

Defying the Norm: Modern Representation of the Male Body

Men's Bodies, 2001

A report by Tom Wilkinson, University of Nottingham, UK

From March 29th to March 31st, 2001, the Department of French at the University of Nottingham held the "Men's Bodies" conference; a conference on the representation of the male body in art, photography, advertising, film, television, pop videos and other visual forms. Organised by Michael Worton (University College London) and Judith Still and Keith Fairless (University of Nottingham), the conference spanned three days of lectures and presentations, together with an exhibition of the photography of male bodies in the Djanogly Art Gallery at the University of Nottingham Arts Centre. The conference presented a broad variety of papers that were related to the central theme of the conference; the classical representation of the male body and how this representation has changed in contemporary times through the mediums of art, photography, and the Internet.

Opening the conference was Edward Lucie-Smith, photographer and art critic, who eloquently and somewhat humorously discussed the relations between the classical interpretation of male nude photography and modern, avant-garde, "kitsch" representations of the past few decades, highlighting the shock value of such images. Drawing upon the work of "Bruce of Los Angeles", amongst others, Lucie-Smith clearly identified how more modern approaches to male nude art relate to the classical, Herculean and heroic forms, while showing how gay cultural art has revealed a "kitsch" and therefore ironic side to the classical form.

Explaining the crossover between art, photography, and medical anatomy of the male body, Anthea Callen (University of Nottingham) took a similar approach in arguing that representations of the male body affected our perceptions of it. Showing a number of slides of the anatomy as seen in early medical journals, Callen illustrated interconnections between medical and the representations of the male body. Photographic techniques allowed the male body to be displayed in various active poses, potentially glamorising it, while remaining within the bounds of medical conformity, serving as academic references. Medical students were taught the new science of anthropology, learning the subtle differences between anatomies of the races, which can be seen as an issue of class nowadays. Callen identified the nature of such medical imagery as allowing the male nude to emerge as an artistic form through the representation of the body in such active and postured ways. The medical precedent allowed this due to the nature of the composition of the photographs; against plain backgrounds, often with measuring grids or sticks to reinforce the legitimacy of such an approach.

Both Lucie-Smith's and Anthea Callen's papers gave useful and informative approaches to the central theme of the conference (reconstructing ideas of the male body), expanding upon

familiar conceptions of the representation of the male body, setting the tone of the conference through the presentation of the classical male body and the origins and reasons behind such representation.

The art exhibition allowed people to see the kinds of work that were being discussed at the conference, thus enabling contemporary work to be closely related to the topics and themes of the conference. This relation to modern work was shown in a collaborative paper fusing the work of artist and academic. Michael Pinfold (Cheltenham and Gloucester College of Higher Education) used the modern photography of Trudie Ballantyne as a backdrop to his essay on the cultural conditioning of society's reactions to the male nude. Pinfold's essay highlighted the ways in which we are conditioned to accept the presentation of the male body in terms of cultural dogma. Ballantyne's presentation then showed the male body (and therefore masculinity) as vulnerable in terms of a positive projection of the modern male image. The photographs, some of which were at the exhibition, showed the freedom of the male image from classical forms.

Introducing a more psychoanalytic approach to what the "ideal" male body means to men through the way in which we see our own bodies and ourselves was photographer Tom Southern. He argued, through his own work, that men are disempowered by the role models we see on paper or on screen, thus creating psychological discrepancies. Southern gave a more heartfelt, personal presentation, drawing on his own experiences and interests within the artistic area of male nude photography and his work in counselling.

Another photographer, Ajamu X, presented his work in conversation with Anita Naoko Pilgrim (Goldsmith's College). He talked about how he got into photography, his background and his education, as well as the influences which led him to photograph the nude male. He showed the need to escape the ideal and classical stereotypes of the black male body (as hard-edged masculinity), instead presenting a more playful version of such classical forms, mixing white with black, male with female and straight with gay. He argued that this playfulness is absent in contemporary black male photography and that through race politics it is geared around the representation of suffering (slavery).

In an illuminating and interesting presentation, the "playful" concept of the work of Ajamu X was taken one step further by Melody Davis (The City University of New York) who looked at the photography of George Dureau. Davis showed that Dureau's work consists of somewhat disturbing, yet captivating, images of handicapped or disabled male bodies. She argued that while these images may appear shocking at first, on second look they contain a great deal of humour and irony. In presenting the handicapped male body in such a way, Davis claimed that Dureau replaces the distress we feel when looking at such images with humour. This allows us to do away with the derogatory joking that serves as protection from such imagery, and helps to break down the taboos attached to it.

In relation to the exhibition, the artists who presented their work at the conference provided a very useful and important insight into how their work is produced, as well as the thinking and methods behind it. The exhibition successfully balanced out the more critical essays with a more artistic view while showing strong links between the two approaches.

Among the broad range of papers being presented were ones that centred on the representation of the male body and masculinity in cinema. Dottie Broaddus (Arizona State University West) presented the political and cultural woes of the black male body as seen in

the film *Sweet Sweetback's Baad Asssss Song* (Melvin Van Peebles, 1971). Broaddus explained that in the Hollywood Blaxploitation films of the 1970s there was a shifting structure of white supremacy, the black male body in this case becoming the site for political struggle. The film shows how white supremacy has the need to control the black male body as if it were an animal force, while at the same time, Sweetback uses his "blackness" as a weapon.

Complementing Broaddus' presentation, and using the similar theme of the black male body in cinema, was Chi-Yun Shin (University of Exeter) and her paper on the film *Looking for Langston* (Isaac Julien, 1998). Setting out some detail, Shin explained how the black male body is expected to behave in a certain way according to Western views. Shin explained how the film explores homosexuality in race, and offers an alternative to the stereotypical idea of the black male body as containing almost bestial sexual prowess, instead attempting a relocation of it into a body capable of intimacy and eroticism.

In looking at the French film, *L'Homme Blessé* (Patrice Chereau, 1983), Alison Smith (University of Liverpool) discussed the theme of physical male desire. She discussed how the spectator is drawn into the tension between the central male characters in the film. All of the papers that discussed specific films succeeded in concentrating on the more psychological issues of masculinity and added depth to the conference.

The presentation of the male body in women's magazines was the theme of Clarissa Smith's paper which took a female point of view in assessing the nature of *For Women* magazine. The representation of the male nude in terms of female audience prompted Smith to ask questions about the nature of the female "gaze" and how women in modern society are not typically the bearer of the "look". In trying to theorise female audiences' response to male nude images, Smith argued that more feminine reactions to such images were present, resulting in the creation of male imagery designed to appeal to the female audience (i.e. in showing the display of emotions, other than sexual, as well as the perfection of the body).

Ground already covered in the conference was expanded upon by Martin Patrick (Buckinghamshire Chilterns University College), who showed the representation of the black male body on the Internet. Arguing that the black male body has a tribal and bestial power, he showed how it had changed to a more heroic form, while commenting that the black male body has not always been the object of heroism.

In the three short days of the conference we saw a variety of presentations that fully displayed the main points of contemporary thought on the male body. The main thrust of the conference was the necessary liberation of the male body from the classical, bodybuilding, heroic poses of early art and photography. The conference served as an excellent collaboration of academic and artistic work in the field and allowed those who attended to see how the two activities can meet and complement each other.

Metz and Modems

Society for Cinema Studies Conference 2001

A report by Matt Hills, Cardiff University, UK

Reviewing an academic conference the size and scope of an SCS event is rather like reviewing a book when you have only read the introduction, the conclusion, and a handful of chapters in between. On the whole, it is a pretty bad idea, and you run the risk of saying something truly and stupendously ill-informed. So, with that problem firmly in mind, I would better start with a confession; my own research and fan interests in cult TV, horror, science fiction and trash film led me, on the whole, to steer a rather idiosyncratic path through the many panels on offer at SCS 2001. Anyone interested in the full (and vast) range of topics covered would do better to consult a copy of the conference program rather than this inevitably sketchy set of reflections.

Having offered the obligatory disclaimer, certain themes and preoccupations *did*, after all, become apparent across the conference as a whole. A good number of panels dealt with emerging relationships between cinema and new media, such as "Cinema and the Digital Age" on the conference's opening day. There were also workshops on "The Industry in the Classroom" (dealing with teaching strategies in a multimedia environment) and "Paper or Electronic" publishing, as well as the presentation of a digital, annotated version of *Casablanca*. While in Washington D.C. I attended a meeting of the journal *New Media and Society*, where somebody remarked on the considerable presence of work on new media at SCS this year. Not having attended an SCS conference before, I too was pleasantly surprised to find that this Society for Cinema Studies gathering was full of works on new media.

But the conference was not all high-tech, shiny, start-up dot theory: "new" media commingled with old favourites such as authorship and production in the panels "Author(ity), Copyright and Digital Culture", and "From Metz to Modems". New media was also analysed culturally and politically in terms of long-established film studies concerns with media literacy and access. Panels such as "Media Literacy... By Any Means Necessary" and "How Wide is the Digital Divide?" promised to tackle these questions. Cinema may still be the leading object of study that holds the SCS together, but it is certainly not a prescriptive or singular focal point, as this year's emphasis on "digital culture" demonstrated.

The papers that I attended were, rather like an analogue of Washington D.C. itself, a disparate mix of the exaggeratedly monumental and the dangerously shabby. Do not expect me to name names at this point. Suffice it to say that all well-known conference nightmare scenarios were present and correct, including speakers over-running (alright, I probably did that too), drastically under-running, cutting as they went, and/or speaking far faster than the human brain can process information. My own personal favourite was a speaker who introduced a list of directors whose work would be covered in the paper to follow, only to conclude many, many, many minutes later that there just was not time to discuss the last director on the list. So, no Spielberg then.

Some panels were strictly standing room only, particularly one on "The New Action Heroine" that included some excellent work from Allison McCracken on representations of masculinity in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. We did not get to see the clip that everyone was waiting for, but the paper was more than entertaining and thought-provoking enough without it. And just in case anyone gets the mistaken impression that I spent four days thinking about *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, perhaps I would better mention Adrienne McLean's paper on *The X-Files* and representations of Scully/Gillian Anderson. McLean argued persuasively, and humorously, that Anderson has become increasingly sexualised and objectified in *The X-Files*, with her "movie star" persona migrating back into the TV text from its movie franchise reinvention.

Not every panel was as well attended as "The New Action Heroine", or the session chaired by McLean, "Fashioning the Performing Body". Some panels offered a forlorn vista of empty chairs, although scheduling sessions to run between 8:30am and 7pm probably did not help, and I felt particularly sorry for some speakers who had travelled many miles at considerable expense only to find that their potential audience was still asleep upstairs in the Marriott Metro Center hotel. I also felt sorry for the fellow who, on the first day of the conference, sat next to me in the audience for one session and then promptly dozed off. Jet lag, I assumed. After all, the panel was not *that* bad.

However, once the travel tiredness wore off, and body clocks adjusted to the time zone, the "participatory culture" of academia found its feet and its questioning intelligence. A number of panels included excellent question and answer sessions, especially those where all the panellists and much of the audience were obviously united in a very specific research interest. Of course, some panels included rogue speakers whose topic did not quite fit in with anything around them, but watching out for the "rogues"-- who were sometimes apologetic, sometimes baffled and sometimes belligerent -- only added spice to the proceedings.

One panel dealing with "Mexploitation Cinema" was especially rewarding, since its papers fitted together extremely well. There were certainly no rogue speakers here. I particularly enjoyed Andrew Syder's contribution on psychotronic reading protocols, read in his absence by the chair, Dolores Tierney. This entire panel had a complementary coherence that allowed you to re-think one paper through those that followed it, and was exemplary in my opinion (and no, I do not know any of the speakers).

Following on rapidly from my "Mexploitation" experience, I happened across a workshop covering "explorations and exploitations" of screen violence. With a line-up that included Christopher Sharrett and Stephen Prince I felt sure that discussion and argument here would be intense and interesting. When the time for debate eventually arrived, after a necessarily brief but excellent contribution from Prince, a number of audience members weighed in with their thoughts. Although on this rare occasion I kept quiet, I could not help but feel that many of the positions staked out were long rehearsed and comfortably replayed. Feelings may have run high in a few cases, but the discussion did not stretch far outside versions of academic "common sense". Sharrett was usefully quizzed on the binary opposition of "right-wing mythologised" violence versus "left-ish visceral" violence that he had proposed, but the session could have done with more detailed and critical questions of this ilk.

Boasting a wide ranging program that I have spectacularly failed to capture here, as well as a series of special events and screenings, SCS 2001 felt less like a half-read academic book and more like a set of hypertext links calling for careful navigation. Traversing the conference's

many points of branching was one of its bittersweet pleasures, no doubt leaving each participant with a sense of intellectual roads not taken. But then there is always next year's SCS conference to remedy that...