

# Cinema at the Periphery

Cinema at the Periphery, University of St. Andrews, Scotland, 15–17 June 2006

## A report by Pietari Kääpä, University of East Anglia, UK

The recent years have seen a rising interest in transnational cinemas, with a plethora of exciting and invigorating academic texts challenging the previously-held perceptions of monolithic national cultures. We are seeing the emergence of numerous films that focus on liminal identities and cultural groups that live in the interstices of conventional society, and who constantly transgress established boundaries. In such cultural production, the hierarchical relationship between the centre and the peripheries becomes replaced by instability, liminality, border-crossing and migratory movements. In the light of these cultural developments, the Cinema at the Periphery conference held at the University of St. Andrews on the 15-17 June 2006 was a timely symposium dedicated to the "re-assessment of dominant frameworks and the shifting of established paradigms".

### **Day One: Industry/Transnational Realities**

The first day was devoted to discussing international co-production and funding and the ways in which these impact on minority and/or peripheral cinemas. The papers were to focus on the ways in which peripheral cinemas interacted with one another in situations of co-production. Would such co-production contribute to the empowerment of peripheries or result in re-orientating the dispersive peripheries towards centralisation?

The first paper of the day, "Homophilic Transnationalism: the 'Advance Party' Initiative", was by Mette Hjort (University of Hong Kong). She focused on the ways in which artistic and financial transnational collaboration between artists from small nations can lead to a mutually productive, even emancipatory relationship. Hjort successfully argued that such a collaborative process has the possibility to create transnational dialogue that transgresses national borders and results in politically enthusiastic cinema that reveals the periphery as the locus of experimentation.

Rod Stoneman (Huston School of Film & Digital Media) explored the 'radical pluralism' of contemporary Irish cinema. His paper, "Dimpsey at the Edge", suggested that intelligent, politically motivated cinema can provide vital counter-currents for hegemonic conceptions of national cinemas, and in turn establish a multitude of internal peripheries that further fragment the constitution of centralising forces.

Duncan Petrie's (University of Auckland) paper, "Small National Cinemas in an Era of Globalisation", examined various forms of indigenous cinema in New Zealand and the constraints, opportunities and dilemmas such cinemas face in a competition-driven market place. The paper successfully drew a poignant picture of the ways in which small national cinemas are constantly re-thinking their strategies, not only in terms of Hollywood competition, but also in relation to the indigenous relationships between film-makers, audiences, state-funding and commercial sources of investment.

Sheldon Lu (University of California) gave an insightful paper, "Emerging from Underground and the Periphery: Independent Cinema in Contemporary China", on the changing status of previously suppressed underground independent film-makers in China. As the old political structures in China become more open to the dispersive influence of centrifugal forces, we need to re-imagine the old dichotomies between the centre and the periphery and the national and the transnational.

Lúcia Nagib's (Leeds University) paper, "Japanese Cinema and Local Modernity", focused on the ways in which a polycentric approach to cultural modernity can provide alternative ways of thinking about cinema's capabilities of communication. Nagib argued that certain forms of Asian cinema draw primarily from antecedent indigenous art forms and only secondarily from Western ones, which allows the films to have a political dimension where identification becomes a process of emancipation rather than regression.

The five panellists and the open discussion resulted in a thought-provoking examination of the state of cultural production in a globalising world. The discussions moved beyond the arguably out-dated dichotomies of the national and the global and the centre and the periphery to a more thorough understanding of the multi-faceted and often contradictory nature of contemporary cultural representations.

To make the event even more pertinent, the organisers of the conference had organised a number of screenings of films that could be considered peripheral. The films of the first evening, Mohammed Soueid's *The Civil War* (2002) and Fatih Akin's *Crossing the Bridge: the Sound of Istanbul* (2005), encapsulated many of the themes of the conference with their focus on peripheral identity-building and transnational interaction.

## **Day Two: Narrative/Context**

The aim of the second day was to discuss the importance of place as a means to challenge the concepts of centre and periphery. This was to be achieved by focusing on a number of films that foreground liminal spaces of peripheral interaction, where cultural discourses move beyond considerations of centrality.

Laura Marks' (Simon Fraser University) paper, "Geopolitics Hides Something in the Image: Arab Cinema Unfolds Something Else", dealt with ways in which non-industrial and auteurist Arab cinema deconstructs conventional notions of Arabness. Her arguments successfully discussed the ways in which peripheral cinemas function along different political and representational parameters than hegemonic Western forms of cinema.

Faye Ginsburg (New York University) focused on the ways in which Aboriginal film-making and political activism negotiate diversity with the Australian nation-state and offer alternative accounts that undermine monolithic national narratives. Ginsburg's paper, "Black Screens and Cultural Citizenship", illuminatingly revealed the multi-faceted ways in which we must think of Australianess as a diverse, often contested cultural formation.

Dudley Andrew's (Yale University) paper, "Turbulent Waves, Stagnant Seas: Awash in World Cinema", focused on the ways international distribution and the film festival circuit generate 'new waves' of cinematic expression. In contrast to 'canonical' waves such as The French New Wave, these new waves (e.g. New Korean Cinema) are not coherently unified or truly political movements, but are instead examples of commercial cinema. Rather, they are

only marketed as coherent cultural and political movements. Whereas the majority of papers so far had focused on the ways in which notions of centrality are eroding, Andrew's paper was especially refreshing, as it looked at the ways in which global capitalist movements attempt to negate the dispersion of the centre-periphery dichotomy.

Bill Marshall (University of Glasgow) contrasted Quebec minority cinema with the politics of queer cinema and the ways in which the de-territorialization of French identity and language impacts upon the notion of minor cinemas. Marshall's paper, "Deleuze, Quebec and Cinemas of Minor Frenchness", examined the changing hierarchical relationships between major and minor cultures and provided an excellent allegory for the ways in which notions of centre and periphery are in the process of constant negotiation in contemporary cultural discourse.

The second day provided invigorating challenges to notions of cultural homogeneity and dichotomous concepts of the centre and the periphery. The four papers argued that cultural production is a constantly fluid battlefield, where cultural spaces are revealed as fragmented and contested. Furthermore, while Western modes of discourse may still be dominant, new emerging modes of thinking constantly challenge these -- all matters examined in the evening's film *Beau Travail* (1998). Such challenges not only rise from non-Western locations, but can form at the heart of the centre through minority politics and de-territorialization. Of course, the West may try to 'strike back' with appropriatory 'waves', but the efficiency of these strikes is under question.

### **Day Three: 'Iconography/Identity'**

The final day of the conference focused on celebrations of marginality and the ways in which peripheral places become legitimate spaces in which to rediscover diversity, multi-culturalism and new forms of civic nationalism. What we find in these previously neglected spaces are new understandings of the ways in which identities are negotiated.

John Caughie's (University of Glasgow) paper, "The Angel's Share: *Morvern Callar* and the Difficulty of Art Cinema", discussed how Scottish cinema privileges multiple subjectivities over the conception of a collective national identity. Caughie insightfully displayed the ways in which contemporary cinematic representations move beyond the somewhat regressive and limiting questions of national identity to a level that reflects the more fragmented nature of social existence.

Pam Cook (University of Southampton) discussed the ways in which the work of Baz Luhrmann negotiates between Global Hollywood and Australian national cinema. Cook argued that Luhrmann's films consciously negate national specificity in favour of a global mode of address. Her paper, "Out from Down Under: Baz Luhrmann and Australian Cinema", much like Dudley Andrew's, traced counter-peripheral movements and shed valuable light on the ways in which dominant cultural bodies attempt to negate the effects of peripheral dispersion.

Patricia Pisters (University of Amsterdam) considered the position of Tanger as a gateway between Africa and Europe. Pisters' paper, "Filming Tanger: Migratory Identities in North Africa", examined the ways in which issues of neo-colonialism, post-colonialism and temporality resonate in narratives chronicling the relationship between African and European identities and the liminal Tanger. Her paper proposed important questions on the formulation

of dominant and minority identities in peripheral locations, where power relationships are inherently fluid.

Hamid Naficy's (Rice University) paper, "Interstitial, Transnational, and National -- Iranian Silent Cinema", focused on the transnational dimensions of Iranian cinema. He presented a thoroughly convincing argument of the ways in which national cinema is in fact a process of cultural exchange between a multitude of factors: national, transnational, sub-national and international. Naficy's contribution was instrumental in clarifying the ways in which 'national' cultural production should be not seen through a monolithic lens, but through a series of often contesting discourses.

Kristian Feigelson's (Sorbonne Nouvelle) paper examined the problematics of making sense of the changing structure of the film world, when global media-scapes and increasing peripheral localisation challenge antecedent hierarchies of the film world. His paper, "A Visual Map of the Film World", argued that individual film-makers and history from below -- that is, individual memory -- can provide us with a way in which to understand the contemporary changes in social existence.

The third day of the conference provided a range of papers that complemented and contradicted each other, thereby suggesting the multi-faceted nature of the field of transnational cinema studies. There are no easy or simple answers to questions of peripheral identity formations and their respective cultural representations. Appropriately, the film of the evening was Knut Erik Jensen's *Cool and Crazy* (2001), which celebrated individual and communal locality, but also showed us the dangers of increasing globalism.

The 'Cinema at the Periphery' conference was a highly successful and timely affair. There were plenty of chances to interact with a variety of academics, film-makers, publishers and post-graduates, which created a friendly and enjoyable atmosphere. The conference emphasised the notion that questions of national cinema need to be thought of in terms of interchange and border-crossing, rather than persisting with the antiquated notions of insular nations and their respective cinemas. But as transnational flows of culture and global capitalism permeate even the smallest of nations, the dangers are that small cinemas will suffer. But this negativity was not the sense that one got from the conference. Rather, the mood was somewhat optimistic -- a celebration of the multi-faceted nature of 'peripheral' cinemas from across the globe, which can challenge the oppressive homogeneity of mainstream film and dominant concepts of centre and periphery and articulate new forms of identity politics.

# Gender and National Identity in Film and Television: A Postgraduate Conference

Gender and National Identity in Film and Television: A Postgraduate Conference, University of East Anglia, 23 June 2006

## A report by Tim Snelson, University of East Anglia

The chief intention of this one day postgraduate event was to allow research students to share their ideas regarding the intersection of gender and national identity in film and television, and to make connections over mutual interests that might lead to future professional relationships. The conference programme explained that the main organisers Shelley Cobb and Sarah Godfrey decided to spearhead the event because of the lack of scholarship in this area. They were apparently delighted to receive such an enthusiastic response to their call for papers. 'Gender and National Identity' saw twenty-four national and international delegates presenting a diverse range of papers running over two parallel sessions. More than sixty five colleagues were in attendance adding to the lively and friendly debate; in fact a number of delegates commented that it was the 'friendliest' atmosphere of any conference they had attended. Whilst the event was organised and run entirely by postgraduate students, University of East Anglia (UEA) faculty members Andrew Higson, Yvonne Tasker and Sarah Churchwell chaired panels, bringing their own expertise and research interests to bear on the day. In addition, the choice of keynote speaker Ginette Vincendeau perfectly encompassed the event's course between global ambition and local charm.

Professor Vincendeau (Director of Film Studies at King's College, London) was a highly engaging and also extremely apt keynote speaker for this conference: as Professor Tasker explained in her introduction, Vincendeau was awarded the first ever film PhD at UEA. Her enticing paper entitled "Femme Fatale is not a French Word -- the Strange Absence of Femme Fatales in French Cinema" had an ambitiously extensive scope and perfectly reflected the conference's aim of interrogating (mis)conceptions regarding the intersection of gender and national contexts. Vincendeau suggested that whilst the ancestry of the American femme fatale lies in nineteenth century French art and literature, this ambiguous figure is absent from French film. She proposed that the female characters retrospectively deigned as such in 1930s and 1940s French cinema are either not threatening enough or alternately too obviously evil to exude the ambivalence and resultant transgressive power of their transatlantic counterparts. She linked this shift towards vilifying women to a spirit of post-war emasculation and loss of national identity resultant of the realisation of Nazi occupation. Vincendeau suggested that perhaps only with the generational shift in filmmaking styles, and subsequent self-conscious appropriation of classical Hollywood tropes by the Nouvelle Vague, does the femme fatale figure emanate in French cinema.

This keynote speech raised two of the key themes of the day, which were explored in a series of usefully themed sessions. Although the papers covered a wide range of genres, nationalities and periods, it was recognised, perhaps unsurprisingly, that traditional gender and national tropes were remobilised following challenges to national boundaries, be they

military, economic or cultural. The papers particularly focused around discourses emanating from immediate post-war European and post-colonial contexts, particularly the conflict arising from a sense of culture that looks to the past to legitimate itself and the idea of state that looks to the future through the discourse of 'progress' to define itself as a unified nation. For example Nandana Bose's (University of Nottingham) discussion of censorship and sexuality in 1990s Hindi cinema highlighted the attempt to fortify the boundaries of the Indian nation from the threat of globalisation through the imposition of an orthodox Hindu 'politics of purity' upon the symbolic site of the female body. This tendency to centre women's bodies as the transfer point for nationalist discourse was highlighted in a number of other contexts. These included Bridget Birchall's (University of Exeter) excellent paper on the "Contradictory Feminisms of Catherine Deneuve in 1971 and 1972" and Jennifer Clarke's (University Of Southern California) discussion of the use of female superheroes in 1970s American television, particularly Wonder Woman and Isis, in justifying America's global power. Both highlighted the hegemonic appropriation of 'Second Wave Feminism' to shore up increasingly diffused national spaces under global capitalism. Bringing these debates into a more recent context Rebecca Naughten (University of Newcastle) convincingly explained how Penelope Cruz has been constructed as the embodiment of the Spanish nation through her recent film roles and the subsequent media discourse around her stardom.

However, although the female body is clearly still a locus for onscreen national debates, the day's discussions highlighted the recent emphasis on working class masculinity in crisis within the specificities of disparate national contexts. Relevant papers included Aramchan Lee (Southampton University) on 'traumatic masculinity' in contemporary South Korean cinema, Ruth Quiney's (Birkbeck College, London) conflation of the figure of the domestic terrorist in *Fight Club* (1999) and the ideology of the 'War on Terror', and Rifat Siddiqui (University of East Anglia) problematising the notion of hybridity through a case study of Muslim masculinities and romance in British Asian film.

Perhaps the most original take on the theme of masculinity in crisis was Claire Westall's (Warwick University) use of cricket as a mode of film analysis, specifically with reference to Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game* (1992). Westall suggested that the film, structured largely around a cricketing metaphor, highlights national and gendered identities as an 'in-between space' through the repeated allusion to the batsman's negotiation of the crease; she in fact mapped the narrative's many contestations onto a diagram of the cricket pitch. In addition to providing an engaging analytical tool for this particular film, at a meta-discursive level the successful application of this framework drew attention to the potential inadequacy or arbitrariness of many dominant modes of analysis when applied to an increasingly complex trans-national field.

Some of these concerns regarding appropriate analytic frameworks were furthered in a useful closing session chaired by organisers Shelley Cobb and Sarah Godfrey, in which delegates were encouraged to give feedback on the main issues raised during the day. It was suggested that more work was needed regarding production and reception contexts in relation to the interaction of gender and national identity. There was some work in this vein at the conference, with for example Daniel Martin (University of East Anglia) discussing the British reception of Japanese horror with specific reference to the gendering of audiences and critical canons. Daisy Hasan (University of Wales, Swansea) brought the question of audience reception to bear on the dialectic between traditional culture and westernization in contemporary India. Analysing the popular television serial *India Calling* Hasan highlighted the problematic ideology of much of the narrative, but demonstrated the textual sophistication

of much of the serial's audience, particularly through an analysis of fan discourse. Letters from fan communities underlined the audience's negotiation between the idea of *India Calling* as a mimetic reflection of their own urban lifestyles and paradoxically as a self-conscious mode of address that referenced a purely imaginary sense of nation and gender. In the concluding discussion session perhaps the most persistently referenced area for productive development was the concept of the 'post-national'. This was fruitfully explored in Pietari Kääpä's (University of East Anglia) "Men without National Pasts: Post-National Gender Identities in the Films of Aki Kaurismaki". The conflation of the ironic deployment of Finnish stereotypes and inter-textual modes of gender performativity in Kaurismaki's characters is usefully compared and contrasted with the French Nouvelle Vague's assimilation of iconic Hollywood gender representations as discussed by Vincendeau. However, through Kaurismaki's contemporary post-national lens the authenticity of national and gendered identities are more purposefully overturned, whilst the global flow of cultural tropes between national spaces is treated with far greater satire and probing.

Whilst the post-national usefully draws attention to the concepts of nation and gender as contested spaces, the ironic deployment of Hollywood inter-texts serves to highlight the dominance of American cultural hegemony and the persistence with which other national cinemas and television media define themselves in opposition to dominant American representations. For example Lindsay Steenberg (University of East Anglia) discussed masculinity in Canadian TV through the figure of the 'Mountie' in crime shows, suggesting that his benevolence and paternalism is constructed in direct opposition to stereotypes of American masculinity drawn from film and television. These 'Mountie' shows therefore simultaneously represent an ironic mode of self-address and a reassertion of Canadian masculinity. The delegates concluded that the 'ironic' deployment of national stereotypes was a pervasive yet not unproblematic development. Therefore the 'Gender and National Identity' conference encouraged lively and productive debate that drew attention to future potentialities for analysing this dialectic so central to discussions of national and post-national cinematic and televisual landscapes.

# International Film Workshop on Hero: Anatomy of a Chinese Blockbuster

International Film Workshop on Hero: Anatomy of a Chinese Blockbuster, The University of Nottingham Ningbo, China (UNNC), 13-15 April 2006

## A report by Shi Yu, University of Ningbo, China

*Hero*, directed by the fifth generation filmmaker Zhang Yimou, is considered as the first indigenous Chinese blockbuster to achieve world wide popularity. As a globally successful 'event movie', *Hero* embodies multi-layered economic, political and cultural meanings and as such, since its release in 2002, it has attracted both Chinese and international scholars from various academic backgrounds to analyse the phenomenon created by the film. Its controversial narratives have also sparked exciting discussions in cross-disciplines such as Chinese studies, film and media studies, cultural and communications studies, as well as political and social sciences.

The University of Nottingham is the first British -- in fact, the first foreign -- university that has established an independent campus on the Chinese mainland, namely the University of Nottingham Ningbo, China (UNNC). The brand new campus of UNNC became fully functional in September 2005. It seems rather fitting, therefore, that the first international conference organised and hosted by the UNNC was on the theme, '*Hero*: Anatomy of a Chinese Blockbuster'. As Dr Julian Stringer, Associate Professor in Film Studies, (University of Nottingham) has said, 'The theme of this workshop signals the East-West transnational relations at the very heart of *Hero* itself.' Dr Ming-Yeh T. Rawnsley, Head of the Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies Ningbo and chief organiser of this workshop, has also confirmed that the workshop and subsequent publications will draw upon staff expertise in several key areas of scholarly endeavour in both the Nottingham and Ningbo campuses. Moreover, she stressed that 'close examinations of *Hero* will help us understand how the forces of globalisation coincide and conflict with localisation through economic, political and cultural processes.'

The three-day event began with an opening ceremony at the UNNC Auditorium on 13 April 2006. After the welcome speech by the UNNC Provost Ian Gow, Dr Stringer delivered a public lecture entitled '*Hero*: How Chinese is it?' in which he posed several important questions, including; what made *Hero* resonate so extensively with its audiences? What is the 'Chineseness' the audience sees in *Hero*? How do we define 'Chinese' cinema today when blockbuster movies are not only often financed through both Chinese and Western sources, employ international stars and draw upon both Chinese and Western narrative styles?

The plenary session was followed by a screening of *Hero* and a post-screening discussion led by Dr Stringer and Dr Armida de la Garza, Lecturer in International Communications Studies, UNNC. The audience, mainly UNNC students, responded to the film in a truly fervent way. They raised many contentious points -- for example, does the film really reflect Chinese history? Does it matter (if so, to what extent) if a film distorts certain historical truth? Who is (or are) the hero(es)? Is the First Emperor of Qin powerful or powerless in the

film? How can the film be improved? What would be a better title for this film and why? Many scholars from Australia, Singapore, Hong Kong, and the UK were impressed by the student participants at the workshop. As Professor Louise Edwards of Chinese Studies, University of Technology Sydney (UTS), has admitted, 'The interactions with the UNNC students are a highlight for me. It is amazing to witness how outspoken and articulate these students are.'

However, the real climax of the workshop was 'the study day', held on 14 April, and consisting of four panels. The first panel dealt with national identity. Dr De la Garza presented a paper on "Negotiating National Identity", which was concerned with how national identities are transformed. Her paper intended to bridge the gap between theory and practice by examining film-making and film-viewing, a cultural practice that has been closely related to national identities, together with a boundary-blurring practice, for instance globalisation. The next speaker, Dr Yingjie Guo of UTS, gave a talk on "National Unification Overrides All". He connected history making and the formation of national identities by comparing the First Emperor of Qin with Chairman Mao. Dr Guo argued that *Hero* affirmed the First Emperor's national unification project, which echoes the statist rhetoric on unity, stability and self-sacrifice of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Dr Yiyan Wang, Chinese Studies of University of Sydney, traced the origin of the Chinese state in her paper, "The Emperor and the Assassin: China's National Hero and Myth of State Origin". She raised the issues of the connection between the changing meanings of three concepts and Chinese national imaging – 'China' (*Zhongguo*), 'All-Under-Heave' (*tianxia*), and the 'Central Plain' (*zhongyuan*). In her opinion, these three concepts are closely linked to the myth of Chinese state.

The second panel continued on the theme of politics and nationalism. Dr Xiaoling Zhang, Institute of Contemporary Chinese Studies, (University of Nottingham), wrote a paper on "The Politics of *Hero*". She examined the film within the modern Chinese political context and discovered its indirect relations with various CCP policies, including media censorship. The second paper of this panel, "Towards a Global Blockbuster", was presented by two Hong Kong representatives, Dr Anthony Fung, (Journalism and Communication Studies, Chinese University of Hong Kong - CUHK), and Professor Joseph Man Chan, the Changjiang (Chair Professor in the School of Journalism at Fudan University) and Professor in Journalism and Communication, (CUHK). They tackled the issues of storylines, production and distribution from the perspectives of political economy. The authors discovered that the decontextualizing and depoliticizing strategies implemented by *Hero* actually matched the PRC's media policy which tends to minimize social conflict, contradictions and upheaval and pitch in with the nationalistic ideology of the state. It was followed by a paper by Professor Xiaoming Chen, (Chinese Studies of Beijing University), and entitled "Visions of 'All-Under-Heaven' (*tianxia*)". Professor Chen concluded that although Zhang Yimou has used *Hero* to interpret his version of world history and reality, he has tried to express his views in an Eastern/Chinese aesthetical style. As a result, *Hero* has become a product of spatial epic combining the traditional Chinese grant vision of 'All-Under-Heaven'.

The third panel approached the film from the angle of cultural studies. Professor Edwards of UTS presented a fascinating paper on "Swords and Sex with Women Warriors". She pointed out a crucial fact that there is often a similarity between the western and Chinese audiences: the dissimilarity usually comes from different gender. Thus Professor Edwards emphasised the importance of audience research based on gender. She also highlighted the gender inequality in *Hero*, as well as the generally inferior social status of the female in the Chinese

society and Chinese cultural representations. The following paper by Mr German Gill (International Communications, UNNC), was entitled "The Aesthetics of the Instant in *Hero* by Zhang Yimou". The paper explored the aesthetic and metaphysical meaning of the subversion of the conventional space-time continuum to create a very particular reality through the scenes of *Hero* filmed in slow motion. The third paper, "The Present made up of Different Times (and Places): Towards a Spectrology of International and Exchange between East-Asia and the West in Relations to Visual Culture", was delivered by Dr Paul Gladston (Associate Professor and Head of International Communications, UNNC). Strictly speaking, this paper did not address *Hero* directly. Yet as it turned our attention to visual culture as a whole, the paper attempted to place our viewing of *Hero* in a wider modern Chinese visual cultural context.

The fourth panel was on the theme of film studies. "Music and *Hero*" was presented by Mrs Katy Gow (UNNC). She addressed the special role taken by the music created by Tan Dun, a Chinese composer with strong traditional Chinese musical roots, but at the same time used to collaborate with world renowned western trained musicians. "Such a unique musical relationship", Mrs Gow said, "not only suggests an extremely creative end product, but one that is clearly targeting the western market and therefore suggests a score which is not only appropriate for the Chinese audience, but also one that translates well for the western ear." Her talk clearly highlighted how this might be achieved and in particular, emphasised cultural cross-referencing and overall effectiveness of the score. Professor Haizhou Wang of Beijing Film Academy then spoke on "The Format of Chinese Martial Art (*wuxia*) Films and the Rewrite of Such Format by *Hero*". Martial arts cinema is allegedly the third largest movie industry in the world after Hollywood and Bollywood. It is no wonder that the martial arts genre would be a typical choice for a Chinese movie wishing to enter the international market. However, Professor Wang argued that Zhang Yimou's *Hero* introduced scenes of martial arts fighting but deconstructed the format of the genre's narratives. Hence the controversies surrounding *Hero* emerged partly from the fact that the audience identified the film as a martial arts movie but one that failed to satisfy the expectations of the genre. The final paper, "Martial Arts, Star Dust and Historical Memory", was co-written by Dr Yi Zheng and Professor Stephanie Donald, (both Chinese Studies, UTS). The paper criticized Zhang Yimou's first 'wuxia' blockbuster as Zhang's sell-out to international market.

Overall, the aim of the conference was achieved through two main strategies. One was to offer diverse perspectives through which to analyse Zhang Yimou's *Hero*. The other was to bring a sophisticated interdisciplinary approach to analyse the complicated cultural and political phenomenon presented and created by the film. The chief organiser of the workshop, Dr Rawnsley, is very optimistic about future research output from the workshop -- there is currently an edited volume and special/focused issues of journals being planned and organised. It is hoped that these publications will add to current literature in relevant subjects.

# From Silver Screens to Liquid Crystals: Screen Studies Conference

From Silver Screens to Liquid Crystals: Screen Studies Conference, University of Glasgow,  
30 June-2 July 2006

## A report by Leon Gurevitch and Alexandra Simcock, Lancaster University, UK

This year's *Screen Studies Conference* was bigger than ever. Thanks to the availability of two new rooms and an impressive lecture theatre in the Charles Wilson building, the conference could boast five or six panels in each session in addition to three plenaries. Scheduled to speak in the closing plenary, John Caldwell (University of California Los Angeles -- UCLA) was unfortunately unable to attend, but there was no shortage of big names, with speakers including John Ellis (Royal Holloway), John Corner (University of Liverpool), Annette Kuhn (Lancaster University), Richard Maltby (Flinders University), Jeffrey Sconce (Northwestern University), Lynn Spigel (Northwestern University), and Glasgow's own John Caughie and Karen Lury.

In the opening plenary, entitled 'Television aesthetics: after film theory', John Ellis, John Caughie and Karen Lury presented papers that set the tone for a conference which, despite no strict pre-determined theme, would have an emphasis on TV aesthetics. John Ellis got events underway with a paper building on the notion of televisual "witness" explored in his book *Seeing Things: Television in the Age of Uncertainty* (2002). What he wished to do with the idea of witness in *Seeing Things*, Ellis explained, was to move television theory beyond the realism debate -- to begin to theorise the relationship between the viewer and the text, rather than the text and the object. His paper continued this interest by further interrogating what we might understand by the term "witness" -- what models are appropriate in understanding the media act of witnessing. Arguing that witness involves both engagement and distance, Ellis reasoned that if we are to invoke a religious parallel it should not be the rapt, confessing witness required by proselytising faiths, but those practices where the witnesses are merely required to be present. Televisual witnessing, Ellis further suggested, has something to do with time limits -- with having the same frame of reference as others, with sociability, with gossip. What we witness on TV has a temporarily meaningful nature. Moreover, we are rarely eye-witness to *events*, as we were for 9/11. More often what we witness is the *aftermath of events*. In this sense, Ellis argued, we are not eye-witnesses in the judicial meaning of the term; rather we are witnesses to our times.

Focussing on the way that we are engaged by television, John Caughie likewise discussed TV in terms of both detachment and absorption, arguing that contemporary TV's excessive style and exhibitionism is not evidence *against* the idea of TV as distraction but has come about precisely *because* of the distraction of TV. Also showing a concern with television's engagement of viewers, Karen Lury's paper "'The Ghost Concerns Us': remembering public service television" rounded the plenary off by exploring a public service aesthetic in British television. Lury began by considering the connection between the recent shift in the BBC's

stated public service obligations and its changed conception of its audience. She pointed out that the discrete, identifiable national audience known to the BBC as the "public" has started to give way to a less easily defined global audience and global mission to provide "value" (a concept she suggested was linked to the BBC's changing brand identity). Taking as her examples clips from a wide variety of BBC broadcasts (*Pogle's Wood*, *Ascent of Man*, *Edge of Darkness*, and *Who Do You Think You Are?*), Lury appealed for recognition and understanding of the importance of television as a means of articulating conceptions of the "public". These examples, she argued, all shared a similar purpose, not only to inform, educate and entertain but also to address their audience as part of a public entity. In her concluding remarks Lury put forward the sobering thought that if the BBC continues its shift (as it surely will) from public service to global brand then its public purpose, however imperfect and fractured, will most likely be lost.

Subjects covered in the following day's sessions ranged from reality TV to queer TV, with several panels loosely revolving around the subject of television aesthetics -- a theme which would conclude the day with John Corner (University of Liverpool) and Cathy Johnson's (Royal Holloway) plenary, "Evaluating television aesthetics". There was also plenty of choice for cineastes. Our own panel was scheduled at the same time as speakers Lynsey Russell-Watts (University of Nottingham), Annette Kuhn (Lancaster University) and Richard Rushton (Lancaster University) discussing new approaches to psychoanalysis and cinema, and Iain Smith (University of Nottingham), Ruby Cheung (University of St. Andrews) and Min Lee (University of Warwick) forming a panel on transnational cinemas; as well as a panel on contemporary American serial television and an apparently well-attended panel entitled 'Historical struggle/the struggle for history: documents, witnesses, theories'.

Also scheduled at this time was a panel on 'Authentic and authenticating bodies', including a paper by Elke Weissmann (University of Glasgow) on *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*. Weissmann noted that while conventional crime drama tends to focus on perpetrators of crime, in *CSI* attention is shifted from the perpetrator to the victim. The concern is not "whodunit?" but "what happened?" and the body of the victim is instrumental in revealing the truth of events. Focusing on the first series in the *CSI* franchise, Weissmann examined how the text is constructed in relation to male victims, which dominate in the series, belying the assumption in much academic writing that the victims are predominantly female. This assumption is revealing however -- for Weissmann it is a result of the way that the series works to feminise its male victims, constructing them as passive by penetrating their bodies and denying them a voice in flashbacks. Revealing the continued value of textual analysis, Weissmann showed that it is only through close attention to the way that the series constructs meaning through narrative, image and sound that we can understand that the apparent empowerment of the victim to reveal the truth through forensic science only works towards greater empowerment of the investigators, who are constructed according to traditional racial and gender hierarchies.

On the final day of the conference, the 'Signifying horror: seen but not heard?' panel offered a strong assortment of papers. Alison Peirse (Lancaster University) took a close textual analysis approach to male victimisation with a paper on "The masculine 'body-in-pieces'" in classic horror film. Similarly to Weissmann, Peirse's case study challenged the common perception that the victims in classic horror films are predominantly female. Applying a close reading of *Werewolf of London* (1935), Peirse extended this premise to assert that framing and editing mechanisms position the spectator to masochistically identify with the protagonist and so gain pleasure from the on-screen destruction of the body. As a result, Peirse argued for

a revised understanding of the monstrous body in the horror genre. With an informal style of delivery and making good use of visuals, her paper was a welcome start to the day. Stan Link (Vanderbilt University) shifted the focus from image to sound with an interesting paper on "Cinematic contemplations of silence and death". Analysing extended sequences of Werner Herzog's *Nosferatu* (1979), as well as *Apocalypse Now* (1979), Link argued that the use of non-diegetic silence at the point of death or near death has become an aural shorthand that operates across genres. This he suggested raises a number of broader questions surrounding the prevalence of silence as a construction revealing broader philosophical, ritual and temporal significations. Andre Loiselle (Carleton University) concluded the panel with a paper laying out a thoughtful and mature framework toward the construction of villainy in horror. Picking up the spirit of Peirse's call for a revision of canonical horror theory, Loiselle offered a fresh approach to performance in horror films and drew attention to the lack of adequate research into the way in which monstrosity is constructed through performance. Within this framework Loiselle suggested that theatrical excess best symptomatises the conditions in which villainy is externalised and expressed on the screen in a manner analogous to the techniques used on stage. Acknowledging that he was eschewing deeper contemplations of meaning for an exploration of the surface, Loiselle refreshingly conceptualised the horror film villain in terms of an aberrant performativity -- as a composite of ostentatiously theatrical gestures and sounds -- rather than in the more familiar psychoanalytic terms (the villain as an icon of the repressed Id or a metaphor of otherness).

In a panel in the following session James Bennett (London Metropolitan University) also paid attention to performance, but in relation to TV personalities. Focusing on television presenter Alan Titchmarsh, Bennett discussed TV personalities in terms of television's preference for ordinariness and attainability rather than the unattainability that defines film stars. However Bennett was careful to note that while these TV personalities are often deemed to be "authentic" depictions of their ordinary selves, we must not ignore the way that their performances are constructed. Paying attention to performance, Bennett argued, can help us to understand the TV personality's on-screen appearance as a "televsual image" similar to the "star image" critics such as Richard Dyer have identified in film theory. Well-received, Bennett's paper led to a lively discussion of Alan Titchmarsh as a sex symbol.

Part of the same panel and equally concerned to understand the ordinariness of television, Herbert Schwaab (Ruhr University) presented a rather dense paper utilising American philosopher Stanley Cavell's writings to inform a reading of *King of Queens* in terms of everyday life. Dealing admirably with the noise from clips being shown in the next-door "Spook TV" panel (there is a lack of soundproofing between the new rooms), Glen Creeber (University of Wales, Aberystwyth), on the other hand, discussed recent programmes such as *Shameless* in terms of social realism. Raising questions about the place of social realism in our understanding of contemporary television, Creeber contrasted the black humour and exhibitionist aesthetic of *Shameless* to the dour style and documentary look of an earlier period of British TV drama. Together these three papers indicated the importance of everyday life for an understanding of television aesthetics.

However, attention was not only directed at ordinary cultural products. In a parallel session a panel on "Radical TV drama" offered two very diverse but equally interesting explorations of radical televisual forms. Starting with Lez Cooke's (Manchester Metropolitan University) consideration of BBC Scotland's 1961 television drama *Three Ring Circus*, both papers explored experimental television forms from opposite sides of the Atlantic. Cooke explored the modernist fantasy of the *Three Ring Circus*, through which, he argued, sprung a whole

line of experimental television made for the BBC in the early 1960s. In particular Cooke singled out for notice the remarkably innovative, non-naturalistic style of the production, noting the unusually long takes and the surrealistic montage sequences that constructed "a kaleidoscopic fantasy world." More generally Cooke then explored the origins of the experimental tradition in British television drama, asserting that *Three Ring Circus* be regarded as the founding text of modernist television drama. Following Cooke, Mark Bartlett (independent scholar) addressed the work of Stan Vanderbeek in his paper "The political-aesthetics of expanded-TV: Stan Vanderbeek's *Violence Sonata*." In an interesting dual screening Bartlett played Vanderbeek's previously unseen, *Violence Sonata* (which originally involved two audio-visual streams broadcast on two network channels simultaneously with the intention that viewers would borrow neighbours' sets) through two VHS players. As with Cooke's previous clip, the *Violence Sonata* (1970) still held up as a pertinently radical aesthetic form of televisual experimentation. However, though he took the *Violence Sonata* as his central audio-visual text, Bartlett's paper actually involved a more wide-ranging and incredibly rich examination of Vanderbeek's career in research positions in Bell Labs, MIT and CBS. Highlighting the way in which Vanderbeek has been classified as a visionary, Bartlett argued that his radical approach to television aesthetics was paradoxically driven by a pragmatic agenda: to bring a radical political aesthetic critique to bear on communications systems.

Following this last session the closing plenary by Jeffrey Sconce (Northwestern University) and Lynn Spigel (Northwestern University) concluded the conference with crowd-pleasing papers on *Snakes on a Plane* (2006) and "Warhol TV". Sconce's presentation on *Snakes on a Plane* moved beyond television to consider the range of audio-visual texts through which the film's hyper-marketed pretensions to B-movie kitsch has been circulated. Considering the way in which the film's reductive, high concept aesthetic has been identified and marketed as a virtue, Sconce asked what space is left for spectator resistance when even the knowing irony of enthusiastically consuming "bad films" has been marketed by the Hollywood apparatus. While he did not address the main themes of the conference in great detail, Sconce's performance was widely enjoyed and a hard act to follow. However, Lynn Spigel's paper on Warhol TV did not disappoint and explored Warhol's utilisation of television in the 1970s against a backdrop of discourses hostile to the use of an overtly commercial medium in producing "art." In their diverse subject matter -- the operations of mainstream cinema and art television -- these two papers epitomized the character of the conference as a whole: bigger than ever, able to accommodate more speakers and a wider range of papers, but nonetheless set apart from other conferences by the welcoming atmosphere and good-humoured nature of debates amongst academics with a variety of disciplinary perspectives. The *Screen Studies Conference* continues to be a great success.

## References

Ellis, John (2002) *Seeing Things: Television in the Age of Uncertainty*. London; New York: I.B. Tauris.