies: capability and relationality.

When it comes to the experience of poverty, Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach has been particularly influential (see Nussbaum and Sen; Nussbaum; Sen). They define poverty not only in material terms but in terms of "a person's capability to do things he or she has reason to value" (Sen 231). Due to various individual, environmental, social, and cultural contingencies, there are "variations in the conversion of income into the kinds of lives that people can lead" (Sen 255). To give just one example, people with disabilities tend to need more income than non-disabled people to have similar opportunities in life. This definition spotlights

the fact that poverty also means “socio-cultural exclusion and a lack of agency, opportunities and access (to knowledge, traditions, rights and capabilities)” (Korte and Zipp 2). The United Nations Development Programme builds on such an experiential approach with its three-dimensional notion of poverty, which comprises health, education, and standard of living (3).

This dialectic of material and nonmaterial dimensions of poverty also lies at the heart of an influential definition of poverty in literary and cultural studies. In *American Hungers*, literary studies scholar Gavin Jones defines poverty as “socioeconomic suffering” (3) that implies both economic deprivation and social distress. As poverty plays out on the body and the psyche, “[t]he materiality of need [...] opens into the nonmaterial areas of psychology, emotion, and culture, with poverty moving away from the absolute and the objective toward the relative, the ideological, and the ethical” (3). Jones criticizes traditional class analysis for treating poverty rather implicitly. For instance, by blurring the boundaries between the working class and the poor, it “fails to focus sharply on what poverty means as a social category” (8). Jones thus makes a case for deepening the focus on poverty as a separate category of scholarly inquiry that can yield distinct insights into the workings of the social production of inequality under capitalism.

Sociologists of poverty, in turn, have developed a nuanced understanding of the causes of destitution. Synthesizing recent trends in the field, Matthew Desmond and Bruce Western conceptualize poverty as, first, multidimensional; second, relational; and third, as a matter of justice (305). The notion of multidimensionality is used to gesture toward “the *linked ecology* of social maladies and broken institutions” that produces poverty (Desmond 3). Poverty, they argue, is not monocausal but brought about by “something akin to correlated adversity that cuts across multiple dimensions (material, social, bodily, psychological) and institutions (schools, neighborhoods, prisons)” (Desmond and Western 308). Such adversities include inhumane

working conditions, low wages, inadequate schooling and housing, a lack of access to healthy food and medical care, illness and disability, addiction, criminalization, a lack of childcare, exposure to ecological risk, and vulnerability to disaster. Their distribution is profoundly racialized, gendered, and classed.

The second central concept, relationality, throws into relief how the long-standing focus on individuals or structures has now been complemented by an emphasis on the “bonds or transactions between actors or organizations occupying different positions in a social hierarchy” (Desmond and Western 310). Assuming that poverty is not just a “byproduct” of other processes but “actively produced through unequal relationships between the financially secure and insecure” (310), a relational perspective requires studying the poor and the non-poor simultaneously. Lastly, relationality renders poverty a matter of justice, as it asks the economically privileged to acknowledge their own role and responsibility in the production, alleviation, or continuation of poverty (313-14). From this vantage point, poverty reveals fundamental tensions in Western society, as it “antagonize[s] the liberal assumptions of freedom and universality that underpin a market economy” (Jones 1).

Poverty and Representation

These definitions provide important impulses for literary and cultural studies. Poverty may be primarily economic, but it also involves a lack of cultural and social capital that limits access to (self-)representation. Consequently, depictions of poverty are rarely authored by poor people. When (formerly) poor people become authors, they often “employ forms of articulation that transcend their own class and reach privileged readers only” (Korte 294; Michaels 200). Cultural representations thus are, as Eric Schocket puts it, “deeply implicated in the exploitive relations they seek to document” (11). Unsurprisingly, poverty has often been depicted from a vantage point

that fails to acknowledge its multidimensionality, its relationality, and its fundamental rootedness in questions of justice. Rather, cultural representations have tended to portray the poor as a separate category, an “Other” (Gandal 4) whose problems appear to be unrelated to the functioning and the responsibilities of the larger society. The persistence of poverty is often attributed to a presumed cultural difference of the poor, which erases the ways in which the existing economic and political arrangements (in which everyone participates) contribute to producing and maintaining poverty. What Keith Gandal calls “classploitation narratives” thus “seem[s] to come out of middle-class fantasies and serve those fantasies more than any other social aim. They are fantastical outsider accounts meant ultimately to titillate, mollify, or terrify” (6). As a result, it is crucial to figure intended recipients and their responses into our understanding of the inner workings of relationality.

Indebted to “the ethical and social turns in criticism” (Schmidt-Haberkamp 11) within the fields of literary and cultural studies, research on representations of poverty has adopted one of the basic principles of the new poverty studies: that is, to “hold[...] representations accountable” for their implication in the production and legitimation of social inequality (Schocket 11). In this regard, Barbara Korte argues that postcolonial studies can deliver important impulses, as the field has developed a rich set of concepts and methodologies to address questions of power over representation, voice, and authority (294). So do related fields of cultural theory, such as feminism and gender studies, Black studies, Indigenous studies, or disability studies because poverty, conceived relationally, is thoroughly intersectional.

Recent scholarship has also begun to demonstrate how the ethics of representing poverty are entangled with the specific aesthetic traditions of different media and genres, as well as with conventional reading practices. To this end, new poverty scholars working in various disciplines

have been developing a range of analytical methods. In literary studies, Barbara Korte and Georg Zipp have proposed a “figurations approach to poverty in literature” (12). They use Norbert Elias’s notion of “figuration” as “the changing constellations and processes in which human beings are socially related to each other” to explore how literary texts “mould images and imaginations of the world through their specific textual elements and structures” (13). Their method places elements of the textual world, such as characters and environments, in conversation with formal elements (such as mode and voice), agency of representation, and historical reference (13-14). In visual culture studies, Astrid Böger, Cara Finnegan, and Winfried Fluck have explored the ambivalent ethical ramifications of Great Depression documentary aesthetics in different media contexts. Sieglinde Lemke and Wibke Schniedermann’s edited volume on *Class Divisions in Serial Television* focuses on so-called Quality TV. They argue that this format, whose emergence in the first two decades of the twenty-first century facilitated “sophisticated narrative and formal techniques,” enabled “more complex ways of exposing class divisions in contemporary US life” that move viewers beyond dominant, middle-class perspectives (1, 3). Lastly, contributions to Sandra Borden’s *Routledge Companion to Media and Poverty* analyze the representation of poverty in news media through the lens of notions of capability and relationality. As the scholars featured in this special issue also discuss, such research benefits from studying the ethics associated with genre and media traditions side by side with the ethics of specific works. This is particularly pertinent in the case of cultural products whose aesthetics aim at critiquing medium/genre conventions. More often than not, such self-reflexive meaning-making pushes the envelope by effectively shifting or blurring media and genre boundaries.

Destitution across Media

With its focus on intermediality, this special issue builds on recent research on representations of poverty in genres which typically involve media combinations. Understandably, authors often simply point out that more than one medium is used but then focus on other concerns – such as content and plot (e.g., Henke; Korzeniewska-Nowakowska), the economics of media production (e.g., Charbonneau, “Branching Out” and “Exporting Fogo”), or ethnographic studies of responses to media content (e.g., Ong). Others display a decided interest in intermedial aesthetics and affect (e.g., Garritano) while connecting this interest with the concerns of the field of new poverty studies. For instance, Caitlin Frances Bruce elucidates cinematic techniques that drive home the discomfort Western audiences should feel when voyeuristically watching documentaries about poverty in Africa. Joseph B. Entin’s media-comparative study of US-American fiction and photography of the 1930s applies new poverty studies’ double lens, as he scrutinizes class differences among authors, fictional characters, and readers alongside stylistic trajectories. He concludes that “sensational modernism” primarily relies on an “avant-garde aesthetics of astonishment” (146; et passim) which indicates that some “middle-class writers” regarded “writing as a form of ethnographic or imaginative slumming” (259). Also addressing power differentials, scholars have linked intermediality theory with postcolonial theory when analyzing fiction that evokes or imitates visual or sonic media in order to dismantle discriminatory representations of social hierarchies. Such fiction emphasizes the anything-but-innocent history of representational strategies and challenges readers to re-think their perceptual and interpretative habits (e.g., Rippl; Neumann).

What, then, is the added benefit of addressing mediation and intermedial meaning-making processes when studying representations of poverty? And what are possible avenues for future

research? On the most fundamental level, intermediality theory has been open to non-artistic media and genres – in contrast to its predecessor ‘interart studies’ which focuses solely on artistic works. Although intermediality theory originated within literary studies and has flourished most strongly there, it has also developed a growing cultural-studies bent (e.g., Stein, “From Text-Centered Intermediality” and *Music Is My Life*; Wolf 470-71; Rajewsky, “Intermediality” 44; Rajewsky, “Potential Potentials” 30-31) and has made remarkable inroads into media studies (e.g., Schröter, “Das urmediale Netzwerk” and “Das Ende der Welt”; Müller) and film studies (e.g., Pethö, *Cinema and Intermediality* and *The Art of In-Betweenness*; Denson and Leyda). This interest in expanding the scope of potential primary sources coheres with poverty studies’ search for forms of representation that are more accessible to the poor than traditional art and literature. For instance, one potential object for future studies could be street newspapers.

Current intermediality theory does not only beckon awareness and understanding of the relations between media, be they relations of coexistence, complementarity, overlap, contrast, or competition. It also contextualizes these relations within culturally embedded practices and conventions of sensory perception. It thus can complement explorations of what Jacques Rancière calls “the distribution of the sensible,” i.e., of the ways in which, under the dominant social order, certain voices are heard and recognized but not others, or certain subjects are seen but not others (7). As Wilhelm Voßkamp and Brigitte Weingart point out, publicly displayed images mostly circulate in conjunction with other media (7), especially with verbal texts. Regarding images and words as interdependent and complementary encourages us to simultaneously consider regimes of the (in)visible (8, 11) and of the (un)speakable (11). While researchers need to be aware of perceptual conventions, they need to explore specific “configurations” (12 [our translation]; also see Müller 25) within such historical/cultural contexts (Voßkamp and Weingart 10, 12) in order to

elucidate the “operative potential” (13; our translation) of image and text in each instance. As the individual processing of mediation thus determines meaning constitution, an ethics of perception and interpretation take center stage.

Similarly, the lively debate about analog and digital media formats, as well as about the strategic use of analog and digital aesthetic effects (independent of whether the technical channel is analog or digital), has highlighted issues that are relevant to studying intermedial representations of poverty. Examples are the economics of access to analog and digital content, class-based reading practices, and culturally embedded understandings of what analog and digital phenomena may imply (see Rajewsky, “Intermediality” 62-64; Schröter, “Das ur-mediale Netzwerk” and “Das Ende der Welt”; Fetveit; Pethö, “Introduction”; Denson and Leyda). All of these areas of inquiry strengthen the axis of diachronic approaches to intermediality (see Müller 19) from which research on representations of poverty can benefit, as the articles in this special issue demonstrate. Moreover, theorization of analog/digital meaning production can be an eye-opener regarding the cultural capital associated with specific media forms and regarding concomitant clichés about potential contents and audiences. Both in *belles lettres* and in lay or commercial image-plus-text publications, a decided trend towards using elements that are promoted as replicating a ‘bookish’ aesthetic illustrates artists’ and designers’ notions of reader expectations. Furthermore, such cultural products drive home the point that verbal text can be read as an image just as much as images are (see Voßkamp and Weingart) and that intermedial approaches need to consider the materiality of media (see Rajewsky, “Border Talks” 63; also see the debate about post-media as found in Nannicelli; Ochsner; Spielmann).

Opera, Poetry, Photography, Life Writing, and Film

The idea for this special issue originated during the international workshop conference “‘Poverty viewed at a distance’? Depicting Destitution across Media,” which was held by the Centre for Intermediality Studies in Graz in October 2017 and organized by the guest editors. The contributions to this volume explore a wide array of media, ranging from opera and poetry to photography, life writing, and film. They address how an intermedial perspective on the co-presence of multiple media in specific works or on the relation between different works (within the history of a genre/medium, through intermedial reference, or through adaptation) helps us understand various mechanisms and impacts of representing poverty and destitution.

In their contribution “‘Wir arme Leut’: Büchner, Berg, and the Activism of Art,” Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon first elucidate the verbal and sonic meaning constitution – and thus, the intermedial features – of Giacomo Puccini’s opera *La Bohème* (1896) whose aestheticized representation of poverty allows audiences to enjoy luscious music and possibly shed tears. But, as they show, the opera’s media combination of music, text, and staging does not advocate for social change. In stark contrast, Alban Berg’s opera *Wozzeck* (1925/1952), based on early-nineteenth-century writer Georg Büchner’s outspokenly political dramatic fragment *Woyzeck* (1836-1837), brutally confronts recipients’ ears and eyes with the deliberate destruction of human dignity with which those in power effectively crush destitute and otherwise socially disadvantaged individuals. As this article demonstrates, the mutually reinforcing verbal and musical languages that characterize Berg’s modernist opera – especially the cold-blooded depiction and verbal rendering of the oppression of the poor as well as the discomforting use of atonality – cuts audience members to the bone in a manner meant to affect them beyond witnessing a performance in an opera house. This is particularly poignant in an artistic genre that – up to then – had hardly tackled

social injustices. The intermedial force of this piece of musical theater relentlessly draws audiences into the devastating sense of deprivation and suffering that Woyzeck as well as his lover, Marie, and their ultimately orphaned child experience. The class boundary separating traditional opera audiences and Büchner's/Berg's characters is consistently evoked and tugs at the listeners' social conscience in a time period of political turmoil.

Focusing on late-nineteenth-century dialect poetry with a regionalist flavor, Emily Petermann's "Raggedy Heroes: James Whitcomb Riley's Portraits of the Poor in 'The Raggedy Man,' 'Little Orphant Annie,' and 'Griggsby's Station'" scrutinizes how child personae and impoverished rural characters are depicted through dialect and oral storytelling in selected poems by an immensely popular author. The implied boundaries within the poems pertain to class differences, both within the depicted fictional worlds and between the poems' central characters and their implied middle-class readers. While the poems cater to readers of an era in which literary texts frequently indulged nostalgic stereotypes of rural America through heart-warming, yet somewhat condescending chuckles about 'quaint' people, Riley's poems nevertheless critique a culture that ignores the real-life plight of child labor as well as class-based discrimination and alienation. Although the poems are monomedial verbal works of art, their representation of poverty derives meaning from the intermedial tension between the written and the oral, between reading poems and hearing/seeing them performed – a tension that stresses social differences within the lyrics' fictional worlds and in the way they relate to middle-class consumers of popular poetry.

Margit Peterfy's contribution "Poverty in Color and in Black and White: Proximity and Distance in Intermedial Representations of Destitution" problematizes long-standing (and unproven) notions of how photographs impact an implied viewer's relation to what they are looking at. Taking this one step further by theorizing it in light of philosophical and aesthetic

debates since classical antiquity, she contemplates ostensible affective differences between black-and-white and color renderings in intermedial works that combine photography and verbal text. After shedding new light on classic works of social photography by Lewis Hine and Jacob L. Riis, Peterfy's in-depth discussion of the intermedial relation between monochrome photographs and verbal color references in James Agee and Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941) offers particularly innovative concepts and arguments. Her meticulous analyses of Agee's texts in relation to Evans's photographs reveal that theories on the evocation of closeness and its opposite need to be rethought. Ultimately, this contribution makes clear that any methodology derived from such theorizations must provide analytical tools that allow us to gauge the aesthetic, argumentative, and cultural/historical specificities of individual works.

Recent cinematic developments warrant intermedial scrutiny as well as a new genre label, as Susanne Rieser and Klaus Rieser cogently argue in "Poverty and Agency in Rural Noir Film." The combination of "rural" and "noir" encourages dialog about intersections between characterizations of non-urban spaces and populations, on the one hand, and the use of "noir" film aesthetics. Following a profound introduction to intersections between and research lacunae within the simultaneous study of poverty, rural sites, and film, the authors discuss a corpus of eight films which premiered between 2008 and 2018. They scrutinize multi-faceted strategies of representation which, more often than not, achieve accurate portrayals of specific social realities and elicit an empathetic response on the part of recipients. In their detailed application of new poverty studies' perspectives, Rieser and Rieser discuss their keen observations about film techniques in light of sociological research on poverty. Their nuanced readings of recurring thematic and stylistic features, and especially of intermedial techniques, elucidate how rural noir

taps into well-known features of social photography, while combining them with film-specific affordances geared towards a realist aesthetic and impact.

In “Longing for Appalachia: Poverty, Whiteness, and the Aesthetics of Nostalgia in *Hillbilly Elegy*,” Simone Knewitz discusses J.D. Vance’s 2016 memoir *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and a Culture in Crisis* and its 2020 film adaptation. Her contribution thus provides a cross-medial comparison of depictions of poverty as well as an analysis of intermedial features within both works. Conceptualizing nostalgia not as “regressive longing” but “as a productive form of memory” in the very present, she argues that the memoir and the film develop different aesthetics of nostalgia, drawing on distinct media and genre traditions. While the memoir relies predominantly on the narrative voice of J.D. Vance as a supposedly authentic, former insider, the film incorporates nostalgic effects into its plot structure and visuality. Yet, while aesthetic choices differ, the political implications remain similar. Both the memoir and the film perpetuate stereotypes of Appalachians as both distinctly American and as exotic, poor, White “Others.” By doing so, they also perpetuate the myths of meritocracy and social mobility encapsulated in the American Dream. In other words, rather than questioning the socioeconomic and political frameworks that have produced poverty in Appalachia, both book and film tell a story about the United States that helps legitimize neoliberal capitalist structures.

The contributions to this special issue frequently zero in on relations between the visual, the verbal, and the sonic. By paying attention to the interrelation of multiple media in specific works, the scholars whose work you find gathered here jointly demonstrate that intermedial approaches allow us to elucidate how various aesthetic strategies enhance or veil sociopolitical arguments, how the use of multiple media can point recipients’ attention to minute pieces in each respective mosaic of depicting destitution – such as people, animals, buildings, landscapes,

material objects like clothing or food, soundscapes, and an abundance of intertextual, inter pictorial, and further variants of allusive relations. In addition to fathoming capabilities and relationality represented within fictional worlds, the articles address perceptions and meaning-making processes in the minds of implied recipients – processes that require rethinking engrained reading, viewing, and listening practices. Intermedial representations certainly do not offer a panacea when it comes to bridging social divides and closing economic gaps between people. But they can include such an argumentative trajectory, and this trajectory may only become clear when we contextualize their aesthetic strategies within – as in this special issue – the histories of opera, film, life writing, photography, and poetry.

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