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The Society of Cinema and Media Studies Annual Conference 2011: Media Citizenship
New Orleans, USA, March 10-13, 2011

A Conference Report by Deborah Mellamphy, University College Cork

As the annual SCMS conference is now in its fifty-first year, the theme of this year's event, "Media Citizenship", addressed what it means today to be a "media citizen" and the changes in all forms of media that have affected issues of equality, existence and subjectivity on an individual, collective and institutional basis. The event was held in the Ritz-Carlton, New Orleans, the same week as Mardi Gras, allowing a truly diverse experience of the French Quarter for first-time visitors. The organisers chose New Orleans due to its spirit and resilience, a fact illustrated on the cover of the weighty 170-page conference programme in an image of a flooded street as seen through a video view finder, reminding delegates of the extent of suffering experienced only a few years ago. The city is now incredibly vibrant, as was the conference itself. It was an intensely rich programme, with seventeen concurrent sessions, composed of a wide range of panels, as well as film screenings, business meetings, awards ceremonies, caucuses and scholarly interest group meetings, round table discussions and workshops, demonstrating the enormity of the event and the wealth (and immense difficulty) of choice. Despite the overarching theme, the conference represented a hugely diverse range of topics from cinema studies, including a large variety of themes, eras, filmmakers and national cinemas to television studies, animation studies, comic book studies, home movie studies, game studies, music studies and a wide range of New Media studies with panels dedicated to You Tube, New Media fandom, and the digital and 3D screens within contemporary media. All panels were fully attended and were followed by lively discussions and participation that often continued long after the sessions had ended. There were no plenaries as almost every panel included internationally renowned scholars who could easily have delivered a plenary paper. As a first time delegate, this did make looking at the conference programme incredibly intimidating; but, in reality, the conference was extremely welcoming and friendly as even the most established academics were highly approachable—making the conference an invaluable networking experience. The size of SCMS, the wide range of papers and topics and the diversity of international speakers, which was a mixture of early career researchers and established scholars, made it a highly significant conference to attend: an attribute that makes a comprehensive, individual conference report impossible to write.

As expected, New Orleans and the American South were heavily represented themes, with entire panels dedicated to *True Blood* and *Treme*. This focus started in the first panel I attended, which was entitled "Horror/Nation". In her paper, "I Want to do Real Bad Things With You: Abject Pleasure and Border-Crossing in HBO's *True Blood",* Janet Robinson (University of Colorado, Boulder) argued that the stereotypical image of the Deep South as a place where everything and anything is permitted still exists in the HBO television series.

The fictional city of Bon Temps is a place linked with the abject as every border is crossed and identity in *True Blood* is not static. Other panels with the same focus included "Treme's Promise: The Authenticity and Potential of David Simon's New Orleans", "Visualizing New Orleans", '"Who Counts in New Orleans: Identity and Citizenship in Embedded and Embodied Media" and "From the Treme to Memphis to Bon Temps to Harlan County: (Re) Imagining the South in 'Slow Television'", all of which explored the South's cultural diversity and resilience against disaster and chaos. The conference also included a special event "NO/LA Local Archives and Local Culture", which featured a panel of New Orleans and Louisiana "archive workers" who discussed the importance of local culture to early and contemporary film and television as well as the significance of local media archive collections. The workshop also examined the significance of the local television channel WDSU-TV in documenting and promoting local culture and knowledge; and Charles E. Richard, the Joseph P. Montiel/BORSF Endowed Professor in the Department of English and Director of the Moving Image Arts Program at University of Louisiana at Lafayette, described the work of The Cinematic Arts Workshop, which is dedicated to documenting local Creole and Cajun culture in the Acadiana region. In addition, the Historic New Orleans Collection (HNOC) organised an exhibition of the Fred W. Todd Tennessee Williams Collection, which ran concurrently with the conference. The collection included correspondence between Williams and Warner Brothers and Vivian Leigh's photographs on the set of *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951).

The SCMS conference also thoroughly engaged with New Media issues and texts. I attended a workshop entitled "New Media Futures: The Digital (The Academy)", which was a discussion of the use of media and technology in the future of teaching and scholarship, as well as New Media publishing practices. Chaired by Nicholas Mirzoeff (New York University), the panellists stressed that media scholars need to be more fully informed about coding and operating systems and must understand how to write these systems, as the humanities are now necessarily digital. Alexandra Juhasz (Pitzer College) discussed her creation of an open access video-book, *Learning from YouTube* (2011), published by The MIT Press on YouTube, which, because it necessitates an understanding of *how* to read the book, engages with a whole new set of skills, addressing some of the difficulties that will be faced in the future. In addition, MIT encountered legal difficulties with video book ownership as YouTube videos cannot be "owned", illustrating the continuing challenges when it comes to New Media. Juhasz argued that New Media is driven by crisis and anxiety, and that these crises will shape and determine New Media futures. I also attended a workshop entitled, "Blogging, Tweeting and Posting: Online Media Community Building and Scholarly Promotion", in which the panel, chaired by Miranda Banks (Emerson College) and co-chaired by Ryan Bowles (University of California, Santa Barbara), discussed the use of New Media and online tools in the creation of online academic personae through blogging, tweeting and posting. Topics discussed included the "branding" of oneself, the use of commenting in the creation of dialogue and debate and the risks involved with blogging. It was highly ironic then that problems with technology were experienced by most of the panels that I attended, and it was also surprising to discover that this was the first time that the conference had wireless internet access, an enormous oversight at past events.

Ironically, at such a technology savvy conference, it was a paper on the fetishistic use of the typewriter that was a personal highlight, on a panel entitled, "The Author: Wanted-Dead or Alive". Lucy Fisher's (University of Pittsburgh) "Body Double: The Author Incarnate in the Cinema" discussed the representation of the typewriter in cinema, focusing in particular on the anthropomorphisation of the typewriter in David Cronenberg's *Naked Lunch*

(1991). Fisher discussed the link between the act of writing (or being an auteur) and violence, outlining the director's troubled relationship with authorship. Fisher also discussed the ongoing importance of Roland Barthes' "The Death of the Author" (1967) and stressed that, far from being obsolete, the author's agency is perhaps now more significant than ever in a globalised, multimedia industry that is increasingly driven by commercialisation.

Video Game Studies was also strongly represented at the conference, demonstrating the area's growing presence within academia. Panels included "Video Game Worlds", "Playing the Apocalypse: Re-imagining Science Fiction Through Video Games" and "Gaming the Globe: Video Games and Empire", as well as the Video Games Studies Scholarly Interest Group, chaired by the SIG's Chair, Mark J. P. Wolf (Concordia University Wisconsin). The attendees discussed the future of scholarship and teaching in the area, as well as future collaborative projects. The meeting also included a round table discussion with members of the International Game Developers Association New Orleans (IGDA New Orleans), as well as a presentation by David M. Myers (Rev. Aloysius B. Goodspeed, S.J./Beggars Distinguished Professor in Mass Communication at Loyola University, New Orleans), who discussed the history as well as the future of video game scholarship.

As an early career researcher, I attended the workshop "Navigating the Job Market". The panel, chaired by Brian Price (University of Toronto), was extremely helpful and discussed every aspect of the job market including how to read jobs ads, CVs and cover letters, phone/Skype/in-person interviews, campus visits and teaching demonstrations. In addition, Mark Betz (King's College, University of London) discussed UK jobs and the significance of the upcoming RAE/REF deadline in relation to the job market.

Overall, my first experience of the SCMS conference was an overwhelmingly positive one as it was incredibly well organised and provided a truly international intellectual platform, through its constant promotion of debate. It was a dizzying but truly rewarding experience.

Deborah Mellamphy completed her PhD in 2010 at University College Cork. She currently teaches Film Studies at UCC, and is a member of the Editorial Board of *Alphaville*.