CORA Cork Open Research Archive
Cartlann Taighde Oscailte Chorcaí

Title	“Looking Out”: The 2018 Association for Art History’s Annual Conference
Authors	McIver, Gillian
Publication date	2018-06-01
Original Citation	McIver, G. (2018) “Looking Out”: The 2018 Association for Art History’s Annual Conference. Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media, 15, pp. 174-178. https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.15.15
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	10.33178/alpha.15.15
Rights	© 2018, the Author(s) - https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/
Download date	2026-11-06 02:58:16
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/7104



UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

alphaville
JOURNAL OF FILM AND SCREEN MEDIA

"Looking Out": The 2018 Association for Art History's Annual Conference

Gillian McIver

With forty sessions, more than three hundred papers and three "blockbuster" keynotes, the Annual Conference for Art History and Visual Culture co-hosted by the Courtauld Institute of Art and King's College, London on 5–7 April 2018 was the biggest the Association of Art Historians (AAH) has mounted to date. Bringing together researchers in all aspects of art history and visual culture, including film, craft and performance, the three intensely packed days offered something for everybody, and more besides. There were sessions on what we commonly think of as "art history"—discussions of portraiture, medieval and early modern art, techniques of painting and so on; but there were also panels on film, music, performance and even medicine. The proximity of the events to the treasures of the Courtauld Gallery, exhibitions of contemporary work in the Somerset House galleries, and an exhibition on *The Classical Now* in King's College ensured a variety of activities, and invaluable spaces for both discussion and reflection.

With such a wealth of possibilities on offer, it was always going to be difficult to choose which panels to attend. As a film researcher and filmmaker, I sought out sessions which might be most useful to film studies. On the first day I attended a panel on *Critical Pedagogies: What Constitutes Critical Pedagogy for Art and Art History Today?* I suspected that the question of critical pedagogy in the teaching of art was not going to be a great deal different to that of critical pedagogy in the teaching of film, and I was right, particularly for those of us who teach film within an art school context. There was a feeling of urgency in the room, a sense that everybody was strongly invested in identifying and discussing what is meant by "critical pedagogy". Convenors Emily Pringle (Tate) and Trevor Horsewood (AAH) introduced the session with a discussion of the theoretical frameworks established by Paulo Friere, Henry Giroux and bell hooks. Over the course of the day, two principal questions were considered: "What forms of teaching and learning are critical, in a global social and educational context?" and "How do we help our students build and demonstrate confidence in critical thinking?"

Pat Thomson (Nottingham) led the way by reminding the group of the enormous value of the creative arts, not only to themselves, but to the UK: £84 billion pounds, 1.7 million directly employed jobs and (despite an unfortunate emphasis on what Thomson described as a kind of "blokey, jingoistic public image" of the British creative industries) a great deal of soft power. All of this does, however, rely on standards of excellence and the question of pedagogy. Thomson posited that, following Bruno Latour, we should admit that critique as a teaching method has probably lost its way, reduced to a sludge of relativism and cacophony of opinion. Instead of this being a "dead end", however, Thomson proposed that this obstacle offers opportunities for a redesign of visual arts onto-methodologies.

© Gillian McIver
This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License

Charlotte Bandlien (Oslo National Academy of the Arts) took an anthropological perspective, and asked if it is possible to create a "coefficient" of art outside of art, away from museums and galleries and traditional spaces of art education. This led to questions about how to make critical theory "palatable for the millennials". There followed some discussion of possible methodologies; film was mentioned, including the example of Slavoj Žižek's films, made in conjunction with Sophie Fiennes, which explain Žižek's critical theory using cinema. The rather bigger question, around teaching art history to art students, was addressed from a historical perspective by Matthew Cornford and Naomi Salaman's (Brighton) research on the history of "radical pedagogy" at Bradford School of Art in the heyday of the autonomous art school. While it would be fair to say that the group rather lamented the passing of the autonomous art school era, the paper by Joanne Crawford (Leeds) "Critical Art History as Critical Art Practice" brought everything back to the present. Crawford expressed a worry that art history is increasingly marginalised within practical art education. This is an important problem for film researchers as well, because film history is often marginalised within film production education (and art history is nonexistent). Although it may be that art history feels more marginalised at present than film history, it does raise the problem of students being taught creative practice within a vacuum.

It was necessary to acknowledge that the history of art has, until recently, been highly exclusive, erasing women, people of colour and members of the LGBTQ community from consideration both as artists and as audiences. Jane Trowell (Nottingham) in her paper "Before We Begin: Whiteness and Coloniality in Art Education" raised the point that the art-history sector is overwhelmingly dominated by white middle-class women, who are engaged in white self-criticality while at the same time being, as women, aware of their historical exclusion from art discourse.

Emily Pringle concluded the session by asking probably the most timely question of the conference. Citing Henry Giroux, she noted that critical pedagogy is aimed at producing socially responsible citizens, and this is at least nominally embraced by educational and museal institutions. But, she asked, can "a pedagogy based on the active dismantling and democratic reshaping of dominant forms of knowledge" operate authentically within the "value systems of the art museum of the twenty-first century?" Museums, she said, just aren't funded to enact democratic participation. They are constantly urged to sell coffee, courses and events. Can the museum "bite the hand that feeds it?" The group immediately also named other institutions: the university, the creative industries, the funding systems and so forth. In discussion, we agreed that despite this, critical pedagogy is more vital than ever and that we are in a moment of opportunity to create and share new strategies.

On the second day I elected to attend the sole panel on film, *Framing Space Through Architecture and Film*, looking at the many ways in which film has used and interpreted architecture. In "Framing: The Inescapable Motif?" Adam O'Brien (Reading) looked at architectural framing of film framing in the works of Hou Hsiao-Hsien, John Cassavetes and Lucretia Martel, reading the place of the figure within the built environment, especially the domestic or "everyday" space. O'Brien's particularly strong discussion of Martel's *The Headless Woman* looked at the temporary domestic space of the private automobile, a site both symbolic of the existential possibilities of "the road" and the claustrophobic quality of the machine. Following, Ulrike Kuch (Bauhaus University Weimar) looked at "Stairs in Film and Architecture" which brought attention to the ways in which stairs have often provided convenient means of structuring movements within the film, creating drama or providing a transition between one scene and another. Kuch's discussion of stairs as a kind of *chronotopos*

was valuable; however, the sheer plethora of "stairs in films"—each with their own singular meanings and relationship to the film's theme and style—meant that in the space of a short presentation it was impossible to do more than offer a few general propositions. More focused and rewarding was Peter Sealy's (Toronto) evocation of the Berlin Wall in the films, and how the Wall was reconstructed as film set for many iconic Cold War productions. "Angels in No Man's Land: The Berlin Wall in Film, 1945–1993" looked at how the spatio-political boundaries of the Wall in postwar films moved from a pre-Wall theoretical nonstructure, framed by the *Gegenwart* films aimed at East Germans, to the stylised poetic space of the Wall (a set, of course) in Wim Wenders's *Wings of Desire* (*Der Himmel über Berlin*, 1987).

On the last day, I attended a selection of presentations focusing on colour, portraiture and music. Although these papers did not mention film, it was fascinating to make the link between the research presented and similar issues within film studies.

Kirsty Sinclair Dootson (Yale), whose research focuses on technical processes of colour in British film and art, has been investigating the technology of colour in painting in the nineteenth century and gave a presentation on "Texture of Capitalism: Making Colour in late Victorian Britain" looking at John Scott Taylor, the scientific director of Winsor & Newton, and his development of oil colours for Symbolist painter George Frederick Watts. Dootson's work on colour is an important contribution to a deeper understanding of the modern quest to create colour, across different art forms.

Sheila ffolliott (George Mason University) offered a paper on early modern portraiture. She explained the discourses around portraiture at the time of Catherine de' Medici, and how looking at her portraits raises question about beauty in the depiction of a real woman (as opposed to a mythological being) and the ability of art to render it. Portraits could provoke discourses of class, gender norms, race, rank and legitimacy. Furthermore, these portraits demonstrate the idea, which becomes established in this era through French and Italian portraiture, that the portrait should display worthiness and virtue rather than simply likeness, citing the Platonic notion that outward beauty indicates inner virtue, arouses curiosity and commands attention. It astonished me to think how visual principles about female representation laid down in the sixteenth century are still so much with us in—for example—the casting of a film. Casting decisions like Shekhar Kapur's choice of Cate Blanchett for Elizabeth I in the *Elizabeth* films (1998, 2007) comes to mind; there is not much likeness between the actor and extant portraits of the Virgin Queen. Isabel Adjani made a mesmerising Queen Margot in Patrice Chereau's *Queen Margot* (*La Reine Margot*, 1994), without resembling Marguerite de Valois at all. The beautiful Salma Hayek in *Frida* (Julie Taymor, 2002), or Brad Pitt as a sympathetic Jesse James also come to mind, but even in wholly fictional films, the casting of Julia Roberts as an LA street prostitute in *Pretty Woman* (Garry Marshall, 1990) seems to hint at the character's inner virtue and imminent redemption via a wealthy man. It is interesting to discover that we still appear to uncritically accept the Platonic notion of the value of beauty. On the other hand, if portraits were charged with the responsibility to render the qualities of virtue and goodness, represented by beauty, rather than render likeness, perhaps they are less useful in researching what people of the past actually looked like.

One of the joys of a large conference like this one is discovering something about which you know absolutely nothing, yet which can thoroughly intrigue and delight. Such was my reaction to Caroline Potter (University of London), author of *Erik Satie: A Parisian Composer and His World*, who presented '"En blanc et immobile': Erik Satie, Mysticism and Whiteness". I learned many useful and interesting things about the brilliant and eccentric Satie, which

enhanced my enjoyment of his music; but overwhelmingly I think I learned that he would be a fantastic subject for a biopic. Amazingly, Satie has never been portrayed on screen to date. Potter, a musicologist, described both Satie's *milieu* in *fin-de-siècle* Paris as well as his idiosyncratic personality, in terms that could almost be a film pitch. Although Potter did not discuss Satie and film, her paper immediately made me consider how Satie's notion of "furniture music" (or background music), is surely one of the cornerstones of film sound. Though Satie's presence on film soundtracks (Wes Anderson's *The Royal Tenenbaums* [2001], Lasse Hallström's *Chocolat* [2000], James Marsh's *Man on Wire* [2008], for instance) is easily acknowledged, his music for René Clair's 1924 surrealist film *Entr'Acte*, for example, is strangely under-researched since Douglas W. Gallez noted in 1975 that "Satie wrote music particularly suitable for silent film scoring" (49).

Eschewing theoretical approaches for real-world concerns, the Association invited three particularly strong keynotes for each of the days: the British artist Sonia Boyce in conversation about her practice with Dorothy Price, editor of the journal *Art History*; Tristram Hunt, the director of the Victoria and Albert Museum, who spoke inspiringly about the past, present and future of the Museum; and Griselda Pollock, probably the most eminent living art historian in Britain today. Pollock's talk was a tour de force in how to "do" art history in a timely, politically aware and radical way. She demonstrated exactly how one can "talk about" art, cinema, music and culture in a way that does justice to each of them, but then returning the focus to the history of art, confirming the dynamism and relevance of the discipline to all studies of culture.

It was impossible to escape the sense that art historians, especially in the UK, feel beleaguered. They worry that their discipline is being marginalised amid the general anti-intellectual discourse which is emanating from parts of the media and their friends in higher places. They fear that the discipline, despite being in a golden age for research, is seen as a "finishing school for rich girls" rather than being about the conservation and understanding of a vitally important trove of historical material. The sexism in this idea is noted: Griselda Pollock made an acerbic point in her keynote about the "muscular young men" who are chosen to present art programmes. But perhaps most of all, there is a growing sense that academic knowledge is not only undervalued, but rejected. It is possible we are seeing the beginning of a loss of faith in the institutional framework of the University, and so the subjects erroneously deemed as "less essential" to the national economy are the canaries in the coal mine. And yet, this was a stimulating, largely joyous and thoroughly bountiful conference which demonstrated how important art history continues to be. In an era where we are constantly inundated with images, we need all the help we can get to understand them.

References

The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford. Directed by Andrew Dominik, Warner Brothers, 2007.

Chocolat. Directed by Lasse Hallström, Miramax, 2000.

Elizabeth. Directed by Shekhar Kapur, PolyGram, 1998.

Elizabeth: The Golden Age. Directed by Shekhar Kapur, Studio Canal, 2007.

Entr'Acte. Directed by René Clair, Société Nouvelle des Acacias, 1925.

Frida. Directed by Julie Taymor, Miramax Films, 2002.

Friere, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Bloomsbury, 2015.

Gallez, Douglas W. "Satie's 'Entr'acte': A Model of Film Music." *Cinema Journal*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1976, pp. 36–50.

Giroux, Henry. *On Critical Pedagogy.* Continuum, 2011.

The Headless Woman [*La mujer sin cabeza*]. Directed by Lucrecia Martel, New Wave Films, 2008.

hooks, bell. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. Pluto Press, 2000.

---. *Reel to Real: Race, Sex and Class at the Movies*. Routledge, 2008.

Man on Wire. Directed by James Marsh, Discovery FIlms, 2008.

The Pervert's Guide to Ideology. Directed by Sophie Fiennes, Channel 4, 2012.

The Pervert's Guide to Cinema. Directed by Sophie Fiennes, PGuide, 2006.

Potter, Caroline. *Erik Satie: A Parisian Composer and His World.* Boydell and Brewer, 2016.

Pretty Woman. Directed by Garry Marshall, Touchstone Pictures, 1990.

Queen Margot [*La Reine Margot*]. Directed by Patrice Chereau, France 2 Cinéma, 1994.

The Royal Tenenbaums. Directed by Wes Anderson, Touchstone Pictures, 2001.

Wings of Desire [*Der Himmel über Berlin*]. Directed by Wim Wenders, Road Movies Filmproduktion, 1987.

Suggested Citation

McIver, Gillian. "'Looking Out': The 2018 Association for Art History's Annual Conference." Conference Report. *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, no. 15, Summer 2018, pp. 174–178. www.alphavillejournal.com/Issue15/ReportMcIver.pdf.

Gillian McIver is Researcher in Film at the University of Roehampton. She is the author of *Art History for Filmmakers* (2016). She also works as a producer and filmmaker, and is an artist and curator.