

Avoiding "Unseemly Haste"

Screen Studies Conference, University of Glasgow, 29 June-1 July 2001

A report by Robert A. Morace, Daemen College, USA

The *Screen* Studies Conference, organized by the journal *Screen*, included sixty-one presentations in twenty-three sessions evenly spaced over six time slots. With three to four sessions per slot and two to three presentations per session, there were anywhere from eight to twelve papers presented per ninety-minute slot. All sessions were held in the compact yet spacious Gilmorehill Centre for Theatre, Film and Television, a converted church on the eastern edge of the University of Glasgow. The fact that there appeared to be little if any disruptive flitting between concurrent sessions (or between the conference and nearby attractions such as the Hunterian Museum and the Hunterian Art Gallery) attests the conference's appeal and the organizers' careful preparations.

The conference began on Friday with a workshop on funding of special interest to British attendees. The plenary session which immediately followed and the closing plenary two days later lent the conference a sense of purpose and direction that most academic gatherings, even those of similar size and scope, generally lack. Held in the Centre's cinema, the plenaries also introduced a welcome sense of intimacy and informality to the conference. These "conversations", as they were quite accurately billed ("Simon Frith in conversation with Ann Gray" and "Andrew Tudor in conversation with Annette Kuhn"), addressed the topic "Sociology and the Screen" by considering where *Screen* studies (or more narrowly and usually, film studies) has been, is now, and soon will, may or should be. They dealt, that is, with the discipline's complex, heterogeneous origins, present state, and future direction, with ample time and reason for, as well as encouragement of, responses from the hundred-strong audience. What emerged from the plenaries is a discipline at once beset and advanced by a healthy anxiety about its still relatively new, rapidly changing, technology-based subject of study and more particularly about itself as an academic discipline: about its make-up and scope and more particularly about which critical methodology or methodologies it should employ, as well as the pedagogical implications of these concerns. This degree of self-scrutiny is rare in academia (and the raising of pedagogical issues rarer still, especially in the US, where to raise questions about pedagogical matters would be to risk embarrassment by sullyng scholarly specialization with mundane matters such as undergraduate education).

Although the discussion did occasionally back itself into some odd corners, such as whether Laura Mulvey's seminal essay on "the gaze" should continue to be taught, and if so, at what length, to which students, and to what end, overall the conversations and ensuing discussions clearly indicated the central place that self-examination has in Film Studies, especially, it seems, in Britain. This passionate self-criticism might have struck a more austere, puritanical note (given the Scottish setting) were it not quite so stimulating, especially for someone like myself, coming from the United States and a background in literature rather than film. The plenaries stressed, with much cogency and good humor, the anxiety of influence of a discipline (*Screen* studies) that exists at the intersection of quite varied disciplines (philosophy, literature, sociology, cultural studies). A discipline which took an early,

arguably obsessive, perhaps unwise interest in psychoanalytical and structuralist theories and in establishing a canon of its own (call this "canon envy" or "the *Citizen Kane* effect").

The plenaries also addressed the important issue of just what should be this ambiguously defined discipline's proper object of study: the text, its reception, its production, or theory (with a clear understanding of what a former reliance on psychoanalytical theory did for, and to, *Screen* studies). The reception and production issues proved to be the most vexing and therefore the most stimulating. Should reception studies follow the British empirical model and focus on actual audiences, as Martin Barker repeatedly stressed? Or should it take more of a cultural studies approach and deal with broader, more ideologically charged issues? (Factor in funding for research and the debate becomes even more interesting and contentious.) If reception provoked some of the most partisan discussion at the conference, production resulted in some of the most stimulating. Part of the interest focussed on the technical side of production: the way(s) in which new technology (digital recorders, HDTV, etc.) both advance the art and fundamentally alter the very nature of the aesthetic object. (Among the very best of these presentations: Duncan Petrie's "British Low-Budget Production and Digital Technology.") Along with the purely technical side, indeed inseparable from it, is production's financial side. A subject once covered in film histories and textbooks in rather straightforward fashion, according to the Hollywood model, has become vastly complicated by an expanded awareness of world cinema and new sources and paradigms of funding, both regional (as in Scotland) and multinational (as in the case of, and the demise of, PolyGram Filmed Entertainment, so ably discussed by David Sorfa).

Of course, in terms of the sixty-one individual presentations, the conference was neither narrowly nor programmatically designed to address directly the issues raised in the two plenary sessions. As a result, the connections between these larger issues so vital to *Screen* studies and the individual presentations were generally indirect and might have gone entirely unnoticed and unmissed had it not been for the framework the plenaries provided and the time built in to the conference schedule to make connections and to continue discussions at the half-hour breaks, the luncheons, the receptions each evening, and the dinner the first night. (It helped, too, that the conference went off without a hitch, technical or otherwise, thanks to the work of Caroline Beven and a student staff that was just as visible and cheerful as it was helpful in providing directions and technical assistance.)

Not surprisingly, the conference had a British focus (refreshingly so, I should add) and attracted a large number of British participants, but the presenters were just about equally divided between Brits and non-Brits: thirty-three from the UK, fifteen from the US, three from Canada, two each from Australia and Belgium, and one each from Switzerland, Spain, Ireland, Israel, Sweden, New Zealand and the Netherlands. The topics covered proved similarly varied: from film periods and literary types to film music and electronic gaming, from Dolly Parton and the Australian edition of *The Weakest Link* to American art cinema, from British television to Japanese and South African films, from the *Crash* (1996) controversy to Jackie Chan, from Mai Zetterling to *Trainspotting* (1996) and *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* (1998). Again, not surprisingly, the majority of the twenty-three sessions dealt with film: seventeen solely with film, four with film and television, one with television only, and one with television and electronic gaming. The fact that television studies made up a small but nonetheless important and certainly interesting part of the conference while the plenary sessions dealt almost exclusively with film studies suggests the uneasy relationship between these two related yet rather different disciplines, each with its own area of interest within the broader field of visual culture and each with its own critical

methodologies. (Among the very best of the television studies: Nicole Matthews' "*Video Nation: The Confessions of 'Ordinary People' and the Re-Shaping of Public Space.*")

With this uneasy relationship in mind, I find it especially interesting that the 2001 *Screen Studies Conference* should revisit issues first addressed in *The Cinema Book*, edited by Pam Cook (London: BFI, 1985), to which one of the conference's organizers, Annette Kuhn, was a major contributor. Although *The Cinema Book's* make-up now seems a bit dated -- History of Cinema, Genre, Authorship and Cinema, History of Narrative Codes, Film Narrative and the Structuralist Controversy -- the overall concerns it addressed are not. They are in fact strikingly similar to those addressed at the conference, as articulated in the plenary sessions and implied in dispersed, fragmented form in the individual presentations. Then *The Cinema Book* rightly assumed that "Over the last two decades, the study of film in Britain has changed more dramatically than any other academic discipline in response to social and cultural shifts, devouring and incorporating often complex debates and issues with almost unseemly haste" (back cover). Sixteen years later, the 2001 *Screen Studies Conference* strove to identify more recent social, cultural, theoretical, and technological shifts, as well as any "unseemly haste" with which Screen studies has responded (or failed to respond) to certain of these shifts. Consequently, I came away from the conference happily aware that Screen studies in general and film studies in particular may very well be, as a result of this responsiveness and self-scrutiny, the academic equivalent of the novel as Bakhtin defined it: the one an anti-genre, the other an anti-discipline, neither having a form of its own, each intensely aware of its (unfolding, uncertain) history and its several and divided loyalties and responsibilities, each developing by cannibalizing and to some degree carnivalizing other genres, other disciplines.

Of Goldfish and Canaries

Multiple Publics/Civic Voices: The American Studies Association Annual Conference in Washington DC, November 8-11, 2001

A report by Sue Currell, University of Nottingham, UK

<http://www.press.jhu.edu/associations/asa/program01/>

This broad, kaleidoscopic, conference can barely be represented in a single report. There were often 15 sessions running consecutively and over 255 panel discussions during the conference, not including business meetings and special events. Although not a film conference, the American Studies Association conference does have a strong visual culture element, and many of the panels I attended reflected my own interest in the visual and consumer culture. While I will outline the central themes of a few panels I attended, I cannot possibly do justice to the scope and quantity of film/visual culture panels that were available. For anyone interested in what I didn't get to see, check out the online conference programme linked above.

In a panel chaired by maestro of consumer culture, Jackson Lears, Kristin Hoganson spoke about how fashion structured an "imagined community" of bourgeois culture for 19th and early 20th century Western women. Offering modernity and civilisation, French fashion offered upper class American women a way of creating an elite culture of consumers, which demarcated transnational class and race boundaries. Hoganson described how these "imagined communities" allowed white elite women to express fascination with the "exotic" and "oriental" while maintaining clear boundaries from non-occidental women, who were defined in fashion publicity as producers and not consumers of luxury. Pastiche of oriental or folk culture in fashion designs, illustrated by the adoption of kimonos as boudoir-wear, expressed the power of elite appropriation, thus making the search for novelty a simultaneous expression of cultural hierarchy and colonial ambition. Hoganson's paper featured a key concern that was reflected in many of the papers I attended -- how "imagined communities" represent themselves in non-written and non-verbal signs of aesthetic and commodity choices.

Class conflict and distinctions also featured prominently in Katherine Martinez's paper on the *Visual Culture of Culturine*. As a word used by anxious "high-brows" about mass-produced visual aesthetics, "culturine", like margarine, expressed a nervous reaction to the mass proliferation of images in American culture. Martinez looked specifically at how tenement dwellers viewed the photomechanically reproduced art reproductions given to them by settlement worker Elizabeth McKraken in the early part of the twentieth century. The black and white copies of art "masterpieces" given to the poor were seen by settlement workers as a gift of "real" culture and as a way of refining and uplifting the lives of the slum-dwellers. Despite this, the pictures were reinscribed with different meanings by their recipients, who positioned them in "unseemly" and "uneducated" ways that disappointed McKraken. Martinez examined the performative aspect of visual culture display and found resistance to the dominant message of cultural elites in the way that images were discussed and displayed

by the poor recipients. Martinez concluded that examining emotive responses to visual culture counteracts the predominance of intellectual and economic theories, which cannot deal adequately with class based differences of visual reception.

Culturally bound viewing practices also dominated Elizabeth Wiatr's paper on the visual education movement, examining how stereoscope cards assisted educators in a didactic drive to teach through visual "knowledge". Wiatr usefully pointed out how teaching visually is not a contemporary concern but something used in the past as part of various "progressive" movements. As part of the Taylorist drive for efficiency in the early part of the 20th century, visual educators believed that the visual could give more rapid and direct access to knowledge, that the knowledge that was gained was universal, and that perception could be standardised. Wiatr compared the homogenising tendency of visual education to the Library of Congress's American Memory lesson plans and didacticism (<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/index.html>) -- illustrating that the visual can also limit viewers' perceptions as much as enhance them. Yet, as many other papers illustrated, the attempt to enforce viewpoints quickly comes undone with effective visual readings undertaken by informed students from multiple perspectives.

The theme of the re-enactment of class values in the realm of the visual reappeared in the *Digital Cities* panel, consisting of Nottingham's own Douglas Tallack, Maria Balshaw of the City Sites project (<http://artsweb.bham.ac.uk/citysites/>), and Peter Hales. In her description of the Three Cities project, Balshaw illustrated how new types of narrative and ways of treating the visual appeared during the process of writing the "e-book". Reflecting on how the project had impacted research techniques and productions, she illustrated how "visual knowledge" is more than just knowledge of the visual object. Douglas Tallack reiterated her point in his presentation of the Jacob Riis essay within the website/e-book (to read his essay click on the Lower East Side essay from the City Sites home page given above). By re-mapping the area that Riis photographed, he illustrated how the "logic of the local" could inform readings of Riis that undermined the class-based visual perception of the photographer. Peter Hales added to this notion that cartographies of class could be used to read and reread dominant discourses of visual presentations. Reading the computer game "Sim City" as a cultural product, Hales examined the digital suburb where the other presenters "remapped" the urban community. Seeing cyber culture as a new system of representation, Hales related this new technological innovation to the historical moment of the invention of photography. This exciting panel combined new and old: new technologies and pedagogies with old material and contemporary forms of analysis incorporating new types of materials such as computer programmes.

My window-shopping for "culturine" led me, inadvertently, to attend perhaps my favourite paper of the whole conference, Katherine Grier's talk on the history of pet keeping. Like the unsuspecting customer who finds herself making a completely unforeseen purchase, this paper mesmerised me from the start, despite beginning along the lines of "today my talk will only focus on Goldfish and Canaries". An inauspicious start to a fascinating presentation of the creation, marketing, production and consumption of pets. Illustrating the role of pets as objects of consumption, Grier deftly punctuated her talk with slides, one showing a canary in the 1890s with a brand on the underside of its wing to prove its pedigree. Likewise, Grier illustrated how goldfish, as the "most ambiguous and multivalent of all commodities" became the first mass-produced and mass consumed pet. A flourishing industry of production and marketing techniques lay behind the emotional involvement of consumer with pet. As part of the upper- and middle-class world of self-cultivation, Grier illustrated how unravelling the

world of pet keeping can offer insights into the complexity of consumption and consumer history. As owners became emotionally involved in the object of consumption they became further tied to purchasing patterns which defined them as citizens as well as pet keepers. Grier's paper also presented an imagined community -- one defined by emotional commitment to the object of consumption and again indicated by markers of class, such as "taste" and refinement of visual display.

The presentation by the Visible Knowledge Project (<http://crossroads.georgetown.edu/vkp/>) on visual learning illustrated the presence of a different kind of imagined community. This time the imagined community was a virtual one of web-based scholars and teachers of American Studies. This session aimed to outline the research undertaken by American scholars into the effectiveness of non-traditional teaching methods. The project attempts to assess the pedagogical aims and achievements of innovative methods of teaching and learning. The website offers the chance to follow an online faculty seminar -- to enhance teaching practice and implement innovation. Rubrics for self-assessment and student assessment are available along with links to many major teaching-with-technology projects. Broadly, the project aims to increase quality of teaching at the same time support the new teaching environment that technologies create. Scholarly research into this field has been lacking until now -- this five-year project is aiming to change that. The presentation offered a much-needed space (not imagined!) to discuss and reflect on teaching practices which have been so dramatically affected by changes in higher education and technologies.

Flâneuse-style, I dipped into the immense array of panels and sessions with a turn-of-the-century sense that I already could not know "the whole", and experienced the imagined community of the academic conference. Part magic lantern show, part museum lecture, both the virtual and real community of American Studies was reflected in the diversity of presentations. The theme of the conference is perhaps reflected most interestingly in one innovation it has adopted: putting a selection of panels and discussions online. *Multiple Publics/Civic Voices* is thus not over, as a virtual public you can visit the conference yourself, read the papers, participate in panel discussions, and then write a report for me!

Visit the online panels at <http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~amstdy/asa2001.html>

Somewhere between Politics and Ethics

Cultural Studies: Between Politics and Ethics, Bath, England, July 6-8, 2001

A report by Richard C. Cante, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, USA

Early this July, an international group of about one hundred and twenty five culturalist scholars gathered amid the enchanting environs, unforgettably vocal birds, and surreal humidity of Bath, England. The goal of this gathering was a serious contribution, in the titular formulation of the conference organizers, to "the process of writing the narrative of cultural studies as a discipline *between* politics and ethics, as well as to the investigation of the nature of this 'between!'" A terrifically timely, and notably overdue, idea for a conference.

So kudos, first of all, to the people who put this together: Mark Devenney and Joanna Zylinska, both formerly of Bath Spa University College's very interesting School of Historical and Cultural Studies, where the proceedings were held. Devenney, author of *Ethics and Politics: Between Critical Theory and Post-Marxism* (Routledge, 2001), has since moved to the University of Brighton. Zylinska, whose new book *On Spiders, Cyborgs, and Being Scared: The Feminine and the Sublime* (Manchester, 2001) proposes a deconstruction-inspired ethics of the feminine sublime, now teaches at the Roehampton University of Surrey. Thanks to Devenney and Zylinska, two separate journal issues comprised of work presented here are forthcoming. The first is their co-edited special issue of *Strategies: Journal of Theory, Culture, and Politics* (Volume 14, Number 2, 2001), which bears the same title as the conference. The second is an issue of *Cultural Machine* that is slated for publication early in 2002.

It was Zylinska herself who, in her terrifically lucid presentation, most coherently laid on the table the paradox under which this conference was convened. As a collection and a category of political-epistemological projects, cultural studies is both "always already ethical" and "not yet ethical". This is as crucial to its current conceptual blockages, and its sites of recent political frustration, as it is constitutive of cultural studies' eternal-open-endedness-by-design in the face of the future -- including its *own* future. In this sense, the tools of our trade are tools which never fail to turn up missing: "forms of political engagement which aren't yet political", decisions which are "beyond knowledge", and ethical systems which aspire to "operating outside of traditional forms of moral authority." Thus, the shared (inter- or counter-)disciplinary mandate that is cultural studies is "ethical" largely in its continual invention of ways to "remain open to the possibility of its own collapse."

Unfortunately, and somewhat predictably, only a small minority of the work I saw presented at this meeting started from similarly complex, contradictory, interesting, useful, or even particularly "accurate" takes on things. (Which is all the more reason, in the future, to more tightly limit the number of presentations at such events; and, however unconventionally, to extend the length of those presentations that are accepted.) For example, Zylinska's talk gestured -- partly because of the degree to which she committed herself to "speaking as a feminist" there, I think -- toward problems posed by the "turn to Levinas" in critical theory: a

turn whereby "to know reduces being to nothing." A serious problem, of course, for a myriad of reasons. But still dominant at this conference was a sort of quasi-religious, grossly unreflective "devotion" to Levinas.

This reared its head in even the most unlikely places, and the most convoluted ways. Of the sessions I attended, it came most publicly to crisis during the discussion that followed the (notably confused) presentation, interestingly, of none other than an actual *theologian*. Not coincidentally, this was a presentation that also attempted to discuss homosexuality: precisely that difference which still never quite gets to be "difference" whenever leftist culturalism veers toward such by-now-easily-recognizable (to many gays and lesbians, at least) modes of post-multicultural "scriptural exegesis." The resulting impasse was more than a bit memorable, and more than a bit educational. The inter-national ground under absolutely everyone's feet got suddenly and exemplarily reduced to, well, mayonnaise.

Luckily, a few attendees were willing to risk appearing a bit cranky at such junctures. (In fact, there should have been more of these junctures, more discussion run aground of similar impasses of argumentative form as well as argumentative content. Plenty of all-attendee discussion forums should be formally planned into the schedule at any conference with a theoretical focus as relatively well-defined as this one's, many of us felt we had learned by the event's close.) In particular, there was one bearded and, if I remember correctly, slightly balding gent -- was this a Bath Spa person? -- who single handedly kept me from imploding at a few such moments, implicitly assuring me that I wasn't the only one more than a bit upset by the assumptions that were being allowed to tacitly underlie things. Other momentary commanders of my heart, who bravely but "unsuccessfully" attempted to send things flying into places the proceedings also direly needed to visit, very much deserve similarly hearty recognition. Some of them are: the *Mundane Behavior* affiliate whose articulate attempted intervention was oddly interrupted in the aforementioned mayo moment, ostensibly because it was taking too long; the fellow in the snazzy summer suit (seersucker?) who boldly pushed Laclau, though to little avail, and to shockingly palpable hostility and/or indifference from much of the audience; and the front-rowed interlocutor who rightly took Mark Poster to the wall for his attempt to involve Nietzsche in his otherwise very useful, though symptomatically "overviewey," keynote about the Internet. (Should we still accept the notion that scholarly audiences deserve "remediation" once digital technology enters the discussion? A thorny question.)

The all-too-earnest Levinassianism that abounded was fueled by a surprising absence of detailed engagement with not only a Foucault, but with the influential contemporary work of a Zizek, a Butler, a Badiou, or even a Stanley Fish, to name just a few. Likewise, a hard-to-ignore, but again somewhat predictable, proclivity toward disavowing the formal and phenomenological specificities of "postmodernism" put more than a bit of a kibosh on various important issues. This was, from what I could tell, especially rampant among those steeped in thinkers and literatures most readily assimilable to the canons of "philosophy."

Of course, the lack of engagement with the work of Butler and Zizek was especially troubling given the publication of their recent book with Laclau, the contents of which I don't think really made it to these proceedings. For instance, note how clearly Laclau's aforementioned invocation of the "signifier without signified" -- along with the aim of Simon Critchley's entire critique of Laclau, which structured this keynote session -- cried out for articulation with, if not psychoanalysis, then at very least "desire," or with *something like that* (in something other than the most banal and, indeed, hetero and sexist way, I mean). Or, short of

that, the aim underlying this invocation cried out for the fruitfulness of translation into the language of the differential modes of exclusion that Butler's work pushes us toward acknowledging signification is bound to continually enact, not to mention into the language of the specific relations of such modes to the very forms of citationality out of which we manufacture both our histories and our futures as -- and here's the key -- differentiated beings with differentiated interpellative affiliations.

It will likely be uncontroversial to assert to the readers of this particular journal, who presumably more or less identify with an endeavor like "film studies," that the inclusion of some keynoters who were more self-consciously engaged with formalisms, or more self-conscious about "operationalizing" a differently aimed sort of exegesis than abounded here, would have helped greatly on a number of the above counts. More textually demonstrable points of entry into the aesthetic realm, and more formally-based conceptions of textuality, would be important to include in the keynote talks were this conference to occur again -- methodologically engaging with, say, narrative theory, or with a rhetorical criticism that understands criticism as writing and speech rather than primarily as "ideas." (In other words, with other ways of taking ethics rigorously back to processes of "reading," whether via or against "foundations.") This is especially true because these were engagements around which so many of the papers in the non-keynote panels did indeed structure themselves. Similarly necessary, were this event to happen again, would be an overt and intensive interrogation of social scientism, which could itself help articulate the minute complications of the effects of different forms of empiricism with the range of conceptual and textual "data" -- including different sorts of appeals to experience -- that many of the non-keynote panels left swirling in their wake. (Granted Angela McRobbie's detailed engagement with a recent, particular U.K. policy document in the opening movement of her keynote, which was about the new employment order, pointed the way toward these points of absence. But, as became particularly clear from the analysis to which McRobbie never quite made it -- of the interesting series of images with which she ended her talk -- the connection of discursive context to *form* was barely even her last order of business for the day.)

It was the more recent recipients of Ph.D.s at the conference, and the grad students, who sometimes came closest to filling these gaps, or at least to explicitly acknowledging and departing from the above problems. Perhaps that is not surprising either, but it makes me wonder why, convention be damned, we do not get one or two "junior" scholars to "keynote" at such events too. In particular, it seemed to me that the aims of a crowd of terrifically bright and inventive, not to mention intellectually daring, cultural studies grad students and recent Ph.D.s from the University of Leeds (many affiliated with the journal *Parallax*) were right there. For instance, Paul Bowman, a recent Leeds Ph.D. who is now teaching in Cultural and Historical Studies at Bath Spa, presented the sort of terrifically observant, bristling, and pointed commentary on the practice of cultural studies and current notions of "theory" that -- precisely due to the ways in which such a talk is "unpolished" and perhaps less "faithful" -- in some ways propels us much more economically toward the space "between" politics and ethics than did even the most of valuable and enjoyable of the keynotes. (A different piece of Bowman's writing can be found in the *Strategies* issue.)

But don't get me wrong. This conference was well worth the trip. I found it extremely useful and enjoyable. And, most importantly, I really hope this event will occur again in the next few years, in one form or another. I also hope that some of the above, requisite series of what could be understood as "complaints"-- culled from a resolutely unscientific, and equally

unrepresentative, sampling of attendees, as well as from my own impressions -- will be taken into account if and when it, or any similar event, does.