

# Fangs for the Memories

"Blood, Text and Fears -- Reading Around *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*" Conference held at the University of East Anglia, UK, 19-20 October 2002

## A report by Beverley Jansen, University of Nottingham, UK

An eclectic group of scholars and interested individuals gathered in the Elizabeth Fry Building at UEA, to witness the deconstructing of the phenomenon that is *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and its spin-off *Angel*. This event was the first International Interdisciplinary Conference centred around the programme and was organised jointly by the School of English and American Studies (British Centre for Literary Translation and Department of Film and Television Studies) and the School of Language, Linguistics and Translation Studies at University of East Anglia. There was a slightly disquieting sense that this conference was not being treated as a serious undertaking by some. It could have been the *Buffy the Backside Slayer* exfoliating soap in the welcome pack, the fact that Dean Higson commenced his welcome address wearing fangs or that it was suggested that the delegates were referred to as "Buffy Buffs" or "mixed blood". However, to quote one of Dean Higson's puns, let us proceed to "the heart of the matter".

The organisers' call for papers, initiated a response of one hundred and twenty abstracts from which fifty-seven were selected from sixty speakers. The delegates numbered one hundred and sixty and flew in from the United States, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and of course the U.K. The speakers were certainly interdisciplinary ranging in specialties from Theology, Linguistics, Film and Sociology to Law and Religious Studies. The opening plenary speaker was Rhonda Wilcox, Professor of English at Gordon College, Georgia and joint editor of *Fighting the Forces* and *Slayage*, the online international journal of Buffy studies, with David Lavery. Her opening plenary paper, "Pain as Bright as Steel: The Monomyth and Light as Pain in *BtVS*", was an inspirational start to the proceedings. This paper was a wonderful melding of popular culture and serious academic dissection. Her use of *BtVS* as an illustration of Joseph Campbell's concept of the "monomyth", from *The Hero with a 1000 Faces* (Campbell 1968), was illuminating but it was her understanding of pain as represented by light and dark combined with the character of Buffy's messianic connection which set a high standard for subsequent papers.

The conference was organised into groups of three parallel sessions. It would be impossible to comprehensively cover such a full conference programme in one report so I shall give a flavour of the outstanding papers presented in the sessions I attended. The first session of Saturday morning was entitled "The Un-Dead Auteur". I was not convinced by John W. Briggs's paper, which compared the 1996 unaired *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* pilot with the so called "bad quartos" of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. However the next speaker, Jonathan Gray from Goldsmiths College, presented a spirited argument for resurrecting the author in the guise of television authors, such as Joss Whedon. His argument happily sits with those who have rejected Roland Barthes's pronouncement of the author's death in 1977. Barthes believed that "To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on the text, to furnish it with a final signified, to

close the writing." (Barthes 1977: 147). Gray argues that television texts are open and reader centred texts. Television authors such as Joss Whedon are reader sensitive responding directly to the viewer's reactions to the text of the programme and seeing the secondary role of the viewer as presenting reader feedback. This new breed of television author accepts partial ownership of their work by the fans and does not desire freedom from this interdependence. This session ended with a paper given by David Lavery from Middle Tennessee State University on "A Religion in Narrative: Joss Whedon and Television Creativity". Lavery has a lot to say in this paper and it can be read in full on [www.slayage.tv/religioninnarrative.htm](http://www.slayage.tv/religioninnarrative.htm) <http://www.slayage.tv/religioninnarrative.htm> (8/11/02). However, it can be summed up by "the power of Buffy lies in the narrative."

The afternoon session, for me, commenced with a quirky look at how the vampires in the "Buffyverse" bend, but do not break the laws of science. David Collinson explained the science behind the idiosyncrasies of vampire existence in a way that was totally entrancing even to the least scientific minded. This audience also gained the answer to that thorny question, how do male vampires achieve erections without a beating heart to provide circulation? I will just say that refrigeration systems have never seemed so sexy. This scientific encounter was followed by a highly entertaining and informative look at the treatment of food in *BtVS* and *Angel*. Jocelyn Rose is a health promotion officer and postgraduate student. She explained how family, nurturing, comfort, celebration, sex and friendship are all represented in the shows by food. Health messages are presented by revealing the extreme consequences of indulging in alcohol etc. Whilst we may end up with a hangover and acute embarrassment, alcohol in the Buffyverse may well cause students to actually turn into Neanderthals, as in "Beer Bad". Villains smoke, tea replaces coffee and drugs cause addiction and a desire to destroy the world. Even though we can easily read these messages hidden in the narrative, they are not presented in a way that patronises the audience and are often used as plot devices. The only truly health conscious message was in fact delivered by the big villain of season three, the Mayor, who expounds on the goodness of milk to Faith.

My next session, was entitled "Sex and Violence". The papers by Stevie Simkin, Tamzin Cook and Stephanie Zacharek did not really say anything new about sex and violence in the visual media or particularly in *BtVS*. This was a shame as, not surprisingly, it was the best-attended session of the day. We did hear that the programme emasculates the gun and those who use guns and that the Buffy/ Spike relationship illustrates the words of Camille Paglia in *Sexual Personae*, "The masculine hurls itself at the feminine in an eternal circle of pursuit and flight." (Paglia 1991). This session also revealed several opportunities for the characters, Angel and Spike, to be seen naked on the screen and this kept the audience happy in the main, although there was always a call for "more!" These subjects did provide the best question and answer session after the papers. Tamzin Cook was asked if the series was saying that sex and violence are acceptable as long as there is no prejudice? She replied that it represented women as initiating sex and violence rather than just responding to them. It was also agreed that the instances of Spike having sex with Buffy and the many scenes which required him to be shown naked or half naked were the pay-off for the rather gloomy arc of season six.

The day ended with an interesting investigation into teen witches of the 21st Century. Many of these teenagers became interested in witchcraft through the representation of witches in programmes like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and their enjoyment and attachment to these shows. In fact 75% of those who responded to Hannah Saunders's survey on

<http://www.witchwords.net> watched *BtVS* -- this was the highest percentage of any media text cited. The sample responses detailed in the conference handout revealed that witchcraft was providing these youngsters with confidence, comfort and a form of self-knowledge that teenagers have craved since the beginning of time. The audience reception data revealed that all of the eleven-thirteen year olds questioned cited "spell working" as their main interest. This number decreased, as the respondents grew older. Later we heard from an educationalist who is using *BtVS* in the classroom to help children of high potential in areas of urban deprivation. I am afraid this is not my area but I am sure that using popular culture alongside traditional learning aids is not a new concept. It was a well-presented paper and showed that the programmes *BtVS* and *Angel* are rare in their presentation of gifted children and intelligence in a positive light.

Sunday was a far more subdued affair, mainly due to the fact that a large number of the U.K. delegates stayed up until the wee small hours watching taped episodes from season seven of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. These current episodes were elicited from a U.S. delegate and shown in a bookshop in the centre of Norwich. The episodes were of course washed down by copious amounts of gin and tonic generously supplied by the manager.

The first session after breakfast presented us with a set of three papers given by John Pinson, Christie Firtha and Beth Ptalis from University of California entitled, "Pathologizing Marginality: Sickness, Limnality, and Otherness in Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Angel". The three papers explored the connection between illness and marginality and contended that, in *BtVS* and *Angel*, marginalised characters are often pathologised, while at the same time are required to police the boundaries of normalcy. Before lunch, the session entitled "Queering Buffy and Angel" provided much humour, nakedness on screen and another large audience. Meg Barker commenced with an energetic look at "Slash Fiction". This was a new subject to many delegates and was an intriguing look at the homoerotic fantasies of heterosexual writers of fan fiction. Less appealing than a pairing between Spike/Angel was the interest of *Star Trek* fans in a connection between Kirk/Spock. Silvia Barlaam's paper compared the (tele)visual representations of the straight and gay male bodies in *Angel* and *Queer as Folk*. She also looked into the production system, sexual availability of the two main characters, opening sequences and the visual messages sent out by the graphics and stills of these two popular and controversial shows. Despite the seemingly obvious directions of these two shows, Silvia Barlaam illustrated in her paper that they are in fact both shot and produced to appeal to the widest possible audiences. She also investigated the audience gaze and the "father against all the odds" storyline, which is central to both shows. All together this was a very interesting and entertaining presentation. Dee Amy-Chinn's paper on "Queering the Bitch: Spike, Transgression and Erotic Empowerment" finished off this session and my attendance of the Blood Text and Fears Conference. Her comic suggestion that Spike's insight into female behaviour might stem from his love of daytime soap operas was still provoking a grin as I drove the one hundred miles home.

Roz Kaveney, editor of *Reading the Vampire Slayer*, gave the closing plenary paper on "Where do we go from here? Critical responses to Buffy in the aftermath of season six and Angel in the aftermath of season three". I was quite content to miss the closing paper as I felt it encapsulated the negative element which appeared too frequently at this conference. Providing a centre for an interdisciplinary conference, by using a popular cultural phenomenon like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, was a good idea. However, the papers too often slipped into fandom rather than academic discussion. There were many interesting discussions and concepts regarding metaphor, allusion, folklore and intertextuality for

example, which were ignored in favour of "dumbing down" and titillation. This conference was a mixture of highs and lows, enjoyable but frustrating. It was a vampire feast slightly lacking in blood.

## **References**

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# Flying High in the City of Angels

New Cities: New Media -- An Interdisciplinary Conference and Media Exhibition, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, January 17-19, 2003

## A report by Christina I. Wilson, University of Southern California, USA

The organizers of this cross-disciplinary conference, Amy Murphy (USC, School of Architecture) and Eric Gordon (USC, School of Cinema and Television) set for themselves and the participants the lofty goal not just of understanding urban space in terms of technological advance or, in cinema, how urban experience is represented, but also the altogether more provocative and difficult task of thinking about the city itself as a kind of mediation of experience; that is, theorizing a relation between cities and media that does not exclude the possibility of their identity. Los Angeles would seem an ideal locale for this radical approach to conceiving of the image of the city and modes of representation, and indeed, the combined promise of midwinter fair-weather (met) and the opportunity to rigorously interrogate the possibilities fomented by the triad "new" "cities" and "media" (also met) drew an international mix of scholars, visual artists, writers and architects. The roundtable discussion which opened the conference on Friday afternoon reflected the interdisciplinary stakes of the conference. Moderated by Amy Murphy, a lively discussion among USC luminaries Nancy Lutkehaus (Anthropology), Dowell Myers (Policy Planning and Development), Michael Renov (Cinema/TV) and Christiane Robbins (Fine Arts) put into play a host of questions that would frame the terrain of the three-day investigation. By Sunday, many questions were broached and even more were asked from multiple perspectives and methodologies in two keynote addresses, twenty-seven papers, four "Media Works" experimental audio-visual presentations, twelve short documentary films, and two interactive CD-ROM projects.

Lev Manovich ([www.manovich.net](http://www.manovich.net)), Associate Professor in the Visual Arts Department at the University of California, San Diego, delivered Friday's keynote address suggestively entitled, "Metadata, Mon Amour." Referring to his own database of stored .jpeg images, the loosely conceived talk went on perhaps too long elaborating its rather simple thesis that the proliferation of digitized information demands to be organized systematically and may be efficiently accessed only by assigning individual quanta of information (images, documents, sound files) to specific categories of metadata which allows users to navigate the sea of information stored in computer databases. Manovich insisted new ways of organizing information (what he termed "metadata-ing" the image) itself gives rise to new images and opens up creative opportunities. Manovich posited that this task of "metadata-ing" be not only the obligation of the computer engineer, but also an opportunity for artists to expand the field of representation, citing the work of visual artists Luc Courchesne and Jeffrey Shaw as well as the SIMS (social simulator) phenomenon as expressions of metadata aesthetics. In the Q&A session following the lecture, Manovich was asked to elaborate on the provocative title whose reference to Alain Resnais's 1959 film, *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*, raises questions about materialism and the limits of memory and image-making. The audience, hugely generous during the bumpy talk, lost all patience with Manovich when he admitted he had not heard of

the film and had only chosen the title based on other articles he had read that employed the "X, Mon Amour" format.

Manovich's keynote address in no way augured the thoughtfulness, beauty and innovation of the CD-ROM projects presented by The Labyrinth Project, a research initiative on interactive narrative at the Annenberg Center for Communication at USC. Labyrinth's director, renowned cultural theorist on popular culture and chair of USC's Division of Critical Studies in the Cinema School, Marsha Kinder introduced the team responsible for designing "Bleeding Through: Layers of Los Angeles 1920-1986" created with cultural critic, historian and novelist Norman Klein and "Tracing the Decay of Fiction: Encounters with a Film by Pat O'Neill" created with Los Angeles native, visual artist Pat O'Neill. Summoning Peter Brooks to conceive of the "cityscape as an expanded middle in the narrative of desire," both projects focus on a network of interrelated stories plucked from a wide narrative field whose elements are combined to produce films that call into question the boundary strict between fact and fiction in the relation between subjectivity and experience.

Both of these "interactive documentaries" experiment with non-linear forms of narration and digital media, incorporating in the case of O'Neill absolutely stunning photography of the now abandoned Roosevelt Hotel, dialogue from *film noir* scripts, press clippings and news reel footage, and in the case of Klein, his story about a fictional character named Molly alongside more typical historical archive material to constellate a sense of the city from a variety of sources. Both projects were available throughout the weekend for participants to interact with on large eight- by six-foot screens. More information about The Labyrinth Project is available at <http://www.annenberg.edu/labyrinth> where both of these titles will be available for purchase in March 2003. The evening concluded with an outdoor buffet in a courtyard surrounded by large screen digital video projections of Prof. Robert Flick's (USC, Fine Arts) "Central Avenue: 2000-2003" and accompanied by the sounds of resident DJ artist Bjorn Palmer spinning urban-electronica in the warm night air.

Perhaps the greatest drawback of the well-run conference was that panels were always scheduled two at a time, often with a documentary short running in yet a third venue, making it frustratingly impossible to experience all the conference had to offer. Over the course of the three days, I was able to attend four of the eight panel sessions. For a complete list of panels, paper titles and speakers and their affiliations, please refer to: <http://www.usc.edu/architecture/newcities>

Panel One, entitled "History, Imagery and Urbanism" featured three papers moderated by Prof. Nancy Lutkehaus. The stand-out paper of the session, "From Los Angeles to Athens, Return," was presented by Romaric Vinet-Kammerer (Doctoral Candidate, Université de Paris, Sorbonne) who traced the relationship between narrative and place -- interrogating the problematics of geographic specificity, monumentality and dislocation -- in the films *Alphaville* (Godard, 1965), *Bye Bye Monkey* (Ferreri, 1977) and *Law and Disorder* (Passer, 1974).

Panel Three, "Body, Form and the Virtual" and moderated by Eric Gordon, was the best panel session of the four that I heard. Galia Solomonoff (Princeton University) in her cautionary paper entitled, "Carnal and Virtual: Cities and Media" discussed the anxieties of the technologically savvy city-dweller alert to the possibility of fantasy (not function) as the driving force behind a vision of architecture that, like our personalized windows to cyberspace, might become more and more transitory as they become more personalized.

Brian Cavanaugh (L.A. based architect) followed up with a more optimistic take on the intersection between the real and the virtual with his discussion of telekinetics' and telerobotics' impact on the design of our cities. He posits an "aesthetic of disappearing" in the transitional zone between the material and virtual where a new middle landscape, dislodged from any fixed place in space and time, opens up new possibilities. He cites the first transatlantic major surgery performed on September 19, 2001 as an instance of what he calls a "transformational landscape." In the final paper of the panel, "Seamlessness, Continuity and Simultaneity: Topology and the Production of New Space," Mark Donahue (California College of Arts and Crafts) persuasively traced the relationship between postmodern architecture, film and interesting topological forms linking (1) *Mulholland Dr.* (Lynch, 2001) and Von Burkle and Bosst's "Möbius House" with the möbius band, (2) *Pulp Fiction* (Tarrantino, 1995) and Rem Koolhaas' structure that is a cross between a sphere and a cone with the Klein Bottle, and (3) *The Matrix* (Wachowski, 1999) and the new Reichstag in Berlin with the projected plane. These three provocative and philosophically challenging papers engendered a lively discussion session which centered around questions of utopian and dystopian visions of the city in relation to technology and "impossible" material spaces.

Panel Five: "Urban Re-Readings" was another fine panel moderated by Greg Hise (USC, School of Planning, Policy and Development). Sabine Hanni's (Cornell) somewhat disjointed argument in her paper "The Aesthetics of Decline: Urban Crisis and Hollywood Renaissance of the 1970s" used the films of Martin Scorsese to trace the evolution of masculine identity within the changing New York urban landscape in *Mean Streets* (1973), *Taxi Driver* (1976), *After Hours* (1985). On the same panel, Andrew Herscher (Dartmouth College) delivered an astute re-reading of the term "collage" in his paper, "Montage and Metropolis: On the Prehistory of the Collage City." His argument interrogates the appropriation by architectural historians of the term "collage" from the 1920s avant-garde and brings out the political / philosophical incongruity of Roe and Koder's use of Modern French architect Le Corbusier to explicate a style they call the "Collage City." Instead, Herscher turns to inter-war Czech architecture in Prague as a more appropriate example of the political ideals and aesthetics evoked by the early-twentieth century use of the term "collage." In another stand-out paper, "Old Cities, Old Media, New Story: On Aldo Rossi's Scientificity," Brendan D. Moran (Harvard University) is interested in tracing the resonances between architect Aldo Rossi and poet Raymond Roussel. By excavating the influence of Roussel's writing, specifically his metagrams, on the architectural designs of Rossi, he finds strongest evidence for his argument in the notion that Rossi's design theory relies on a linguistic theory of semiotics shared by Roussel. An added delight of the panel was the insightful response to the papers written up by Prof. Hise, though it did unfortunately leave no time at all for questions from the audience for speakers.

Prof. Michael Renov moderated Panel Seven: "The City as Subject," which featured a lyrical discussion of the works of Julio Cortazar and their relationship to the politics of memory and public space / identity between Buenos Aires and Paris in "Writing on the Walls: Exploring Julio Cortazar's Textual Cities" by Dan Russek (University of Chicago). Where Russek employed the tropes of collage and graffiti to make sense of Cortazar's relationship to the city in his writings, David Devin (Bartlett School, London) emphasized the dramatic perspectival shift brought about by aerial photography in the wake of WWI on the modern conception and visualization of the urban landscape in his paper entitled "Cities from Aloft." In another photography-based presentation, Steven Jacobs (Ghent Urban Studies Team) perhaps over-eagerly posited the center-periphery dichotomy no longer appropriate to the investigation of the postmodern European city in "Urban Photography in an Age of Urban Simulations."

Interspersed between panel sessions and breaks were four "Media Works" presentations curated by Holly Willis. These programs featured short, experimental, live action and animated films combined with contemporary electronic soundtracks that offered political critiques and aesthetic visions of life in the city. Exemplary pieces included "Salaryman 6" (UK, 2002), "Whizeewhig" (US, 2002) by Chih-Cheng Peng, "This Guy is Falling" (US, 2000) by Michael Horowitz and Gareth Smith and "Destiny -- (Zero 7)" (US, 2002) by Tommy Pallotta. The mesmerizing visual artistry and ambient lyrical sounds combined for a totally enthralling experience of urban artistry.

Perhaps the highlight of the entire conference was Saturday night's keynote address from pop cultural critic and film scholar Scott Bukatman who teaches in the Department of Art and Art History at Stanford University. He opened his talk entitled "Kaleidoscopic Perception" with Spike Jonez's video of Fat Boy Slim's "Weapon of Choice," which features an unlikely Christopher Walken released from the strictures of dull monotony by the undeniable beats of the tune, dancing and eventually flying through a corporate hotel, "freed from banality and gravity's determinism." In a single-bound, Bukatman segued from this provocative piece into his argument which employed the rapid montage and bodily address of kaleidoscopic vision to refigure the city as playground in the realm of Hollywood musicals and superhero comics. Bukatman elucidated a throughway between the city symphony films of Busby Berkeley (e.g. *42nd Street*) and the cityscape of major metropolises in the Superman, Batman and Spider-Man comics via his notion of "kaleidoscopic vision" which seeks a redemptive middle ground between the oppressive Foucauldian discourse of the panopticon and the overly optimistic realm of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque. The superhero -- characterized as the ultimate city dweller whose pure pleasure in movement (called to mind by Walken's dance routine) -- offers to readers and fans a unique way of being in the city and suggests performative bodies we ourselves might inhabit that "make and remake themselves at will in the city."

# History Now

Screen Conference, Gilmorehill Centre, The University of Glasgow, 28th-30th June 2002

## A report by Alastair Phillips, University of Reading, UK

This year's annual *Screen* conference held, as usual, at the Gilmorehill Centre at the University of Glasgow (28th-30th June 2002), was as well-organised and efficiently presented as ever. Though it felt as if the number of delegates was slighter than in some previous years, it is still true to say that the event brought a stimulating cross-section of new and well-established scholars together to present and discuss papers across a wide-range of areas of interest in the proliferating fields of film and television studies. I would thus first of all like to mention the conference's co-organisers John Caughie and Karen Lury as well as especially acknowledge the organisational skills of Caroline Beven and the support team of approachable and helpful assistants who were present at every session. In the course of one weekend, I felt I learnt something from most panels where I heard papers on such diverse subjects as the promotional and narrative significance of the painted portrait in 1940s Hollywood women's films and film noirs; the motif of the letter in contemporary heritage cinema and the evolution of the *giallo* (mystery fiction) in Italian genre cinema.

In this review I would like to concentrate on what seemed to me to be the most sustained aspect of intellectual debate at the conference which occurred during the opening and closing plenary sessions. These focussed on the past, present and future of television studies and allowed many of the leading names to think out loud about the work that has already been done, and the work that now needs to be done in the field. Television Studies exists in the context of a broadcasting and reception environment which is currently undergoing radical economic and cultural transformation through the advent of digital technologies. Coming from a university department which is itself in the process of undergoing an important name change in order to reflect an increased awareness of the nature of television studies as a discreet and evolving field of academic enquiry, I was especially interested in hearing the likes of John Ellis, Lynn Spigel, Charlotte Brunsdon and John Caughie debate the means by which scholars should now work historically in relation to the constituent parts of the discipline. Across the board, I sensed that this shift in institutional legitimacy is also being accompanied by a healthy anxiety over where and how the social and aesthetic specificities of the medium should be located and discussed.

I was especially struck over the ways in which notions of temporality seemed to predominate in much of the discussion in the same fashion that issues of spatiality were broadly convened in many film-related panels. For John Caughie, in the opening paper of the first plenary, for example, this meant re-establishing the ways in which historical work on the medium, especially in relation to British output, should consider the network of connections between theatre and radio and television. He called attention to the experimental possibilities of the field in its early days and, taking his cue from an earlier essay by Geoffrey Nowell-Smith concerning the discussion of cinema history, he noted that this sense of formal innovation should also be harnessed to an awareness of what he termed the "different orders" of subjectivities which pertain to that now distant era of the 1950s.

This need to resist the elegiac, and instead locate television's diverse forms of cultural expression within a broader social and cultural archaeology, seemed to meet with common agreement. Charlotte Brunsdon's customarily stylish and poised presentation explored what she termed "the history of tastemaking" with regards to the development of mainstream lifestyle programming on television from the 1970s through to the present day. This formulation allowed her to discuss two inter-related topics: the content of the programmes in terms of the formation of ideas about tasteful items of interior decoration, and the ways in which the programmes, as artefacts themselves, could be seen in terms of changing notions of tasteful televisual discourse. I liked this self-reflexivity for it saw a range of opportunities to talk about skills involving both the construction and the consumption of television. It also pointed to the possibilities, counter Caughie's preceding discussion, that television has also historically devised indigenous topics and procedures which are still in the processes of transformation.

Perhaps the key item on the agenda was the temporality of television discourse as a whole. What does it mean to study a medium that continually sees itself in terms of the present and whose audience, in turn, is barely given the opportunity to remember, or even experience for the first time, what the many layers of its past contain? As John Ellis put it succinctly, in television "every day is a special day". The pitfalls of this "nowness" are notable not least for the impact on the choice of the object of attention. Does one study a single day in television? Does one study a format or an individual programme item? Does one study a series, or even an entire institution? If television belongs to the immediate -- to the moment of consumption, rather than production, as Ellis would have it -- how do we understand these texts, spaces and moments now that they are gone, now that their temporary meanings have faded? These are questions familiar to the related field of historical work in film studies, of course, but they are also given additional credence by what Lynn Spigel rightly identified as the separate politics of televisual archiving.

As Television Studies evolves, and it was a slight shame that these plenary sessions failed to include a younger generation of scholars who are also present in this process, it must do more than of what Ellis called "scoping work" which investigates industry databases, listings and schedules in rigorous detail. In the ensuing discussion, there was a pronounced call for further oral history work evoking the terrain of cultural memory which is currently coming to the fore in film studies. Issues around periodisation are still, for many, also up for grabs as are the shifting variables of class, gender and, perhaps particularly germane to the nature of television, region.

Many of these points were raised in Laura Mulvey's paper of the final plenary. In a wide-ranging account of British television's incorporation of 16mm technologies, Mulvey observed that the aesthetic properties of this advance had strong medium specific potential in that they clearly foreground the evolution of what she termed the "pseudo-presentness" of direct address in televisual discourse. It seemed to me, to conclude this report, that what she was proposing here, in a usefully nuanced fashion, was a distinctive interpretation of the very issue that many of us had been thinking most about during the *Screen* conference this year. That is to say the means by which one should begin to historicise and deconstruct the apparent immediacy of what has all too often been taken to be nothing more than an audio-visual present.

# **New Technologies, New Media Forms and Approaches, and a Welcome Reflexivity**

The Fourth Annual Media, Communications and Cultural Studies Association (MeCCSA) Conference, University of Reading, UK, 18-20 December 2002

## **A report by Kate Egan, University of Nottingham, UK**

There were two key factors that helped make the fourth annual MeCCSA conference, held over three days at the Bulmershe Campus, University of Reading, a memorable and thought-provoking experience. The first, largely due to the fact that the conference was held a week before Christmas, was its friendly, relaxed and rather festive atmosphere, something which ably complimented the conference's key aim to promote itself as a place of honest exchange, dialogue and debate. However, the second, and perhaps more striking, factor was its impressive level of organisation. While, in one respect, this could be detected on a logistical level (through the presence of the ever-helpful conference organisers, Tessa Perkins and Ann Butler) it could also be observed when surveying the major preoccupations of the vast majority of the conference's papers and panels, on a purely thematic level.

The conference revolved around a number of distinct panel strands (including a number of panels on celebrity, audience studies, politics and the media, and gender representations) as well as a vast array of other papers which dealt with a variety of topics, approaches and objects of study. However, a number of key thematic concerns crossed and linked the vast majority of papers and assisted in giving MeCCSA 2002 an effective sense of focus, purpose and direction.

Predominantly, these concerns could be seen to relate to the onslaught of new technologies, with a large number of papers dealing with the extent to which different forms of modern media (from interactive political discussion programmes, to website news services, talk shows and newspaper editorial columns) could be seen as democratic (encouraging public participation and debate and giving a voice to subordinate groups in society) or mediated and oppressive. In addition, a concurrent focus on the increasing globalisation of cultural industries and the fragmentation of media markets informed papers, from a variety of different panels, on the history of Channel Five, on media and communication policies in Malaysia, and on pan-European television channels, and addressed the conflict between national identities and global identities that underpin these media phenomena.

The true extent to which these concerns were consistently picked up and explored throughout the conference, however, was illustrated in some of the specific conference threads. In a series of panels on celebrity, for instance, these themes clearly emerged again. Carlton Brick's paper explored how the cultural globalisation of sporting industries and iconic sporting figures (from Michael Jordan to Mike Tyson) has led to the creation of national sporting role models who can, arguably, operate as oppressive tools of the state. In addition, Kirsty Fairclough's fascinating paper on celebrity reality TV looked at the extent to which a

newly-heightened cult of celebrity has led to an increased blurring between the public and the private, and a dissolving of the boundaries between glamour, everyday life and the individual.

In line with this awareness of the implications of the onslaught of new technologies and new media forms was a consistent aim, throughout the conference, to question the ability of established media and cultural studies methodologies to deal with these changing and evolving processes. In particular, a panel on the ongoing links between French sociology and international cultural studies, chaired by Nick Couldry, had this concern at its heart, and focused on the strengths and weaknesses of cultural studies' past and continued utilisation of Pierre Bourdieu. This panel (as a continuation of an earlier panel at the Crossroads in Cultural Studies conference) harnessed the conference's dominant remit to initiate productive and ongoing exchange and debate to great effect. To this end, Couldry and his fellow panellists surveyed the history of Bourdieu's continued dominance over both disciplines and considered the need to either rescue and retrieve Bourdieu's work or to break free from his influence and adopt new theoretical paradigms.

Indeed, for a young researcher like myself, this critical and reflexive approach to the dominant aims and methodologies of media and cultural studies research was particularly illuminating and arresting, and was another key theme and approach of the conference as a whole. This reflexive approach to both media research and teaching criss-crossed a variety of panels and papers, with sessions on media employability, educational practice, teaching the Holocaust and national and regional film archives all taking this reflexivity as their focus, and often meshing it with a parallel discussion of the impact of new technologies. However, it took a particularly memorable form in a specific thread of conference papers devoted to audience studies and fan cultures.

In particular, this specific agenda (the need to engage in media and cultural research in a critical and self-aware way) was raised and fruitfully explored in a panel on "Academics and/as Fans" on the second day of the conference. Here, panellists Matt Hills, Lyn Thomas and Milly Williamson resurrected and effectively critiqued the classic fan culture research of Henry Jenkins and Camille Bacon-Smith, and, in the process, raised a number of key questions about the past, present and future methodological aims and goals of fan-related empirical work. These questions related, firstly and perhaps most importantly, to the problematic status of academic ethnographers, as figures who are both inside and outside the fan cultures that they study, but who can "go native" by finding common ground with their respondents -- something which, potentially, can dissolve the boundary between the ethnographer and the fan and can eradicate the ethnographer's critical distance over the fan culture itself.

Related to this concern was the need to question the selection criteria of the fan ethnographer (the question of who is studied by the academic and why), to consider the ethnographer's effect on fan responses, and, as a result, to recognise the importance of studying the contradictions, the gaps and the differences between fan responses and to acknowledge the plurality of fan readings and approaches -- pluralities which could relate to different fan competencies but also to differences of class, gender and race. All of these questions, however, were not raised in an abstract fashion, but through discussions of the panellists' own empirical work and experiences and their own problematic positions as both fan and academic. In particular, these issues were effectively explored in Lyn Thomas's paper on fans of *Inspector Morse* and *The Archers* and demonstrated through illuminating snippets of her

interview work with such fans, with such approaches making for an engaging, as well as thought-provoking, session.

This concern to honestly debate and critique the criteria and approaches of ethnographic research was then taken up in a panel debate on "The Current State of Audience Research", convened and chaired by Martin Barker (a constant and valuable presence in all audience studies panels throughout the conference). The need to adopt a critical and self-aware approach to audience research was, here, effectively and persuasively taken up by Maire Messenger Davies, who again emphasised the need to study differences as well as unities in ethnographic work and the importance of sampling and selection criteria. In addition, she also usefully demonstrated and discussed how audience research can be utilised in undergraduate teaching.

While it was perhaps a shame that there was not more of an acknowledgement of the clear link between these two panels (in terms of relating the more specific area of fan ethnographic work to wider audience studies concerns), this panel was just as fruitful and productive, and initiated a particularly passionate debate amongst the panel's audience members. What clearly emerged from both panels was the vitality of this field and the commitment of its practitioners, and, for the young researcher, the message that while audience research can be a daunting task (in terms of the need to adopt a rigorous and self-critical approach) it also continues to be a rewarding and fascinating one. Overall, this was something that allowed for a highlighting and a renewed questioning of the continued marginalisation of audience research in the wider field of media and cultural studies.

Aside from the specific panels and papers which formed the basis of MeCCSA 2002's packed and busy schedule, the conference was book-ended by some distinctive plenary sessions. In particular, Cees Hamelink's closing paper on the World Summit on the Information Society was not only informative and eye-opening, but also immensely enjoyable, effectively highlighting the conference's aim to challenge and question media, cultural and communication studies approaches and methodologies, but in a relaxed, open and friendly environment which encouraged productive discussion and plenty of food for thought.

# What about the Sports Celebrity?

Sporting Icons: Celebrity, Media and Popular Culture, Leicester University, 7th February, 2003

## A report by Tom Gibbons, Centre for Research into Sport and Society, University of Leicester, UK

On the 7th February 2003 scholars stemming from institutions all over Britain, from Brighton to Ulster, met together with media representatives and correspondents at Leicester University on the fourth floor of the Charles Wilson building which appropriately overlooks, among other landmarks, the Walkers stadium, home to Leicester City F.C. This was to be the setting for the eagerly anticipated "Sporting Icons" one-day seminar, jointly organised by the Leicester and Warwick Centres for Research into Sport and Society (CRSS), as part of the BSA (British Sociological Association) sociology of sport study group programme.

Although the four papers to be presented varied in the specific issues they covered, the general theme of the day was based upon understanding the significance of sports stars in the increasing focus of the media and society, upon the role of the celebrity in popular culture. This is a process noticed by many who study sport, media and popular culture and the conference sought, in part, to summarise some of the most valuable contributions to this area of research as well as to identify topics for future study.

The co-ordinator of the seminar, Dominic Malcolm of the CRSS Leicester, briefly introduced the chairman for the morning session, Andrew Parker of the CSSS Warwick. Parker in turn introduced the first two speakers: Chris Rojek and Gary Whannel. Rojek, of Nottingham Trent University, sought to examine the main features of celebrity culture and the reasons behind its rapid growth in the late twentieth century. Within this Rojek described the meritocratic ideal stressing social mobility that is evident in our contemporary global era before discussing how cultural intermediaries (including publicists, impression managers and media personnel) are responsible for celebrity culture as they select and construct the achieved (rather than ascribed) celebrity for social consumption. Rojek also alluded to how and why sport has moved from the periphery of popular culture into its centre. He argued that due to the professionalisation and commodification of sport interest in it has grown. Then from the 1960s and 70s the advances in medicine, science and technology encouraged and increased awareness of care for the human body. Sport fitted in here as it was linked to promoting the optimal condition for the body. The sports celebrity thus offers an idealised image/myth of the human body and what they have achieved through participation in sport. Consumers of these images feel the need to be in active pursuit of the ideal body. In this way the sporting celebrity reinforces the vulnerability and frailty of people who want to be recognised as conforming to the ideals of contemporary achievement culture.

Following this in depth analysis of sport in contemporary celebrity culture, Gary Whannel of Luton University highlighted the role of the media in particular in the production of sporting icons. In achieving this, Whannel described his model of vortextuality and the media sport celebrity. Whannel stressed that two related transformations were the cause of this effect.

One of these transformations has been the growth in the range of media outlets and media content; the other, the vastly increasing speed of circulation of information and images. In this process Whannel contended that a media event such as the wedding of David Beckham and Victoria Adams comes to dominate/saturate the media to such an extent that it becomes temporarily difficult for commentators and columnists to discuss any other event/story. In this way the media are drawn in, as if by a "vortex". Central to Whannel's argument is the distinction that should be made between David Beckham's wedding and past seemingly vortexual moments, in order to consider the extent to which this effect is a function of the structure and speed of media flow rather than a function of the drama and appeal of a story in itself. This can be appreciated if we consider sports stories of the past that may be heavily mythologized today but which, at the time they occurred, gained comparatively little media attention. Whannel appealed to scholars to test this theory empirically by comparing the media coverage of a past sporting event such as England's win in the 1966 World Cup or the "Rumble in the Jungle" to that given to contemporary sporting events, such as the 2002 World Cup or the Tyson vs. Lewis fight.

Essentially both papers discussed the balance of power between the media and sports stars: the increasing popularity of sport stars and their dominance in the media at different times. Whannel contended that we exist in a media saturated world with advertisers always looking for new spaces to colonise. Yet, Rojek argued that human beings are not passive assimilators of the mediated celebrity. Instead they are able to resist or reinterpret the images they see with their own meanings. Sports audiences are thus able to recognise that it is the media who choose what we do and do not see in terms of their projection of a particular celebrity's image.

Questions following these two papers addressed the role of the social scientist in the debate over, and critique of, celebrity culture as well as how sociology emanating from the 1970s has had a large impact on the way people now increasingly view the social world more critically. Other questions were raised about the use of sporting celebrities as moral role models for younger members of society and how sports stars can be used to talk about social issues, such as Robbie Fowler and "laddishness" as a version of masculinity portrayed by some professional footballers in media reports. One of the main questions raised was whether we as the public ever know the true identity of the sporting celebrity and more importantly whether the celebrity does. The enhanced media presence in the everyday life of sporting icons, such as David Beckham, seems to have created a tension between their public and private personae, a personality split which lead some of the conference attendees to ask: does the sporting icon ever know who they really are?

Following lunch, the seminar reconvened and Dominic Malcolm took the chair introducing the two speakers for the afternoon session, Eileen Kennedy and Andrew Parker. First off, Kennedy of the Roehampton Institute, University of Surrey, focused in on the centrality of the body in the depiction of sporting icons. In particular Kennedy looked at the sports celebrity as the embodiment of masculinity. Here she discussed how such aspects as George Best's liver, David Beckham's foot and Roy Keane's mind have been inspected by the media as parts of masculine bodies that have been used as ways of portraying, questioning and condemning the lifestyles of sporting celebrities such as these. For example, Best's liver is highlighted to explain the alcoholic lifestyle that he simultaneously maintained as a professional footballer. What Kennedy implies by such examples is that it is not only feminine bodies that are subject to "the gaze" of the media, as is argued in much of the existing scholarship in this area, it is also the masculine bodies of sports stars. As such, ways

of understanding the sports celebrity become increasingly complex. Here, the traditional conception of the male professional footballer as working class and the epitome of masculinity were challenged by the depiction of abject bodies in the media such as Paul "Gazza" Gascoigne (shedding tears on a number of occasions) or Keane being highly childish and emotive, as well as Beckham wearing what appear to be feminine clothes.

Following this Andrew Parker, of Warwick University, presented a paper he wrote with Ellis Cashmore (of Staffordshire University, who was not present at this conference) called "One David Beckham? Celebrity, Masculinity and the *Soccerati*". It is relevant to note that this paper is to appear in the *Sociology of Sport Journal* later this month and was perhaps the main focus for much of the media interest in this conference as a whole (according to its co-ordinator, Dominic Malcolm). In this paper, Parker illustrated how David Beckham epitomises, yet also challenges, processes of commodification and gender identity construction in sport. Parker considered how sporting celebrities are not regularly discussed in the broader realms of sociological debate. Yet he stated that their identities could offer an important insight into wider patterns of cultural change. Within this Parker contended that Beckham has a contemporary popular cultural appeal in the codes and messages he displays. He argued that Beckham has a productive value as well as a value for the consumer because if he stopped playing football he would cease to exist as a sporting icon. It was also argued that Beckham personifies media and cultural norms as a positive role model because he is good looking, a family man, a talented footballer, and he is wealthy from his achieved stardom. Yet Beckham also transgresses the traditional working class masculine values. Parker stated that Beckham exists where the "new man" meets the "chief breadwinner" and as such portrays contradictory versions of masculinity.

Questions from the afternoon session highlighted many more topics for future research to encompass. Some of these included how female sporting icons are treated as celebrities in the media, and how is this different from men? To what extent are sports stars "racially" contoured? And, in what ways does the sporting icon change over time -- are there certain continuities or discontinuities evident in the contemporary sporting celebrity when compared with those of the past, and how does this relate to wider societal values of the time? Other issues which emerged included how certain types of images become internalised into peoples' ways of thinking about particular sports, for example, in football videos there are a lack of images depicting awful challenges but a lot of "blunders" and own goals. Does this say something about the "image" of football being portrayed -- perhaps as a site for fun, rather than aggression and retribution?

Towards the end of the afternoon session and of the conference as a whole, Parker stated that sociological debate needs to be broadened so that it encompasses wider issues from other areas such as cultural or film studies as this would aid analyses of issues surrounding topics such as sporting celebrities in popular culture. He recognised the power of icons of all kinds as possessing a unique combination of being ordinary yet extraordinary at the same time. In this way their status and prestige is both attainable and unattainable and this is what makes them so powerful and worthy of academic study.