

Active Heroines Study Day

John Moores University, Liverpool in partnership with The Association for Research in Popular Fiction, 14 February 2004

A report by Kerry Gough, Institute of Film, University of Nottingham, UK

The Active Heroines Study Day at Liverpool John Moores University turned out to be a cosy and intimate affair, rather apt for Valentines Day. The day was refreshingly organised into a series of panels that ran the course of the day as a single strand; thus eliminating the usual dilemma of having to select across scheduled panelled sessions. This intimacy helped to create a particularly supportive and constructive group dynamic, which generated lively discussion, the active networking of resources, and enabled relationships amongst new and established academics to be forged.

In a room filled with women (and some men too -- although somewhat disappointingly none of which were delivering papers!), the day was particularly focused towards revisiting the concept of the action heroine, and to look at how research into the phenomenon had developed over the course of the last decade since its intervention into academic research. The one thing that every panel shared in common was a desire on the part of the delegates to be, or become, an action heroine in one sense or another, and this seemed to set the tone for the day.

The opening plenary speaker, Yvonne Tasker (University of East Anglia), the original action heroine of academic film studies and author of *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema* (1993), *Working Girls: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Cinema* (1998) and more recently *The Action Cinema Reader* (2004), talked of the way in which the action heroine speaks to women as consumers. Examining how within contemporary media the action heroine is a very different one to that being explored in the first wave of academic interest in the active heroine, Tasker spoke of the shift towards the post-modern action heroine and the increased focus upon consumerism, costume, action, romance, family and friendship. Tasker argues that this post-feminist action heroine comes 'fully formed and glamorous,' women who are 'youthful, shaped and slightly muscular' and self-knowingly acknowledge a comedic treatment of this play with femininity. Some examples of this phenomenon are to be found within *Charlie's Angels*, *Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle*, Sydney Bristow of *Alias*, and Sandra Bullock in *Miss Congeniality*.

The first, particularly lively, panelled session picked up on this idea of how the action heroine has worked itself out in relation to the alternative spaces of the comic, gaming and the marketing of the action heroine. Mel Gibson (Sunderland University) in the animated delivery of her paper "What Bunty Did Next: Reassessing and Rewriting the British Girl's Comics", examined the representation of the female action heroine within comics from the 1950s through to the present day. Here she explored strips such as 'The Amazing Valda,' and 'The Bubble Ballerinas,' in order to explore how femininity and girlhood has historically been scrutinised and explored within the comic strip. Within contemporary comics, Gibson

argues, Martin Barker's argument that girls were often either presented as victims or they articulated an expression of anger, as a sense of the 'unfair', is further developed. Recent women creators such as Lorna Miller, take this trope and work with it by turning a number of their female figures into profoundly more active, and sometimes violent figures, revisiting both the anger and assumed passivity of the early strips and turning it into something still darker. Gibson's paper therefore found that within the pages of the comics, the active heroine played with the socially prescribed notions of gender. In a particularly interesting paper, "Demon Girl Power: Regimes of Form and Force in *Primal* and *Buffy*", Tanya Krzywinska (Brunel University) similarly took up the exploration of the action heroine, and the space it created, but within the realm of the gaming and avatar world. Interestingly Krzywinska examined the extent to which the player, through game play, was permitted access to the avatar's body as 'a technology for action' in which the player was granted space for performance 'as if' a warrior. Locating the avatar's body as a source of experimentation in which the game-player can become the Demon Girl, Krzywinska argued that the avatar allowed room for both, 'being and doing.' Rayna Denison's (University of Nottingham) insightful paper, "Selling Lara", moved on to examine how this image of the female avatar is sold intertextually across media. Exploring how Lara Croft was innovatively sold as both character and personality, Denison demonstrated how, through the Lucozade adverts which sought to give a boost to the flagging interest in the Lara Croft phenomenon, the marketing helped to reinvent Lara Croft 'as' Angelina Jolie, to sell Croft as an 'overarching lifestyle brand.' Here Denison mapped the development of the Croft character from game avatar to cinematic star, demonstrating the shifts in terms of the way Croft was marketed across media to divergent audiences.

While the first panel was focused upon the ancillary world of the active heroine, the second session of papers, at which my own paper featured was centred largely around the contradictions at work within the figure and representation of the active heroine. Wing-Fai Leung (SOAS, University of London) in her paper "Heroines, Heroes and Monster: Femininity in Wuxia Films" specifically addressed the problematic concept and contradictions of the woman warrior, gender and the framework of marital heterosexuality. Here Leung looked at the very real work performed by actors of both genders in their need to learn martial arts in order to perform on screen. Leung also explored how the women within these stories were not only constructed as sexual objects, but how frequently they performed the role of the active heroine in their enactment of the revenge plot. While these female warriors could be seen to pose a threat to the construction of male patriarchy, she argues that the heterosexual boundary is never crossed, but also that it is frequently the gender bending figures within Wuxia films who are demonised.

Picking up on the problematic boundaries in relation to gender and violence, Kate Adams (University of Hull) in her paper, entitled "Beating Myself Up Over Nothing: Strange Days and Ultraviolet Identifications", similarly examined the problematic relationships and contradictions within *Strange Days* between brutality and desensitisation. Looking at the representation of female violence, and violence as subversion, Adams attempted to uncover the conflicting responses to the violence contained within the film as we, the audience, are granted the point of view of the murderer and rapist. Here she examined the ways in which female violence and violence upon the female body was represented, but also how with that there comes a tension held between audience subjectivity and the representation of violence on screen. My own paper, "Negotiating Heroism" sought to explore the tensions surrounding the historical reception of *Aliens*. The paper investigated the marked tension and contradiction in terms of the way in which Ellen Ripley, as a representation of the active

heroine, was received and, as a result, how Ripley's heroism was frequently under negotiation within the materials. Here I examined how, within the reception, the figure of Ellen Ripley functioned as a catalyst around which the debates surrounding the 'feminist mother' were being articulated and contested within the social and cultural discourse of the period.

In the final panelled session, hybridity was the theme of the day with a paper examining the issue of race and Professor Sydney Fox of *The Relic Hunter*, and a couple of papers looking at the hybridised figure of Buffy. Yasmin Jiwani's (Concordia University) paper, "Combining the Best of the East and West: Hybridity, Race and Gender in Popular Television Programming", looked at how often within popular television programmes, women of colour were traditionally used as 'colourful backdrops.' Within the figure of Professor Sydney Fox however, Jiwani identifies how the Eurasian woman are represented as Asian in an act of 'American arrogance.' Here Jiwani recognises how cartography is represented as 'hierarchically structured' but within that also how Sydney is presented as acceptable due to her white father. Here then, for Jiwani, Sydney Fox acts as a hybrid figure who represents a blurring of Eastern beauty and exoticism with Western rationality and education. The two papers addressing the character of Buffy similarly picked up on this idea of hybridity. Simone Knox's (University of Reading) paper "'But you're just a girl!'--'That's what I keep saying': Buffy, Feminism's Heroic Slayer", examines how the figure of Buffy and specifically her body, represented as both heroic through physicality and vulnerable through her objectification, is represented as a boundary figure. In "Blurring the Binary: Postfeminist Supergirls and Living in the In-Between", Stephanie Genz (University of Stirling) similarly looked at Buffy as postfeminist supergirl, existing between binaries, using her femininity as a means of empowerment.

Overall the study day, organised in partnership with The Association for Research in Popular Fiction www.arpf.org.uk, provided a forum for a much-needed re-evaluation of the role of the active heroine within popular culture. Looking at the development of the active heroine across time and across media, the day proved to be a valuable idea-generating and pooling process for current work being undertaken around the active heroine within film, television and other visual media.

Keeping the Appointment

The Wicker Man: Rituals, Readings and Reactions -- An Interdisciplinary Conference,
Dumfries, 14-15 July 2003

**A report by Mikel J. Koven, University of Wales,
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We do not have enough interdisciplinary conferences. Of course, there are specialised panels, usually at those massives with three or four concurrent sessions at the same time, but we do not seem to have enough small, two-day affairs where the sessions run consecutively and presenters are not only from Film/Television/Cultural Studies, but from other disciplines as well.

'*The Wicker Man*: Rituals, Readings and Reactions' was one of those conferences: set at the Crichton Campus in Dumfries, a satellite of the University of Glasgow, for two days scholars from film studies met with political scientists, anthropologists, literature scholars, historians, scholars of the philosophy of religion, musicologists and pagans to discuss one filmic text: Robin Hardy's 1973 cult-classic, *The Wicker Man*. The film, about a devout Christian police detective investigating the disappearance of a young girl on a mysterious Scottish island, only to discover the island's inhabitants have rejected Christianity in favour of 'the old religion', a kind of Victorian paganism which only existed in James Frazer's imagination, certainly is the kind of film which invites discussion from many different academic perspectives.

I was fortunate enough (perhaps unfortunate enough) to have presented the first paper at the conference, an exploration of the film's roots within Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. As I got my paper over with at the very start of the conference, this enabled me to sit back and really enjoy the remainder of the papers. Something occurred to me during this conference, and all credit to the conference convenors for this, but *The Wicker Man* conference embodied four key elements for successful symposia:

Keep the sessions consecutive, rather than concurrent.

Perhaps it is a tad *de rigueur* to lament big where there are multiple sessions going on at the same time. Inevitably you miss something really exciting or end up being unsupportive of a friend or colleague because their presentation is opposite something more in keeping with your own research. Consecutive sessions mean everyone hears everyone else's presentation. And everyone hears yours (so, this may be a double-edge sword). There is something more collegial about consecutive sessions, and it creates a definite sense of having been *part* of the conference experience.

Focus on one specific text, and keep the conference interdisciplinary.

Film, perhaps more than any other cultural product, lends itself to a variety of disciplines. Film is taught and researched well beyond the confines of English and Film/TV/Media programmes. However, film *conferences* tend to be discipline specific, and so those

researchers outside of the traditional subject areas tend to get left out. By focusing a small conference on a specific filmic text, and then to extend the call-for-papers beyond just the obvious discipline specific outlets, brings in a variety of papers from a wide range of disciplines. such as *The Wicker Man* conference succeed *because* they are interdisciplinary, and this enables film scholars to hear *other* disciplinary perspectives on film -- how other subjects see film texts? How are film texts used in other kinds of academic contexts? Often, it feels like we are locked within that cliché of ‘the ivory tower’ of our own disciplines and tend to get a bit precious about our subject. Hearing how films are discussed in other departments, despite occasionally disagreeing with a tendency towards an uncritical approach to ‘text’, is a particular strength to these kinds of conferences. Perhaps that is self evident; but the different knowledges and expertises that are then shared in these conference spaces enrich our discipline.

Thankfully, there was little of the kind of Lacanian/Zizekian sophistry that too often mars filmtoday. I have nothing against this kind of psychoanalytic discourse, but too often it degenerates into meaningless rhetorical games of ‘Jack Horner’, with scholars sticking their thumbs into Christmas pies, pulling out a variety of fruity interpretations, and declaring how clever they are.

Instead what we got were a diverse series of papers on a variety topics: among the presenters were Film Scholars like Brigid Cherry and Mark Jones, Classicists like Paula James, Political Scientists like Benjamin Franks, Archaeologists like Richard Sermon, Historians like Luc Racaut and scholars in the Philosophy of Religion like Steven Sutcliffe; each of these papers gave their own discipline’s perspective on the film. Also in attendance were a number of scholars outside the more traditional fields of academia (or at least representing their para-academic perspectives): Melvyn Willin of the Pagan Federation was presenting a fascinating paper on contemporary pagans’ use of music within their rituals, and Judith Higginbottom, of Sgrin Cymru Wales, was similarly presenting her work on the reception of the film within the contemporary pagan communities. Dr. Belle Doyle, of the Dumfries and Galloway Council, in addition to presenting, was also responsible for curating a concurrent film series at the Robbie Burns Arts Centre, appropriately titled “*The Wicker Man* Film Festival” which showed not only Hardy’s film, but also *Witchfinder General* (1968, Michael Reeves) and *Don’t Look Now* (1974, Nicholas Roeg).

Obviously depending on the specific film text one chooses for one’s conference will determine the variety of disciplines attracted, however meeting and liasing with scholars who you would not normally meet, or read their work, makes each of us better scholars in our own rights. So perhaps it is a bit hokey and unprofessional to say that as a result of this conference I made some wonderful new friends -- and it does sound an awful lot like a summer camp experience -- but by establishing these kinds of research networks beyond our subjects strengthens our own abilities as scholars.

Encourage postgraduate students to attend and present papers.

When I was a postgraduate student, I was amazed that these grand professors whose books I was avidly inhaling were so welcoming at certainI attended. At the larger conferences, grad students tended to keep to themselves, rather than mixing with their lecturers, and this created an uncomfortable schism at the conference. At *The Wicker Man* conference, out of twenty-two papers presented, eight of the presenters were graduate students including one MA student. And all of those papers generated as much discussion, if not more in some cases,

than those papers presented by the doctorate holders. Graduate students are the future of our discipline -- another self-evident point perhaps. And although I am unaware of any student who would be turned away from a conference, accepting their proposal is different from *active encouragement* for them to participate. Among those present at this conference were Justin Smith, a PhD candidate at Portsmouth, who presented a paper which considered the textual qualities which made *The Wicker Man* a 'cult' film; Lesley Stevenson, a PhD candidate at Glasgow, who considered the impact that making the movie had on the home communities of Galloway and Dumfries; and Melissa Smith, a PhD candidate from McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, who presented her consideration of the image of Punch in this film, as well as in other popular culture texts. Like this one are terrific platforms for graduate students to 'try-out' their theses on the larger academic worlds, but in the relatively safer atmosphere of a small, and very face-to-face context.

Guest lecturers can be a blessing and a curse.

The Wicker Man conference brought in two main guest speakers (three were booked, but one had to withdraw at the last minute due to illness). Gary Carpenter, who acted as musical director on the film under the late Paul Giovanni (who composed the score), gave perhaps the best ethnomusicological presentation I have ever heard. In particular, he focused on one specific sequence towards the end of the film, where Inspector Howie is running around Summerisle trying to locate the missing girl, Rowan, before she is sacrificed. Carpenter discussed how various musical themes were woven together within the incidental music which gave both clues to the film's dénouement, as well as explored Giovanni's use of traditional folk melodies within the score. To be sure, the music in *The Wicker Man* is one of the film's highlights, and Carpenter's talk was equally a highlight to this conference.

Less enjoyable, but shall we say, definitely enlightening, was the keynote address by the film's director, Robin Hardy. Hardy's talk featured him going through the abstracts of the papers (he only arrived to see the final two papers) and commenting on how 'wrong' a number of us were regarding his film -- specifically those "feminist" scholars who either problematised his gender representations or tried to reclaim female agency within the diegesis. Needless to say this went down like a lead balloon, but the audience was polite, if not a little shocked. It is always a risky business bringing the filmmaker into academic debates like this; they are not always the best commentators on their own work, particularly if they *think* they are. With a film like *The Wicker Man* and a director like Hardy, the conference organisers did the right thing by bringing him in -- if for no other reason than for scholars to discount the director wherever possible.

Much credit needs to go to the conference's organisers: Dr. Benjamin Franks, Dr. Stephen Harper, Jonathan Murray and Lesley Stevenson. Their work paid off, as the conference was challenging, thoughtful, well balanced, and most importantly, an awful lot of fun. The biggest problem with a conference such as this one is, however, that its like can not be easily replicated -- I am not convinced that there is sufficient material for a second *Wicker Man* conference in the foreseeable future, and the relatively unique subject matter which drew such a diverse collection of scholars together are few and far between. But, if there is any lesson from this conference it is that small, one-off focused on a specific film, but open to as wide a range of disciplines as possible are more than welcome on the film studies conference circuit. A volume of conference proceedings is currently being planned, with at least one publisher's interest fully confirmed.

Raiders of the Lost Archive

Breaking the Boundaries in Television Historiography: Historical Research and the Television Archive, University of Reading, 9 January 2004

A report by Jamie Medhurst, University of Wales, Aberystwyth

James Curran, in a recent survey of media history narratives, commented that media history has become marginalised. “It is now the neglected grandparent of media studies: isolated, ignored, rarely visited by her offspring.” (Curran: 2002, 3). To a degree, I would agree with Curran, yet at the same time, as a broadcasting historian, I am increasingly heartened by the growing number of historical studies of the media (radio and television in particular) and of such as the one held at Reading under the auspices of the AHRB-funded Centre for Television Drama Studies.

I’m not sure what the correct collective noun is for a gathering of like-minded academics with a keen interest in the history of broadcasting, but we there ready to discuss, debate and re-charge the batteries before the start of another term. The programme looked very appetising and promised a good (solid) day of varied papers from (primarily) academics and television archivists. I, for one, was not disappointed. The aim of the day was to draw people together to discuss issues relating to how we study television history, how we can exploit television archives, what problems exist. For example, how do you research television that just isn’t there any more? There were opportunities to consider both texts and contexts and to discuss the ways of writing television history. The title of the conference reflected what the conference aimed to do, that is to break boundaries of various kinds on different levels, for example, the boundaries between academics and archivists, between those who need to preserve and those who need to exploit the resources. The success of the day is due in no small part to the hard work of the organiser, Helen Wheatley from the Department of Film, Theatre and Television Studies at Reading.

The day began with a plenary session fronted by Steve Bryant, Keeper of Television at the British Film Institute (BFI), Jackie Kavanagh, Head of the BBC Written Archives at Caversham, Murray Weston, Head of the British Universities Film and Video Council (BUFVC) and Luke McKernon, the BUFVC’s Head of Information. Steve gave a fascinating insight into his work and noted that the BFI off-air record around 30% of ITV, 25% of Channel 4 and 20% of Five. He also noted that in the future, the BFI would be focussing more on what he termed “cultural milestones”. He finished by noting some of the problematic areas such as the fact that the BFI have no statutory responsibility for satellite or cable output and that problems relating to interactive television, supplementary channels (ITV2, E4 etc) and the ubiquitous Internet are now receiving attention. The other three speakers each gave a presentation on their respective institutions and were ready and willing to engage with the audience when pressed on issues such as access to material, written and visual. The first session ended with a presentation by Mark Duguid, again from the BFI, who introduced *Screen Online* which holds great potential in terms of accessing digitally-preserved and archived material for teaching and research purposes.

After the first session, it was time to choose. If I have any complaint, it's that I was spoilt for choice. As I was presenting a paper on "Piecing Together Mammon's Television" (on ITV in Wales in the early 1960s), I was unable to attend a concurrent session. I'm aware that this is a common complaint and so I won't dwell upon it. In the 'other room' Lez Cooke from Manchester Metropolitan University and John Corner from Liverpool University were discussing the place of television history on the syllabus. Had I not been presenting myself, I would have liked to have joined in the debate given that I'm often faced with the unenviable task of having to persuade undergraduate students that history is fun and that an historical understanding of television (and radio for that matter) is a pre-requisite of an understanding and appreciation of contemporary television. Meanwhile, Emma Sandon from Birkbeck College in London and I were giving papers under the session's heading of 'Researching television which isn't there'. Emma gave a very interesting account of her use of oral methodologies for research the history of early history of BBC Television whilst I outlined the problems of researching the history of a television company (Wales (West and North) Television Ltd) for which only one minute and thirty seconds of material remains.

The two sessions during the afternoon required choices to be made again and so I had to miss what looked like a fascinating session on nationality in television historiography (with papers from Spain, the Netherlands and Wales) and attended a session on "Reading texts, researching institutions". Su Holmes from Southampton Institute gave an excellent paper on cinema programmes on the BBC in the 1950s and in doing so, called for a reappraisal of the cinema-television relationship which, the dominant narrative assumes, was hostile. Holmes's research suggests otherwise. Anthony McNicholas (University of Westminster), in his paper, related the soap opera, *Eastenders* to the institutional history of the BBC and drew attention (in an effective way) to the relationship between text and context. In many ways, *Eastenders* was introduced by the BBC in 1985 as part of the early evening ratings battle with ITV in an attempt to redress the balance as the scales were tipping heavily in ITV's favour by 1984. The final paper in this session, presented by Wendy Phillips, again from Westminster, developed the text-context theme by framing situation comedies of the 1970s and 1980s (in particular *The Good Life*, much to the approval of audience members!) within issues of reception, historical context and the broadcasting organisations.

The final session of the day called for more choices to be made and so I shunned the session on the historiography of television news for the one on "Cultural history, television history". Darrell Newton from Salisbury University considered the role of the BBC in the construction of 'Britishness' during the 1950s and focused in particular on the feeling amongst black people in the country at the time that they were isolated from the programmes despite the fact they wanted themselves to 'feel' British. Janet Thumim (looking relaxed as she had recently come to the end of her term as Head of the Department of Drama at Bristol University) then moved on to look at the cultural anxieties provoked by television especially during the 1955-65 period of plural broadcasting in the UK. The session ended with a paper by Tim O'Sullivan (De Montfort University) who argued that the audience, or viewing culture in general, was an oft-neglected element in historical studies of broadcasting. One staggering statistic was the dramatic increase in the numbers of UK homes with television sets --1% in 1946 but 80% in 1960. From this, O'Sullivan discussed issues surrounding the domestication of television, memories of early television viewing, which then fed into a consideration of the role of memory in historical studies. Many of those in the audience were also allowed to indulge themselves in nostalgic reminiscences at this point (although I should add that I'm too young for all that...!)

Following a drink and an opportunity to chat informally people drifted away having had much food for thought. Television history has come of age.

Curran, James (2002) *Media and Power*, London: Routledge

"They Actually Publish Books on That!"

MeCCSA, The University of Sussex, Brighton, 19-21 st December 2003

A report by Rayna Denison, Institute of Film Studies, University of Nottingham

This year's MeCCSA conference was even parts Ghost-of-Christmas-Past and progressive research into some of the least travelled and most interesting parts of diverse cultures. The titular quotation is an approximation of the comments made by Cherry Potter on the horror genre at "The Future of Film" plenary held on the second day of this, the fifth annual Media, Communication and Cultural Studies Association Conference. The plenary was interestingly divided between those -- Potter and, to an extent Patrick Fuery -- who were seriously questioning the content and nature of academic film studies, and a second type of argument followed by Mark Jancovich and John Hill, who were more concerned with discussing the liminal spaces of film and its potential for future academic study.

The central debate could have been an appealing one: when are films no longer films? How does where (cinema or home cinema) and which medium (celluloid or digitisation) affect our understanding and research into film? These questions of film as a private or public medium and of it as a traditional or transgressive medium were sadly underdeveloped in this plenary session. Apart from an insightful question from Martin Shingler (University of Staffordshire) about the continued mutual wariness of film studies and filmmakers, the majority of the discussion devolved into questions of cannon-formation in which Potter and others rather heatedly pushed for a reclamation of the 'classics' of filmmaking (all European, except perhaps Ken Loach), evincing a fear for a lack of 'serious' films within academic film courses. The approach taken by Potter in particular had the taste of popular-bashing and a fear for the legitimacy of film as a subject of study, a mode of taste formation that has long haunted the peripheries of film and media studies. This is what led to Potter's comments on the horror genre -- that she had heard they actually publish psychoanalytic studies of the horror genre -- a comment met by gasps of disbelief from the audience and a somewhat bemused looking Jancovich.

But it raises an important point that Fuery had raised in his paper about why it is that media studies, and with it film studies, have such a bad image in the media. A relatively recent episode of Channel 5's *The Wright Stuff* might serve as an example of this. Discussing the Government's initiatives to increase undergraduate numbers one outraged panel member declared that this country needs no more media students (but could use more plumbers). At MeCCSA this year, this manifested no longer as a general problem for media studies, but one for its more specific 'little brother' film studies. If a valid point was raised at all in these musings, it was perhaps that with such a richness and multiplicity of texts that could be studied, how should we choose to create curricula? Moreover how do we get our students to negotiate the breadth of our ever-expanding subject area, with high-- or mid-- or lowbrow texts and do we need to focus on texts at all? Perhaps it is key that we stop to reconsider these questions at the cusp of a proliferation in cheap digital 'film' making equipment, but the

thrust of the discussion seemed aimed more towards devaluation or denial of the value of the popular than any true consideration of what it means (and will mean) to study film.

This flew in the face of what was, in the panels I attended, an incredibly rich, multicultural and often populist selection of papers. In the first day panel on “Hollywood” there were three such nuanced, interventionist papers. Martin Shingler’s paper entitled “Film Studies and the Creation of Hollywood Genres: The Case of Melodrama and the Woman’s Film”, rightly questioned what should be done when new understandings of genres are created through theorists misapplying category labels to film. He pointed out that melodrama is one of the most conflicted genres in this respect beginning by describing action-adventure films like *Flash Gordon* (1936) and then being mapped onto the ‘woman’s film’ later by film critics. Paul Grainge’s (University of Nottingham) paper of the creation of the changing history of studio brands and logos similarly questioned the way we understand the complex relationship between Hollywood studios and their film products. He described logos as linking the macro and micro levels of film, symbolising both the industry behind and the brand to be associated with the film text. Rounding off the panel was Ian Huffer’s (University of Sussex) investigation into Sylvester Stallone’s female fans. Huffer showed that although young male audiences are thought of as the core audience in the New Hollywood, in fact, female audiences represented a particularly important niche for *Rocky* (1976) and were specifically appealed to through its advertising.

Huffer’s audience study on British Stallone fans began an interesting trend of audience studies papers at MeCCSA. Thomas Austin, in a paper on the audiences for documentary filmmaking, showed how French cinematically exhibited documentary *Etre et Avoir* (2003) negotiated issues of veracity and class identity. This trend was consolidated by the “*Lord of the Rings*” panel, timely coinciding with the release of the third in the series of Peter Jackson’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Martin Barker (University of Wales, Aberystwyth) began the panel by outlining the remit of Aberystwyth’s *Lord of the Rings* project. With partners in about twenty countries in five continents this is both the largest and probably the most unpredictable and important audience study ever undertaken. At long last, Barker *et al*’s project has begun an endeavour that has the power to truly track the progress of a blockbuster and its meanings world-wide, and one that will be able to provide a real understanding of what blockbuster films mean in concrete terms. Barker made a point of announcing that the project was intended to be beneficial to the whole of academia, with results to be published on the project’s website at <http://www.lordoftheringsresearch.net/>.

Ernest Mathijs (University of Wales, Aberystwyth) concluded the panel by suggesting the difficulties in performing a reception study; especially showing how under-explored the status and relationships of text, viewers and ancillary materials are. Moreover he pointed out that *Lord of the Rings* as book and film in its various forms is a text without a ‘final moment’. Somewhat strangely, given the focus on reception studies, the questions raised at the end of this panel mostly related to how the *Lord of the Rings* project was defining key terms like ‘fantasy.’ Vincent Campbell (DeMontfort University), for example, suggested that fantasy might be reconsidered through the mythic.

Television, as well as audiences, featured heavily at MeCCSA. In a panel on “International Media”, Angelina Karpovich (University of Wales, Aberystwyth) delivered a fascinating paper on the cultural specificity of game-show questions in the light of transnationalised television show formats. Focussing on *University Challenge* she discussed how television game-show formats themselves require translation in differing national contexts, using the

UK and Indian examples of the show as a case study. Alexander Dhoest (Katholieke Universiteit, Leuven), in a panel entitled “Television and National Heritage” also provided an insightful comparison of the cultural differences between celebrity reality TV shows focusing on *The Osbournes* and the Flemish footballing celebrity Jean-Marie Pfaff and family as *The Pfaffs*. Dhoest pointed again to the maintenance of national identity boundaries between similarly formatted celebrity-based shows, but intimated that *The Osbournes* was acting as the source to which *The Pfaffs* was a local, Flanders, response. Roberta Pearson’s (Cardiff University) piece on what might be termed “brand Shakespeare” in “Heritage, Humanism, Populism: The Representation of Shakespeare on Contemporary British Television” showed the many uses to which British culture has been putting its Bard. She cited humanism and populism as responses to heritage presentations of Shakespeare but showed how these carried a veiled ahistorical heritage aspect of their very own.

Branding and identity recurred in a panel on “Consumption”, a panel that broke the hearts of more than one academic attendee. In a paper called “But who is Betty Crocker?”, Kirsten Hardy broke the news that Crocker, like so many of her food packaging brand icon brethren, is a fictive character. The fact that there is no Betty Crocker, but rather an aesthetic and continually re-created version of the housewife as used on food packaging was the starting point for a noteworthy investigation of food packaging as an aesthetic and commercial practice. This paper was followed by another on the aestheticisation and feminisation of the sex toy. Clarissa Smith’s “Designed for Pleasure: Style Indulgence and Accessorised Sex” showed how the sex toy is being reinterpreted for a developing female audience that follows on from a feminisation of the sex accessory industry through ventures like Ann Summers and programmes like *Sex and the City*. Through a fascinating range of visuals she illustrated the way that such feminised toys are becoming ever more closely linked with ideas of design and fashion.

This was perhaps the height of the MeCCSA paradox this year. It made a concerted effort to present work by scholars moving beyond the staid ground of past media and cultural studies, but it would seem that some of its participants were not willing to go with them. The great success of the conference was just this, its ability to balance such a massive range of views in a supportive and at times festive atmosphere.