

What Do We Do with Theory?: An Interdisciplinary Approach to the Humanities and Film

"(Dis)junctions: Theory Reloaded / Cintax: Locating Visuality", Department of English -- University of California, Riverside. 8-9 April, 2005

A report by Zina Rodriguez, University of California, Riverside, USA

For twelve years, graduate students in the Department of English at the University of California, Riverside have organised and maintained the largest conference in the humanities on the university's campus. Interdisciplinary in nature, (Dis)junctions has attracted hundreds of graduate students in the United States and beyond to present their scholarly work across disciplines in a collegial and academic environment. Both new and experienced graduate students have found (Dis)junctions to be a conference that welcomes cutting-edge work along with a friendly atmosphere to share ideas and foster communication spanning disciplines and countries.

For the first time in 2002, two graduate students in the Departments of English and Art History organised "Cintax"; a film festival included in the (Dis)junctions program. It is no accident that Cintax grew out of the Department of English, for many of UC-Riverside's graduate students in the department also specialise in Film and Visual Culture. In 2002, Cintax accepted ten student and independent short films for screening and discussion on the last evening of the conference. In only three years, Cintax has grown in popularity amongst student and independent filmmakers in the United States as a collegial and academic forum to screen their films that normally are confined to gallery spaces or independent film festivals. In its twelfth year, "(Dis)junctions: Theory Reloaded", and in its third year, "Cintax: Locating Visuality" both focused on an interrogation of literary theory and filmic production. Side by side, (Dis)junctions and Cintax opened discursive doors to question the kinds of knowledge graduate students are producing in academia. Given that the conference and film festival inform each other both in form and content, this report will look at both segments of the (Dis)junctions conference.

(Dis)junctions: Theory Reloaded

The highlight of this year's conference was the keynote address by Judith Halberstam entitled, "Dude, Where's My Theory? The Politics of Knowledge in an Age of Stupidity." She is professor of English at the University of Southern California and a specialist in Media Studies, Film, Queer Theory, Feminist and Gender Studies, Postmodernism, and Nineteenth-Century British Literature. Her keynote address reflected many of the core elements of this year's (Dis)junctions conference. Both academically rigorous and engaging, Halberstam's talk focused on the production of knowledge in the university and beyond. Drawing from the areas of Queer Theory, Media Studies, and Literature, Halberstam questioned how we use

theory and the ways in which we put it into practice. At the core of her address, Halberstam observed that academic departments are becoming more and more interdisciplinary, often factoring in knowledge from other disciplines with an emphasis on cultural studies. She predicted that academic departments will begin to incorporate more interdisciplinary elements as boundaries in literary theory are crossed.

The panels during the conference reflected this type of academic border-crossing. The participants themselves, reflected the interdisciplinary focus of the conference. Many were affiliated with such departments as: Anthropology, Art History, Comparative Literature, Creative Writing, Economics, and various other Social Science and Humanities departments, with the majority of panellists hailing from departments of literature. The panel topics ranged from classical subjects as 18 th Century British Literature to contemporary fields such as Media Studies and Game Theory. However, it was not unusual to find panellists from several disciplines presenting papers together on one panel. With over fifty panels spanning a two-day period, "(Dis)junctions: Theory Reloaded" contained several panels on Film and Visual Culture such as "The Asian American Body in Action Film" and "City Spaces: Cinema in the City". Interdisciplinary in nature, (Dis)junctions created an academic atmosphere that provided the groundwork for the Cintax film festival.

Cintax: Locating Visuality

Cintax began with a keynote address by Toby Miller, a professor in the Departments of English, Sociology and Women's Studies, and Director of the University's Program in Film and Visual Culture. With research interests in Media, Sport, Labour, Gender, Race, Citizenship and Politics, Miller has an extensive list of published works, recently becoming the co-editor of *Social Identities*. His keynote address presented his most recent work-in-progress. Entitled "Hollywood II," Miller discussed the intersections of Cultural Studies and Screen Studies. Within this paper Miller addressed the ways in which Film and Television Studies can no longer sustain a purely formalist approach. Rather than look solely at the form and content of works on film and television, Miller argued that academic work in Screen Studies necessitates a reading of the cultural context in which the media exists.

Toby Miller's address was an excellent segue into the films Cintax screened this year. Each of the nine short films showcased ways in which media can push the limits of their medium. The theme of Cintax this year, "Locating Visuality", involved an attention to border spaces in the films' formal elements, cultural negotiations, and transnational encounters. *Surge* by Douglas McCulloh and *Dominance and Terror* by Robert S. Oregel are two short films that address the intersections of cultural value and cultural currency. *Surge* locates its search for visuality at the Louvre in front of the Mona Lisa. As crowds literally "surge" by the infamous work of art with their cameras, the audience must question whether the work of art exists behind the bullet-proof glass, on the crowd's cameras, or on the film played before them. *Dominance and Terror* is a documentary on philosopher and political activist, Noam Chomsky. Rather than adhere to the form of a documentary style that places value on information on and about an individual, *Dominance and Terror* features Chomsky as a cultural icon. The film defies the documentary style by breaking through the limits of intelligible knowledge surrounding Chomsky through its fragmentary form and use of stock footage.

It Could Happen to You by Elizabeth Henry and *Not Too Much Remember* by Tony Gault both use archival film and television clips to construct a narrative. Similar to visual art that uses found objects, *It Could Happen to You* and *Not Too Much Remember* push the limits of

how cultural artefacts shift meaning depending on the context in which they exist. Directed by Laura Daroca, *Remains: A Preliminary Investigation*, reconstructs a narrative about a woman the director has never met. Without sound, the film presents a series of artefacts and personal possessions owned by the woman, overlaid with subtitles, which attempt to stitch these pieces together to reconstruct a narrative of the woman's life. Memory is also at play in *Supercollider*, directed by Rick Silva. *Supercollider* was filmed on video and is edited in a style the director names, "database documentary". Composed of over two thousand frames, each frame consisting of four separate images, the film is intentionally edited without regard to linear time. The objective of *Supercollider* is to present a film that defies a progression of time in order to record the way in which the human mind remembers. The result is chaotic in time and space.

Tahara, directed by Sara Rashad, is a dramatic film portraying the emotional pain of female circumcision through the narrative of a young woman and her daughter. Shot on 35mm film, *Tahara* relies on the young woman's memory of her own genital mutilation to influence her decision not to allow her daughter to undergo the same kind of emotional and physical pain she endured in the past. Both moving in form and content, *Tahara* captures the effects of cultural abuse and the ways in which women can heal from such cultural wounds. Directed by Rhianna Paz Bergado, *Suspension* is a comedic film that addresses the concept of identity and otherness in adolescents at a fictional high school. The film is a whimsical trip through a world based on caricature and outlandish situations. The festival ended with Natella Kataev's *The Little Pilgrim*, an excellent poetic story of growth, passage and discovery in which a young girl reflects on her journey from her home in the forest to a large city as she makes peace with childhood's end. The animation combines 3D, traditional and computer graphics to create a magical landscape with a haunting audio track, in order to accentuate the migration and movement from one physical and emotional landscape to another.

While Cintax showcases short films each year, the planning committee is now in the process of archiving the films at the University of California, Riverside as a resource for film students. In addition, Cintax is also planning to create an online database to connect filmmakers and students of film, while informing them of upcoming conferences and screenings. (Dis)junctions is now in the process of collecting papers presented in the 2005 conference into conference proceedings.

For more information on (Dis)junctions and Cintax, please visit:
<http://english.ucr.edu/gsea/disjunctions/>

Visualising The City: A Symposium

Visualising The City: A Symposium, University of Manchester, 26-28 June 2005

A report by James Scorer, University of Manchester, UK

"Visualising the City", held at the University of Manchester from the 26 to the 28 June 2005, was an ambitiously broad symposium, embracing diverse visions of different generic and specific urban spaces and bringing together a multitudinous crowd of presenters from many different cities. Alan Marcus, the "Frank Sinatra of conference organisers" in the words of one delegate, began the three-day proceedings by drawing attention to previous visual city events, specifically the "Screenscapes" conference held in Leeds in 1993, the "Cine City" conference held at the Getty Centre in Los Angeles in 1994, the symposium on cinema and architecture held at Cambridge University in 1995, and the "Cinema and City" conference held in Dublin in 1999. Despite such prestigious precedents, however, Marcus emphasised that the aim of the symposium was to extend "the boundaries of a subject which engages this international gathering of scholars in a truly interdisciplinary way, on a plethora of sub-themes which explore our fascination and lived experience with the city". It is extremely difficult to assess the success of such an aim, not least because such innumerable boundaries are forever subject to cultural reinterpretations. Which boundaries, one might ask, are under scrutiny? Perhaps the point is rather that the body of delegates, in a collective act, tests or reinforces (sometimes inadvertently chosen) limits. Despite the in-vogue vocabularies and sets of references evident at the conference – "If I hear one more Benjamin reference I shall scream," quoted one delegate – the body of papers did push at the interior and exterior boundaries of the city, perhaps above all in the multiplicity of implied dialogues created between the papers themselves.

The conference was structured around a series of presentations from plenary and invited speakers and the delegates were fortunate to be able to hear so many well-respected and established scholars at one conference. Indeed, a number of the editors and authors of certain seminal texts on cinema and the city were present, including David Clarke, François Penz and Mark Shiel. Of the presentations by invited speakers, the two that opened the conference were of particular note: Giuliana Bruno's keynote address, "The Art of Viewing: Film, City Views, and the Geography of Modernity", and Dietrich Neumann's presentation, "Berlin on Screen: Mapping a Metropolis". With the help of a series of illustrative slides of paintings, buildings and art objects, Bruno discussed the interaction between the "emotions of motion" and the shift from the optic to the haptic, arguments put forward in her book, *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film* (Verso, 2002). Within the tactile visualised space of the city, she suggested, the processes of collection and recollection are intertwined. In highlighting the close ties between memory, cinema and the city, she argued that "memories are nothing but motion pictures", films acting as a process of image collection for cultural recollection. Like Bruno, Neumann also approached the city as a "psychogeographic landscape," and, almost as an aside, tentatively suggested that Berlin might be seen as the archetypal cinematic city. He cartographically traced a series of journeys in notable "Berlin" films, including *Sunrise*, *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, *Der Himmelüber Berlin* (*Wings of Desire*), and *Run Lola Run*, illustrating how choice in film backdrops can alter, not just the perception of the film, but also of the city. One illustrative example was a Nazi propaganda film made

towards the end of the Second World War, Neumann comparing the route taken by the film's protagonists on a drive through the city with an aerial photograph taken by the RAF, highlighting how the drive carefully avoided the streets destroyed by bombing raids.

Several delegates, however, noted that the "truly interdisciplinary...plethora of sub-themes" was to be found in the presentations on the wide variety of simultaneous panels spanning over the three days. With thirty-five panels encompassing almost 150 presentations, there was certainly plenty to choose from, themes including, but not limited to, imagining, transversing, selling, animating, desiring, photographing, sexing, fighting, racialising and timing the city. It would be impossible for one delegate to document the whole range of presentations, but even following one path from the innumerable ones on offer indicates the possibilities and potentialities of a title like "Visualising the City". It would be fair to say that, despite the broad implications of the conference's title in terms of visual media, the majority of papers were concerned with film rather than other forms or methods of visualising the city. There were several papers on photography and art, both the painted city and the role of public art forms within the city, but rather fewer on, say, maps, written narratives or even simply sight and the city itself, ideas which might have pushed the boundaries of the conference back even further. Nevertheless, there was a huge variety of topics, and the methods and styles of presentation were as varied as the topics discussed. Steven Jacobs, for example, managed to present his paper on Hitchcock's urban monuments alongside a continual stream of spliced film clips to illustrate his argument. In a similar vein, some delegates choose to create presentations that were themselves spectacles, several artists presenting their own visions of urban space. For example, Andrea Frank read a U.S. government document about homeland security whilst displaying a series of (mostly clandestine) photographs she had taken in New York City; Tim Wray presented a series of haunting photographs alongside his paper on the ghostly city; and the architect Jill Stoner demonstrated her imaginary visions for a liveable and literal urban jungle. It was also praiseworthy that the conference organisers made such a conscious effort to incorporate presentations from numerous postgraduates, an effort that was rewarded not only by the postgraduates' contributions to a truly broad series of topics but also to fresh and varied approaches and enthusiasms.

As so often happens, however, the conference's strength in breadth was also its Achilles' heel. The variety of papers posed a difficult problem for the conference organisers, particularly in the structuring and grouping of the panels. Whilst the papers on some panels worked effectively together, other delegates were left wondering why they had been placed with other papers on their panel. Post-presentation questions at the former quickly developed into interesting interactive discussions, especially when helped along by shrewd panel chairs. The panel entitled "Photographing the Urban Street", for example, culminated in a productive discussion around urban photography's relationship to surveillance, reporting and the construction of the city. The possibility for discussion was further helped by the fact that this panel had three rather than four presentations allowing more time for questions than at other panels, which also suffered from over-enthusiastic (and less well-prepared) delegates running over time. At panels where the papers worked less well together, however, the questions lacked the threads that would have enabled the development of more productive exchanges. Furthermore, regional rather than thematic panels such as "Berlin Metropolis" or the unconvincing "On the Pacific Rim", did not particularly aid the stated inter-disciplinary aims. Nevertheless, it should be stressed that the prevailing quality of the papers themselves and the overall "feel" and impressions of so many different "fields within fields" and "cities within cities" papered over the cracks that occasionally threatened to disrupt the conference's intentions.

The conference was aided by its location in the new Music and Drama building at Manchester University, the Martin Harris Centre. The building's central presentation hall and surrounding seminar rooms provided an admirable setting for the proceedings as well as high quality technical facilities. Indeed, the level of technical support for the conference was very high, especially considering the range of visual methods employed by the speakers, who often switched from video to DVD to PowerPoint within the space of a few minutes. Furthermore, that the conference took place in Manchester added a further dimension to the proceedings, delegates finding opportunities to walk the city's streets and discuss their impressions of the changing faces of the post-industrial urban landscape. This added dimension was utilised astutely by the conference organisers. On the evening of the first day, a special screening was organised at the local arts cinema of the 1960 film, *Hell is a City*, a crime thriller appropriately set in Manchester. There was also an opportunity to attend a drop-in talk on the painted city by Sandra Martin, the principal fine arts curator at the Manchester Art Gallery. Perhaps the highlight of these "extra-curricular" activities, however, was the plenary talk at the Urbis Museum by its creative director Scott Burnham. Burnham's paper, "The VJ of the Everyday: Physically Re-mixing the Urban Visual", was an invigorating presentation on the changing visual face of the city, taking as its starting point Antonio Sant'Elia's famous statement, "Every generation must build its own city." Burnham's argument was not so much that every generation builds its own city but rather that every day builds its own city. He used a series of very contemporary visual examples of citizens interacting with the urban environment, not just artists "playing" with alternative interpretations of street signs but also citizens creating dialogues with each other through the material space on offer, for example, paper cups inserted in a chain link fence forming words that were changed from day to day.

"Visualising the City" offered an opportunity to experience many diverse presentations and meet many different people over the space of three days, the cumulative dialogue generated by the participants proposing a variety of visualisations of the city. Beyond the exchange of ideas and thoughts, however, perhaps the conference's greatest success was its cosmopolitan hospitality. It would be hard to dispute one delegate's comments that "Visualising the City" was "one of the warmest conferences I've been to in a long time."

Gender and East Asian Cinema: A Study Day

Gender and East Asian Cinema: A Study Day, Lakeside Arts Centre, University of Nottingham, 21 October 2005

A report by Martin Fradley, Freelance Scholar

Taking place within the pristine environs of the Lakeside Arts Centre situated within Nottingham University's expansive main campus, this lively study day focusing upon issues of gender and representation in East Asian cinema was organised by staff and research students affiliated to the University's Institute of Film and Television Studies. Despite its relative brevity, the mini-conference nevertheless attracted a healthy cross-national range of delegates, including scholars from as far afield as Canada, Singapore, Taiwan and Hungary. Scheduled to coincide with the Arts Centre's East Asian Film Festival (which itself included an impressive array of screenings, with films from China, Hong Kong, South Korea, Japan and Taiwan), the study day and the festival were unquestionably symptomatic events indicative of the current interest in East Asian cinema(s) on both popular and critical fronts.

Broadly split into a series of unremittingly excellent keynote speakers interspersed with slightly more inconsistent parallel panel sessions, the study day opened in earnest with an introduction from Julian Stringer (Nottingham University) followed by a revealing anecdote from co-organiser Sabrina Yu (Nottingham University) concerning her experience at a major conference in Beijing earlier this year ("National, Transnational, and International: Chinese Cinema and Asian Cinema in the Context of Globalisation", June 6-7 2005). In stressing the lack of critical attention to issues of gender and representation at this event (particularly surprising given gender studies' firmly established place within the humanities), Yu's emphasis on this curiously absent presence served as the central rhetorical impetus for the day's discussion and debate.

With titles such as "Masculinity Revisited", "Gendering Japan", "Re-framing Femininity", "The Subject of Stardom", and a session devoted to Wong Kar Wai and his celebrated *In the Mood for Love* (2000), the panels and keynote sessions covered a pleasingly broad range of genres, nationalities and periods, from Dolores Martinez's (SOAS, University of London) dissection of the evolution of *Rashomon* (1950) through its various (transnational) remakes and Jinhee Choi's (Carleton University, Canada) perceptive analysis of South Korean Romantic Comedies, through papers by Bruce Carson (London Metropolitan University) and Jessica Langer (Royal Holloway, London) on contemporary Japanese horror, and on to Rayna Denison's (University of Sussex) paper "Miyazaki's Women: Representation and Stardom in *Princess Mononoke* (1997)", Colette Balmain's overview of "traumatic masculinity" in Japanese Science Fiction cinema of the 1950s and 1960s, and Sue Clayton's (Royal Holloway, London) enthusiastic description of screenwriting in Asia (though personally I was less than convinced by her intimations of the radical potential of what she dubbed "Buddhist narrative").

Amidst all this diversity, it was Mark Gallagher (University of Nottingham) who provided perhaps the most succinct synopsis of the key critical threads that structured the study day. Acting as chair for the concluding roundtable discussion, Gallagher highlighted both the potential freedoms and restrictions of studying gender in East Asian Cinema(s). Arguing that while the cinemas of China, South Korea, Vietnam, Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan et al may well offer alternatives to restrictive (and, broadly speaking, "Western") gender norms, Gallagher also noted the importance of identifying the national, cultural and historical specificity of gendered representation in any given film text, and also the necessity of avoiding potentially homogenising and over-arching terms such as "East Asian" in order to localise our understanding of those cinemas. Moving on to what was perhaps the central theme of the conference, Gallagher stressed the various ways in which these various national cinemas are constantly (and inevitably) in negotiation with their mainstream Western counterparts, not least in their ever-more transglobal distribution and concomitant appropriation(s) of generic norms and successful commercial formats from Hollywood itself. This was a proposition that in itself renders the notion of an "authentic" national cinema at best problematic; at worst, defunct. This then led into a discussion of the dilution - or "McDonaldisation", if you will - of that selfsame cultural specificity as "East Asian" films become increasingly geared towards a non-specific global market. As the debate continued, several delegates made the point that even our taken-for-granted critical terms and paradigms (psychoanalysis and queer theory were both namedropped at this juncture) may well serve as a form of critical imperialism, casually imposing Western concepts onto a culture for whom they are alien (and maybe even irrelevant). Repeated warnings about the ease with which Western critics (and, indeed, audiences) are inclined to see through a profoundly distorting ethnographic or Orientalist lens once again underlined the importance of negotiating the balance between the local and the global, and between cultural specificity and the totalizing impulse of what might quaintly be dubbed high Theory.

Coming to the conference with an interest more in "gender" than in national cinema(s) per se, it was interesting to note just how many of the debates seemed familiar and even well-rehearsed from critical analysis of gendered representation in less marginal cinemas (read: Hollywood). For example, towards the end of his paper on *Mambo Girls* (1957), Gary Needham (Nottingham Trent University) noted the ways in which the weak, "feminised" and ornamental men of the consumerist Hong Kong musical examined in his paper were later displaced - arguably in deeply reactionary fashion - by the considerably more potent, muscular and "remasculinized" figure of the martial arts hero. To illustrate his point, Needham referred to the iconic image of a taut and toned Bruce Lee stripped to the waist. Needless to say, strong arguments about the dubious political investments in such hypermasculine male bodies have been made by the likes of Susan Jeffords (1994) in relation to mainstream American action pictures such as *Die Hard* (1988) and *Terminator 2* (1991).

Similarly, Jinhee Choi's lively discussion of the subversive potential of the liminal female "tomboy" in Korean Romantic Comedy punctuated as it was by hugely entertaining excerpts from *My Sassy Girl* (2001) and *My Tutor Friend* (2003) came to similarly ambivalent conclusions as, say, Yvonne Tasker (1998) in her analysis of big-budget Hollywood products such as *The Long Kiss Goodnight* and *Twister* (both 1996). Again, Jessica Langer's paper on "the mysterious feminine" in director Takashi Miike's *Audition* (1999) expressed an healthy uncertainty over the representation of transgressive femininity akin in many ways to the "monstrous feminine" of Barbara Creed's (1993) analysis, or the violent post-feminist re-articulation(s) of gendered identities described by Carol Clover in her influential book *Men, Women and Chainsaws* (1992). Sabrina Yu's paper, "From Father's Son to Mother's Son:

Reconstruction of Chinese Masculinity in Jet-Li's *Fong Sai-yuk* (1993)" echoed both discussions of the loss of faith in the paternal signifier in American cinema in the 1970s and, more recently, the Oedipal angst of Susan Faludi's impressionistic survey contemporary U.S. masculinities in *Stiffed: The Betrayal of Modern Man* (1999). Finally (and perhaps most obviously), both Leon Hunt (Brunel University) and Lo Mun-Hou (National University of Singapore) raised the age-old film studies chestnut of the Mulveyan "gaze" in their respective discussions of *House of Flying Daggers* (2004) and *Chinese Odyssey 2002* (2002).

I wish to stress that this is in no way intended as a critique of the various scholars' work (though these were certainly not isolated examples), and unquestionably this sense of critical *deja-vu* was symptomatic of the cross-cultural negotiations at play in these films as highlighted by many of the speakers. As ever, the cultural and political anxieties of societies in transition become mapped across gender in various ways via the representational field of popular culture – and this was a given in many, if not all of the speakers' arguments. However, rather than see such all-too-familiar processes as somehow providing a "truth" about gender, I was struck by how the study day as a whole was emblematic of the eternal problem of "speaking" gender (and, therefore, part of the process of "speaking" gender into existence). Perhaps, then, it may be worth considering how we as scholars inevitably collude in the perpetuation of restrictive notions about gender (the problematic and fluid potential of the cinematic "gaze", for example, or the reliance upon the banal masculine/feminine binary). For this writer, the study day in many ways provided food for thought about potential new directions for gender theory, and illustrated just how badly we need a new language with which to speak, critique and reformulate gendered identities and representations both within and without the potent fantasy space of the cinema.

The relative absence of any substantial critical material on contemporary East Asian cinemas and the debilitating effect this had upon otherwise popular and successful undergraduate courses, was perhaps the most frequently overheard topic of conversation throughout the study day. However, with recently-published titles such as Chi-Yun Shin & Julian Stringer (ed.), *New Korean Cinema* (Edinburgh University Press, 2005), Jay McRoy (ed.), *Japanese Horror Cinema* (Edinburgh University Press, 2005), Yingjin Zhang's *Chinese National Cinema* (Routledge, 2004), not to mention a forthcoming collection stemming from this stimulating study day entitled *Gender & East Asian Cinema* (edited by Julian Stringer and Sabrina Yu), coupled with the burgeoning interest in East Asian national cinemas at both the international box office and within the academy, complaints about a dearth of critical writing on the subject are unlikely to persist for very much longer. To this end, the study day stands at the cusp of what will almost certainly be a fascinating "new" avenue for film scholars.