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The Society of Cinema and Media Studies Annual Conference 2012
Boston, USA, 21–25 March 2012

A Conference Report by Anthony Coman and Missy Molloy, University of Florida

Shortly after the hotel fire alarm interrupted Thursday's hot midday panels, a disembodied voice assured everyone that there was no immediate danger and suggested that we all "return to our places". This episode encapsulates the atmosphere of the Society of Cinema and Media Studies 2012 Boston conference, which unfolded over the course of five full days in late March. For any academic discipline, disorientation generates vitality, and whether it comes in the form of the shrill pitch and flashing lights of a false alarm, the sharp stab of a question from an established scholar, or the probing engagement of fellow panellists, the SCMS annual meeting is a destabilising force that draws strength from its members' diverse interests, and typically sends its participants home feeling exhausted, yet invigorated.

The Park Plaza Hotel's average room size was significantly smaller than those in 2011's Ritz-Carlton; the tight quarters emphasised the continued popularity of panel hopping. Rushing down the halls and gulping water at one of many prominent but obstructive water stations, members sampled as many of the 420 conference sessions as possible. Given such close quarters, it was not surprising to hear the occasional sign of exasperation as people shuffled in and out between papers, and yet, these minor inconveniences also attest to attending members' enthusiasm. If the annual meeting is a window into the global study of media, it is clear that those active in the field remain as concerned with pedagogy as with research and theory. As much as the expanded acronym (SCMS from SCS) has added to the society in terms of potential texts for analysis and cross-media visibility, the discipline remains committed to rigorously engaging with visual culture and cultivating critical awareness in students.

SCMS offers a quick, intense look at the state of the field. Perhaps "fields" is more appropriate, considering that many speakers referenced the long process through which the words "and Media" were added to the Society's title in 2002. In doing so, they addressed the considerable impact that the Internet and digital technologies have had upon film production, reception, and distribution. Of the variety of disciplines that fall into the "Media" category, television was particularly well represented this year, with over twenty dedicated panels. Specialised panels for radio, sound, video games and new media were also prevalent, as were panels addressing issues related to digitisation across media. The digital revolution continues to generate work focused on issues related to media ontology, accessibility, fandom and archives, as indicated by Wednesday's consecutive discussions, "Index, Ontology, and the Digital 2".

One particularly strong, yet under-attended, panel on digital aesthetics focused on the work of independent filmmaker Dennis Tupicoff. It featured a panel response from noted documentary film scholar Bill Nichols as well as a presentation by Tupicoff on his own "The First Interview", a film constructed using original photographs and shorthand notes produced during Félix Nadar's seminal 1886 interview of Michel Eugène Chevreul. Beyond the actual presentations, the "Media" of Cinema and Media Studies also surfaced in conference attendees' dedicated documentation of the week's events: microbloggers tagged their tweets #scms12, traditional blog posts were archived at cmstudies.org, and keynotes and highlights were posted to the official SCMS YouTube page.[1]

Two pervasive hallway topics were the horrors of the job market and the pressures that are currently facing many publicly funded humanities programmes. Unfortunately, few people approach the current job situation optimistically; however, at both last year's SCMS conference in New Orleans and this year's event, several established scholars reminded listeners about similar employment droughts in the past in order to encourage broader, less negative perspectives (those particular scholars were, admittedly, long-tenured). Shrinking public budgets, and the "walk-the-plank" dynamic that they create between administrations and humanities programmes, are even more distressing to many media scholars in the North American academy, because they threaten the security of the tenure system, which many fought for and which many others rely on. They also threaten the status of our discipline(s), which has developed gradually over the last five decades, but whose future now looks uncertain.

While much attention was paid to the institutional move toward contingent faculty, the diminished support for travel and scholarship, and the cutting or restructuring beyond recognition of entire programmes, several panels addressed pedagogical issues that attest, thankfully, to the popularity and vitality of media courses. In the process, they also highlighted the social value of such courses. One particularly well-attended pedagogy workshop focused on teaching comics. Participants Scott Bukatman, Suzanne Scott, Matt Yockey and chair Drew Morton each presented a unique take on teaching comics studies, and their syllabi are archived on the weblog of the newly formed Comics Studies Special Interest Group.[2] A lively debate about the parameters of a comics curriculum and its canonical texts demonstrated the excitement within SCMS for the new SIG, a fervour carried over from the immensely popular panels on comics and animation at the 2011 convention.

Another pedagogy workshop focused not on teaching new media but on approaching traditionally taboo subjects in a dynamic fashion. "Belly of the Beast: Queer Cinema and Media Studies on Conservative and Religious Campuses" included participants who teach in Salt Lake City, UT, Grand Rapids, MI and at Notre Dame in South Bend, IN. While the demands of such a challenge could easily raise anxiety in those interested in teaching queer content, participants largely eased fears about teaching conservative students, instead stressing the valuable learning opportunities at both ends of the classroom contract. In fact, participants seemed unusually willing to honestly address the tension between classroom activism and institutional pressures not to make waves. For example, Christopher Smit from Calvin College admitted that financial pressures and the lack of job mobility affected what he is willing to risk, and Pamela Robertson Wojcik shared her feeling that, while Notre Dame supported her academic freedom, activism was not encouraged by the administration. Kathryn Bond Stockton's recommendation to "seduce

students" with content that they consider illicit made a strong impression, highlighting the productive dimension of teaching on conservative campuses. She used sensuous language to echo her main point—that we should excite curiosity about the "excess pleasures" and subtle politics of films such as *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994) and *Babette's Feast* (Gabriel Axel, 1987), which she referred to as "our bible"—and also warned against approaching the pedagogical relationship as "selling" information to "clients." Again, this workshop illustrated scholars' concerns about Draconian policies being adopted by university administrations and the tensions that they create within media studies, a discipline that is as dynamic and forward-looking as the texts that often attract our attention.

Another panel focused on excessive pleasures, titled "Beyond the Uncanny: Psychoanalysing Contemporary Horror", invited participants to revisit their assumptions about what inspires pleasure in recent horror films. In *Paranormal Activity* (Oren Peli, 2007), a married couple monitor their house to document a supernatural haunting; Hugh Manon argued that the narrative and its digital framing target specifically domestic anxieties. In addition, he claimed that the film franchise illustrates the oscillation between pleasure and dread aroused by digital surveillance in twenty-first century consumer-driven society, an interpretation that explicitly stresses the films' class connotations. In addition, he evoked Laura Mulvey's concept of the gaze in an attempt to translate her argument from an analogue to a digital context. Panellist Brian Wall discussed the charged critical responses to *Trouble Every Day* (Claire Denis, 2001), which resurrected debates about art cinema and audiovisual excess. He analysed two scenes that erupt in "orgiastic display" to illustrate Denis's focus on the precise moment when pleasure becomes pain, a moment that stresses a death drive without conscience; in this reading, the infected Coré (Béatrice Dalle) literally embodies the death drive and therefore cannot recognise the difference between pleasure and terror. Chair Hilary Neroni's paper encapsulated the panel's underlying focus on the manner in which horror films literalise the effects of biopolitical regulation and subjugation of bodies by connecting Giorgio Agamben's concept of "bare life" to the blockbuster *Saw* (James Wan, 2004) and *Hostel* (Eli Roth, 2005) franchises, which many critics refer to as "torture porn". In these franchises, according to Neroni, bodies are subjected to prolonged, purposeless torture in order to dramatise the struggle to survive; these films' conclusions—in which death suspends torture—parallel the mechanics of biopower, which incessantly and impersonally generate submission.

Elsewhere, similarly dark viewing pleasures were found in an unlikely place: the undersea world of Jacques-Yves Cousteau's maritime documentaries. At the "Regarding Cousteau, Regarding the World" panel, participants questioned the spectatorial pleasure of these documentaries, which are more commonly associated with wonder and nature conservation. James Cahill's presentation, "Periscopophilia", began with a production anecdote from the sea-bound set of *The Silent World* (*Le Monde du silence*, Cousteau and Louis Malle, 1956): after reviewing footage of a shark feeding frenzy caused by his boat injuring a young whale, Cousteau decided that it needed to be filmed again. For the reshoot, he ordered another whale to be killed and lashed to the side of the boat, where cameras were ready to document the re-enacted feeding and the crew's subsequent killing of the sharks. Cahill interpreted this and other examples of Cousteau's "interventions" through Aimé Césaire's influential postcolonial text, *Discourse on Colonialism*. Adopting Césaire's maxim that "no one colonizes innocently" (39), Cahill argued that *The Silent World*'s setting in the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea firmly connects

Cousteau's underwater colonisation to the geopolitics of the early 1950s Middle East. The subsequent presentation extended the argument to contemporary filmmaking. In her "Reflections on Umwelt", Janine Marchessault began by linking Cousteau's adventure documentaries to the exploratory drive of Jules Verne's fiction, arguing that Cousteau is similarly vulnerable to Roland Barthes's critique of Verne: that he reduces the infinite to a known space in an act of bourgeois appropriation. For Marchessault, the desire to produce a record of direct contact with the otherworld of the sea drove Cousteau to mechanic and technological invention in a manner similar to that in which total cinema tactility inspires contemporary auteur-inventor James Cameron.

The subtitle of "Video Essays: Film Scholarship's Emergent Form" was thoroughly justified by a crowd willing to stand, crouch and kneel in aisles and between seats for insights into current projects focused on producing work through, rather than about, visual media. Participant Christian Keathley shared student videos on Nicholas Ray and explained the pedagogical challenge of promoting video scholarship that draws upon the immersive and multi-track strengths of the medium. A conversation that emphasised the benefits of working with a text frame by frame evoked popular online video essay sites, such as *Press Play* and panellist Catherine Grant's *Film Studies for Free*. Grant argued that such work focuses on process over product and remains an essay only in "Montaigne's sense of the term … distinctly not an article, it just tries very hard". Despite the evident interest in the panel, the questions and answers session contained harsh critiques of such scholarship, and some emphasised the need to supplement the video's argument with oral or written commentary. However, for those with access to the video equipment necessary for such innovative work, the particular formal focus of a scholarly video essay on a research subject is unquestionably beneficial.

Vivian Sobchack, winner of the 2012 Distinguished Career Achievement Award, delivered a memorable account, by turns moving and humorous, of her personal history, which coincides with that of SCMS to a significant degree. She described SCMS's humble beginnings and her own marginal position amongst her peers at UCLA in the late 1970s, when Marxist and psychoanalytic approaches dominated film studies, and her research interests (Sobchack is best known for her work on phenomenology of film and on science fiction) were considered idiosyncratic at best. She also related an account of a particularly fraught conference at New York University in 1980, when graduate students from her generation (including Bill Nichols, who introduced her) flouted established conventions by answering questions about their papers in "ordinary language" and consequently "ripped into what had been traditional film studies". Yet the most unexpected moment in her speech occurred when she admonished the audience for forgetting that we are, first and foremost, writers ("Writing is our medium … it is what we do") and reminded SCMS members of our too-often overlooked function as writing teachers, "and by that, [she meant] argument, rhetoric in the deepest, the most philosophical sense, of not only being persuasive and certainly not ornamental, but understanding tropes [and] the structure of language itself". She cited Brian Attebery—"There is no reason critical writing can't be entertaining"—in order to stress the poetic, creative dimension of writing that is, according to Sobchack, unfortunately absent in much of our work (8). We were strongly impacted by her argument, particularly after prolonged exposure to papers so focused on the conceptual geographies of their ideas that language seemed only a conduit rather than the essence of transmission. As we are aware of our own tendencies to prioritise theory over clarity, Sobchack's

reminder seemed important—something worth keeping in mind if you are currently embarking on the long journey that may end in SCMS's 2013 Conference in Chicago.

Notes

[1] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G2ttnUKwSnY&feature=relmfu

[2] http://www.cmstudies.org/?page=groups_comics

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