

Motorbikes, Penis Pics and the Grateful Dead: Film Studies Meets Pop Culture in Albuquerque

The 23rd Annual Conference of the Southwest/Texas Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association. February 13-17, 2002, Albuquerque, New Mexico

A report by Sarah H. S. Graham, University of Leeds, England

Rarely at an academic conference can the subject areas of participants be deduced from their clothes, but at the Popular Culture Association meeting in Albuquerque, New Mexico, certain specialisms were evident: those ferocious-looking guys at the bar, in leather and heavy boots, must be here for the "Motorcycling Culture" panels, and the gang in tie-dye are surely contributing to one of the ten panels on the Grateful Dead. Niche markets, perhaps, but in a conference of almost 500 panels there was still plenty of space for Film Studies and many other subjects, including The Beats, Harry Potter, Gender Studies, Horror, Humour, War, Autobiography, Animal Rights, Native Americans, Creative Writing and Physique Culture, to list a few. Even under the Film Studies banner, panels were subdivided into Film, Film Adaptation (my own area), Film & History, Hitchcock, Silent Film, Shakespeare on Film and others, diversifying into television and radio.

Of course, the conference suffered from all the usual, apparently unavoidable aspects of conferences, especially large ones: presenters who do not appear, presenters who run wildly over time while the panel chairs cough and shift in their seats, presenters who offer extracts from larger works rather than finished papers, audiences of rowdy bikers. Well, maybe that last was specific to this conference. The other common feature of large conferences was especially noticeable here was the number of simultaneous panels. Even with ninety minute sessions scheduled from 8am to 9.30pm, there were often ten sessions running at once, with the result that the available audience was spread very thin indeed, especially at less popular times of day. Pity the poor souls presenting at 8am, competing with comfortable beds and uncomfortable hangovers; pity too those whose evening slots were empty in favour of bars, restaurants and -- because we're in New Mexico -- casinos.

My own experience was that an attentive audience of subject specialists was ultimately more valuable than a full room of people who could only tell you that your paper was "fun" or "interesting", however gratifying that may be. More than one fellow participant told me that this kind of affirmation was pleasing but not helpful to his/her research, while I consider myself lucky to have had such constructive and knowledgeable feedback from a small (to be frank, tiny) audience of people well-acquainted with the issues surrounding my paper. This, by the way, was on the novel to film adaptation of *What's Eating Gilbert Grape* as a negotiation of cultural anxieties about adolescence. Equally, the two presenters with whom I shared my panel, Andrew Tash of Wichita State and Trisha Stubblefield of Cottey College, who offered papers on *The Cider House Rules* and *Bright Lights, Big City* respectively, were

responsive to the work of the whole panel and were very willing to discuss their own work in detail. Tash's work on the effect of fairy-tale tropes in Lasse Hallström's adaptation of Irving offered a revealing route into an acclaimed but rather odd film; Stubblefield's study made thought-provoking connections between McInerney's work and fin-de-siècle novels of manners, as well as noting significant filmic devices in the adaptation.

What both of these papers had, that several others lacked, was an analysis that moved beyond observation to reasoning and conclusions. Naming no names, of course, there was a certain style of presentation that I witnessed a little too often in the twenty-nine papers that I heard: details observed as an end in itself. In the film studies panels, this would manifest itself as an engaging presentation of film clips with accompanying commentary that was -- at worst -- somewhat less analytical than a decent post-film pub conversation. Rather than focus on the failures, or what I prefer to think of as the papers of unrealised potential, I will restrict my report to the papers that worked, for me at least. Kelly Kessler of the University of Texas offered "Politics of the Sit-Com Formula: The Sapphic Second Banana", analysing those popular American series that have second-string lesbian characters. Kessler pointed out that the device of presenting lesbian couples that are often more stable than the lead heterosexual characters (see: *Friends*, *Mad About You*) is at once an affirming contradiction of the cliché of the promiscuous, predatory gay, but also an attempt to desexualise and isolate the lesbian character, with her long-term partner and heterosexual social circle. Kessler asserted that the same syndrome was evident in *Will and Grace*, since the "lead gay" was so straight-acting that he needed a gay best friend whose extreme representation of the camp/catty gay allowed a potentially alienated "straight" audience a safety valve of permissible derision.

Susan Blassingame of Lubbock Christian University found a route into cultural responses to war by focusing on films that explore the subject from the perspective of non-combatants, arguing that *Mrs Miniver*, *Coming Home*, and *Since You Went Away* explore the "meaning" of war through their sometimes problematic representations of women, who are both a prime motivator of male participation in war, and deeply affected by their exclusion from war as a "man's world". Kiran Katira of the University of New Mexico argued that "*Fight Club* is a White Club", reading the film as a representation of racial exclusivity that celebrates the affluent white male's unfocused propensity for violence, arguing that the unnamed "other" evoked by the increasing destructiveness of the film's protagonists must be those excluded from the club of white masculinity by dint of gender or race. Katira's paper had the effect of making an already disturbing and compelling film rather more so, and provoked re-viewing, which must be one of the best results of any paper.

Gender Studies sessions offered plenty on the subject of film: I particularly enjoyed Lidija Milic, of State University of New York, on *The Matrix* ("Mothers, Priestesses, Lovers and Black Leather"), who argued very convincingly that the female lead in the film is presented first as strong, dangerous and almost androgynous but mutates as the film progresses into a cardigan-wearing "girl" content to mop Keanu Reeves' brow as he saves the world. Especially impressive in Milic's presentation was her use of edited-together clips from the film, which played silently as she read her paper and was timed to illustrate everything she discussed as she said it. I shudder to think how much effort it must have taken to put that together, but it made for smooth, convincing package. Also interesting from a film studies perspective was Judith Lancioni, of Rowan University, who argued that the male figures in *The Full Monty* were marginalized and thus emasculated for various reasons (unemployed, middle-aged, overweight, gay, black) and so had both more and less to lose from their strip show. The strikingly named Carole Carroll (she married a Mr Carroll, you see) of Lubbock Christian

University offered part of an engaging work in progress on Lara Croft's gender ambiguities in *Tomb Raider* ("All the Men and All the Women, Too"), noting with particular relish Lara's persistent demolition of large, phallic columns, often used to crush (male, naturally) opponents.

In the Film Adaptation panels, Suzanne Ferriss of Nova Southeastern University offered a lively paper on "Cinematic and Narrative Doubleness in *Bridget Jones's Diary*", arguing that a number of texts intersect in the film, including Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, the BBC's version of that text, Helen Fielding's novel (which appears in subtitles and acts as written interior monologue alongside a voice-over equivalent) and the varied baggage brought to the film by Renee Zellweger, Colin Firth and Hugh Grant. For some reason, this particular paper attracted and provoked a great many bikers, one of whom argued that the economic imperative to marriage, so key to Austen's text, was absent from the film. As the lone Brit, I responded that the accent Zellweger affects in the film skews our understanding of this, since her voice presents her as far more "posh" than the men she aspires to, whereas in fact Firth plays a top barrister and Grant a publisher, both very much higher up the social scale than Bridget's wobbly PR assistant. It was agreed that, to an American ear, this mismatch of voice to class is not so evident, and so the issue of social status is flattened.

Susan J. Wolfe and Roberta Rude, both of the University of South Dakota, offered a joint paper that explored the play, film and musical film of *Pygmalion/My Fair Lady*, with many clips offered for comparison, some interesting analysis of the shifting representation of both upper and working class characters and a certain amount of breathless admiration for the luminous beauty of Audrey Hepburn. More than one audience member claimed a reluctance to discuss the paper's conclusions on the grounds that this might spoil a favourite film. I also heard an enthusiastic eulogy for Pauline Kael, which had the effect of making me want to read more of her work; a paper on the role of racial "others" in science fiction, which was a little confusing in presentation but was obviously the product of high-level analysis and full of potential; a paper on the class implications of the documentary *Hands on a Hardbody*, about a competition in which the person who could keep their hand on a pick-up truck the longest won the truck. The presenter of this last paper, Mark Gallagher of Oklahoma State University, made the interesting point that the recent spate of documentaries on "social oddities" tend not to be considered political pieces, but this film manages to question commodification whilst celebrating a bizarre but genuinely demanding trial which brought together contestants marked by class -- but not race or gender -- exclusivity.

And that, aside from a variety of other papers unlikely to be of relevance to Film Studies, was my experience of the Pop Culture conference in Albuquerque this year. The conference's motto was "If it isn't popular, it isn't culture" and, while I frankly doubt this statement's validity, its spirit does communicate much about this unusually inclusive and unpretentious conference. If the downside of this characteristic is some few papers whose level of analysis fails to convince -- for example, one panellist claimed that we enjoy performances by Denzel Washington so much that we do not notice that he is black -- that may be a small price to pay for a wide-ranging and welcoming conference. Some very large can be formidable and isolating experiences and the PCA makes every effort to counteract that, aiming for an off-beat experience in an off-the-beaten-track location. As for the penis pics, well, that was running against the last panel I attended, so sadly I missed the presentation by Emily Toth of Louisiana State University entitled "Wankers in the Night: Collecting Penis Pics on the Net". However, I could hear the laughter quite clearly from where I was sitting.

To Theorise Beyond Theory

"WHAT'S LEFT OF THEORY?": The Cultural Studies Association of Australia Conference at the University of Tasmania

A report by C. Jason Lee, University of Central Lancashire, UK

Between December the 8th and 10th 2001 an eclectic group of scholars from film studies to biblical studies, from an array of institutions from across the globe, plus non-affiliated rebels, convened at The University of Tasmania, situated in an enviable position high above Hobart for "What's Left of Theory?" the tenth conference of the Cultural Studies Association of Australia.

The co-ordinator Ian Buchanan kicked off by questioning theory's current status and its political implications, suggesting the core question if theory is not philosophy then what is it? I wondered whether theory was now an ethereal beast that people felt needed taming or part of the infinite processes of thought that could free people from illusion, both being extremes. Next Alan McKee, president of the association, brought us down to earth quoting *The Secret Life of Us* character Tony who is looking for the perfect man: theories of men are about gossip, communication and community. Was the message that we could and should be at one after all and theory maybe part of this?

The first plenary session by Horst Ruthrof analysed the history of theory and mentioned Giles Deleuze's work on cinema plus the importance of theory being auto-critical, as Jacques Derrida points out, not just self-perpetuating. For Ruthrof it should be post-ontotheological, theory being a process of mediation, which equated with McKee's comments on community. Panel sessions on politics, media and architecture then followed concurrently with a screening of Jennifer Rutherford's film *Ordinary People* (2001). This documentary, while dealing with Australian politics, is just as much relevant for Europe as Rutherford's film follows One Nation Party candidate Colene Hughes through two years on two election campaigns in Ipswich, Queensland.

With Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari the absent yet ever present spectres of the show, given the number of references to them, it was refreshing to hear Maria Angel from the University of Western Sydney maintain these theorists were not particularly useful when analysing film. Her colleague Virginia Nightingale followed by presenting early research on the "children and media harm" project. Children had reported heightened awareness of the possibility of non-human forces through watching horror movies, internet gore galleries and computer games, but the research was in its early days and one could argue quite naïve in purpose. Was it to find a justification to censor cultural forms or to merely analyse audiences' verbal responses to film in uncontrolled settings? Whatever the reason, it was taking film seriously as an art form that constructs and is constructed by reality and the imagination.

Forty papers followed on day one, ranging from reading as remembering to an analysis of Lacan's seminars XX to XXV, where the audience is simultaneously student, analyst and

analysand, but here I shall briefly mention papers on film. One paper that stood out was William Martin's "Feedback in 2001: Towards a Cybernetic Theory of Reading". Martin's abstract maintained that "a cybernetic approach to reading a film assures that a narrative has been generated in advance by the film's production, and reveals the Nietzschean mode in which the auteur's gaze Eternally Returns to haunt the film". If one wanted an overriding theme to the conference, haunting might have been one. Interestingly this paper and that by Laleen Jayamanne of the University of Sydney on *Eye's Wide Shut* (1999) encouraged me to reassess Stanley Kubrick, particularly his posthumous movie. As always with Kubrick's films there is an unsettling uniqueness, *Eyes Wide Shut*, with its emphasis on the tension between the abstract and natural sets, the colour subverting the naturalism and managing to disturb. Bergson's theory of time as virtual multiplicity (ideas and duration where the present unravels), time as series (something new) and times as interval (editing techniques that violate US montage), so it was pointed out, were all utilised by Kubrick, haunting film production in this and in the more recent *AI* (2001).

Other papers on Jack Smith as cultural theorist and on the limits of Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject in approaching body-horror films *Fight Club* (1999) and *Crash* (1997) were also noteworthy, particularly the way the latter integrated theory with a close reading of these two important films.

Day two began with a chirpy talk on teaching theory by a zealot for the cause followed by panel sessions on theory and experimental music, queer space and citizenship, and philosophy and performance that went over the old chestnut concerning philosophy as representation in representation, all of which were followed by a number of interesting papers. Finally, on the third day Fredric Jameson spoke for an hour and a half on the subject of theory's apotheosis and suspected demise, followed by sessions on identity and politics of authenticity, reconfiguring the internet, academic journals, and Deleuze and film theory.

After a tour de force through intellectual history from the enlightenment, Jameson stressed how theory had supplanted philosophy, the latter having too much belief in itself, and he probed the battle between the particular and the individual, the problem of existence verses essence. His mention of Althusser was pertinent, all words being ideology and ideology being eternal (unlike theory?) and he praised Derrida's negative dialects of truth without subject. For Jameson, theory is a hybrid linked to aesthetics and linguistics, and is situated between judgement and analysis, the real ontology being an abandonment of universals and a theory of scepticism.

In the session on Deleuze, John Lechte, with reference to Bergson, passionately asserted that cinema instigated a new way of thinking which was non-analytical and a process, time becoming synthetic and revelatory. Richard Rushton pointed out Deleuze's belief that cinema produces reality and thus being part of reality does not distort reality and is non-ideological, Deleuze in my mind being involved in wishful thinking. In this process thought is taken outside the self and becomes mystical. Behind all this I could see a slipping into a form of mystico-analysis, rather than schizo- or psychoanalysis, close to Levinas and his thoughts on the Other, the Text or God, creating the self, which goes beyond rationalism, the need for transcendence being so overt. Perhaps this is a steppingstone into theory in the twenty first century, but also a step backwards.

Lawrence Simmons in his paper pointed out the link between ontology and the French for haunting, illustrating that theory always begins by coming back, like the spectre. Baudrillard's

analysis was still relevant and generally what was being said was that what was left of theory was what it set out to negate by rationalism. Perhaps we were all stuck in Kubrick's invisible feedback loop, an entertaining place to be, not the exciting point of the apocalypse, more a post-purgatorial pleasure zone, the buzzword in Australia being "fun". Within this I sensed a movement to the right. To what extent this equated with events in the so-called "real" world I was uncertain, but I concluded that theory must enlighten as well as entertain and if not there really should be nothing left of theory, if by theory we mean a form of investigation indistinguishable from the ideologies of production and consumption.

Visualizing Rhetoric and Rhetoricizing the Visual

Visual Rhetoric Conference, 2001, Indiana University-Bloomington

A report by Courtney Bailey, Indiana University-Bloomington, U.S.A.

What might happen when the terms "visual" and "rhetoric" collide? Given the predominantly verbal emphasis of the rhetorical tradition, how might bringing it together with visuality challenge both the ways that we think about rhetoric and the ways that we think about visuality? And how might such a collision help us better understand sociocultural issues such as collective memory, identity politics, community formation, democratic practices, and ideological struggles? These were some of the central questions that animated the Visual Rhetoric Conference, held from September 6-8, 2001 at Indiana University-Bloomington. Co-sponsored by the Department of Communication and Culture at IU-Bloomington, by the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Iowa, and by the National Communication Association, the conference featured two keynote speeches, three plenary addresses, several panels of competitive paper presentations, and a series of seminars designed to generate discussion around particular topics and themes.

Overall, the conference did not provide any one solid or decisive answer to the above questions, nor did it culminate in a single hard-and-fast definition of "visual rhetoric". Rather, multiple possibilities and speculations were offered about what it might mean to bring rhetoric and visual culture to bear on one another. The word "might" is significant here, as the first keynote address of the conference, given by Barbie Zelizer of the University of Pennsylvania, pointed out. Entitled "The 'As If' of Visual Rhetoric," Zelizer's speech provided one possible way to think about the contribution that rhetoric might make to a study of the visual, specifically to the study of still photographs taken for journalistic purposes. Using several photos of people about to die as material examples, Zelizer argued that rhetoric can draw our attention to the subjunctive voice of the image, to the hypothetical "might" or "could" rather than to the indicative "is." Rather than seeing the photo as evidence of what is, the subjunctive voice posits the picture as a screen for cultural beliefs about larger issues such as death. It allows us to imagine a wide range of possible actions and outcomes of the event "captured" in the photo. Zelizer also noted that acknowledging the subjunctive voice of photographs would subvert journalists' own understanding of the role of photos.

The conference audience of mostly rhetoricians and cultural studies scholars seemed intrigued by Zelizer's argument, asking whether the subjunctive is a convention for how we deal with images of death in particular and how the "as if" might construct us as moral spectators, empowering us to ask questions that the indicative would foreclose. Zelizer's address also opens up other potentially fruitful lines of inquiry, such as how the subjunctive voice relates to other kinds of images besides still photographs and in other contexts besides photojournalism.

It is worth noting that Zelizer's articulation of the subjunctive/indicative voice of images draws on a linguistic metaphor, since the imbrication of the visual, verbal, and rhetorical was a central theme during the conference. Some questioned how the logocentrism of the rhetorical tradition problematizes any rhetorical study of the visual, while others wondered whether there is something about the visual that cannot be completely captured by rhetorical, verbal, or discursive analysis. Several speakers brought up Roland Barthes's famous characterization of the image as a "message without a code," one that is distinct from and not entirely assimilable to verbal language. In his plenary address, Hanno Hardt of the University of Iowa, offered one way to navigate this tension between verbal language and visuality, as he explored how photography has been constructed in various works of short fiction.

W.J.T. Mitchell of the University of Chicago also touched on this issue in the second keynote speech of the conference, entitled "Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture". Mitchell's address presented ten myths or fallacies about visual culture that have become commonplace and then offered several counter-statements to rebut those fallacies. On the one hand, Mitchell argued against attempts to purify visual media, as if one could separate out the visual from other senses such as hearing and touch. He instead advised us to think of all media as mixed and varied combinations of the visual, auditory, tactile, and so on. At the same time, he did suggest that the conventional objects of study for both rhetoric and visual culture, namely the various artifacts of media, are not enough. Urging us to think of the visual construction of the social (and not just the social construction of vision), Mitchell suggested that we turn our attention to vernacular visuality, to those everyday practices that fly below the radar of most scholarly analyses in rhetoric, aesthetics, art history, and other fields interested in visual culture. He gave us the example of an exercise called "showing seeing" that he does with his students, in which he asks students to imagine that they are part of a society with no concept of visual culture or of visuality itself. They are then charged with explaining particular practices of seeing, whether it be the role of facial expressions in interpersonal interactions or the process of looking in a mirror. The point of this exercise is to show what has been overlooked, much as vernacular visuality has been overlooked through an excessive focus on artifacts. Audience members complicated this notion by asking whether it may inadvertently return us to an understanding of visuality as a natural process whereby everyone sees the same, by pointing out that the boundaries of the vernacular are always shifting, and by arguing that we need to theorize the relationship between artifacts and vernacular practices.

Mitchell also criticized ideological analyses of visual culture that presume to demystify dangerous images and to overturn "scopic regimes" of domination and oppression. Not only are such iconoclastic approaches ineffective, according to Mitchell, but they also fail to consider that images can have their own agendas not reducible to domination. Many of the plenary sessions, competitive paper panels, and seminars did in fact focus on ideological critique. However, it is not clear that these presentations theorized visual culture as necessarily or exclusively the domain of domination, but rather as *contingently* so, in specific historical instances.

These presentations tended to feature work that would be familiar to cultural studies scholars, insofar as they centered on how images address different audiences, how they get recontextualized and reconstituted by audiences, how they organize identities around gender, race, class, sexuality, citizenship, etc., and what their implications are for power relationships. For instance, the competitive paper panels that I attended included work on the connections between suburban housing and heteronormativity, on the "white gaze" of 19th

century landscape photographs of the Western frontier, and on the way that stock photographs create an exclusionary norm at the site of the banal and ordinary.

In a similar vein, Ramona Liera Scwichtenberg of Wichita State University gave a plenary address on fashion advertising in *Latina* magazine. Scwichtenberg argued that, unlike more mainstream fashion magazines that engage in non-threatening appropriations of otherness, *Latina* attempts to ground its images of Latina women in particular histories and locations. Stephen Mailloux of the University of California-Irvine, meanwhile, devoted his plenary speech to a reception study of Frederick Douglas's oratorical performances, tracing the visual and verbal ways that rhetoric travels across times and communities.

The seminars investigated a wide range of topics: the links between landscape photography and identity; the role of iconic photographs in constructing notions of citizenship and in managing contradictions of American public culture; witnessing as a specific way to deal with cultural trauma and memory; the cultural politics of museums and exhibitions; the question of authenticity in Native American performance; and the way that images manage political difficulties and position their viewers within certain identities. I myself participated in a seminar entitled "Visualizing Whiteness: Between the Global and the Local". Much of our discussion revolved around the narrative and visual strategies through which whiteness is continually re-centered and privileged, even as it is increasingly felt (at least in some quarters) to be "in crisis".

Work that emphasizes such questions of ideology, power, and identity, as well as the more explicit attempts to theorize the relationship between visibility and rhetoric most evident in the keynotes, were both valuable aspects of the conference. But I do have one caveat: it seems to me that the conference's preoccupation with delineating the boundaries of rhetoric, the verbal, and the visual, although potentially helpful, risks becoming reified and fetishized, as does the feeling that visual rhetoric must offer something completely new/different or else be an act of futility. Such disciplinary anxieties are understandable, and even useful, except when they begin to eclipse more significant questions of how the rubric of visual rhetoric might help us with both our research and our pedagogy, as we strive to become better scholars and better teachers.