If We Want to Prosper, We Need to Blow the Trumpet

For the most part of the year of my sabbatical I had the chance to travel around the UK, to France, Germany, Canada, Hong Kong, Estonia, and elsewhere. Meeting and talking to colleagues during these travels only strengthened the feeling I have had for quite some time now: Whereas the discipline of Film Studies is populated by great scholars, its position in the respective academic and University structures is disproportionately frail. This weak academic standing affects our publication and funding record, and, most importantly, our career development.

Over the past decade Film Studies in the UK has grown remarkably well; over forty programmes in the country award degrees in Film nowadays and each year, the UK produces about fifty or more Film Studies PhDs. The future for those that have chosen to enter the academic field, however, is not particularly clear. The very position of the discipline in the context of contemporary academia is shaky and vulnerable.

In most cases Film Studies has arrived on campus as a result of some administrative initiative reacting to the decline in enrollment in traditional disciplines. The combinations between Film Studies and its host department (usually considered ‘mother discipline’) are numerous: the genealogy can most commonly be traced to Media and Communication Studies (in the case of more modern-minded Universities), or to Languages and Literature (in the case of more traditional Universities). Other combinations include Theatre/Drama, Art History, Cultural Studies, Philosophy, American Studies, European Studies, and so on.

Only in a few select instances have departments managed to emmanate themselves sufficiently to have a say in the affairs of their institutions. In most cases, however, we have a situation where Film Studies is relied on to deliver the goods but not taken into consideration in strategic planning. The healthy income that Film Studies usually brings in is welcomed, but it is often diverted to fill up various budgetary holes. It is still the ‘mother’ disciplines that are considered to be major and defining ones. Film Studies is treated as yet another one of the ‘Mickey Mouse’ degrees. Academic Deans and PVCs are usually from some other discipline; Professors in the traditional humanities have more weight by default. (No wonder, given that the main criterion for esteem is still considered to be fellowship of the British Academy, an institution that is still to wake up to the existence of our discipline.) The funds that come to the University from Film Studies do not seem to change its perception as a discipline of puny academic clout. There is a paradoxical disequilibrium between the strong financial contribution of Film Studies and its feeble administrative position, a situation that undermines us in multiple ways.

In singular cases strong leaders have managed to enlist the support of their institution; but these are usually wobbly ad hoc arrangements that are jeopardized by every change in senior management and direction. The Universities do not really comply with Film Studies academics and the needs of the discipline are not normally part of strategic planning. If a call for ‘restructuring’ comes in, Film Studies makes a perfect candidate for oblivion as even if financially sound, most Universities would choose not to jeopardize the more established disciplines (as, possessing a more influential lobby, they would also put up a more vocal resistance). It is not about the income we bring to institutions. It ultimately comes down to the fact that we are yet to begin mastering the academic couloirs du pouvoir.

Our vague institutional standing affects us in applying for and receiving research support. The subject coverage of the AHRC, the main UK body to which we all go for funding, does not have a clear-cut category for Film Studies. The discipline is covered under its Panel 2 (Visual Arts and Media: practice, history and theory) alongside design, art history, visual studies, and various other kinds of cultural, media, and museum studies. Out of the twelve peer-review members of this panel, there are maximum two with expertise in Film (currently only one, whose term is about to expire). Film Studies proposals are often assessed by peers whose specialists are only roughly related to the field.

A further worrisome aspect is that, as far as Film Studies is concerned, there appears to be no correlation whatsoever between AHRC’s subject coverage and the discipline classification adopted by the RAE 2008 (Research Assessment Exercise). Here, Film Studies is split between two different and equally alien Units of Assessment (65 Drama, Dance and Performing Arts and 66 Communication, Cultural and Media Studies). Due to the fact that there is no clear designation for Film in the subject classification, many departments have had to succumb to University contextual politics and have been submitted to a further scattered array of disciplinary configurations (ranging from Art History to European and American Studies). What this means in practical terms is that even after the results of the RAE come out, Film Studies will barely be able to benefit from the assessment, as the programmes would not have been assessed next to each other by the an authoritative specialist panel. How does this affect us? Most hiring and development decisions in British academia today are dictated by RAE politics, and in a scattered configuration like this we have no real chance to persuasively show our achievements and have a clear orientation of who are the leaders in the field (because, no such field seems to exist according to the RAE subject classification).

Things are not helped by the coverage we get in the media, either. An article published in The Times Higher Education Supplement on 11 May 2007 was pre-announced with the headline: Film Studies: Has It Lost the Plot? It suggested that members of the Film Studies community have differing and even divergent views on what the discipline itself is. While not hostile in tone, the piece presented Film Studies clearly lacking consensus over what it is doing or trying to achieve.

Ultimately, this may be the case, indeed. The fast growth of Film Studies enrollment does not seem to have been accompanied by the same degree of self-reflection. At St. Andrews it took us about two years to begin hearing from colleagues that they now finally begin grasping what Film Studies actually does. It may well be the case that while busy growing administratively we have failed to be sufficiently articulate.

Many aspects of our position need tiding up for the sake of securing disciplinary strength for Film Studies. Most of all, we need to talk more to one another, compare our strategies in institutional politics and lobbying, share information about the difficulties, set concrete goals for the discipline, and support each other. If we want to thrive, we need to blow our trumpet stronger.

Dina Iordanova
Paris, April 2008
Please visit www.DinaView.com
Scottish Consortium for Film and Visual Studies
First Conference ‘Mapping Scotland’
24th June 2008
Gilmorehill Centre, University of Glasgow

In 2007, following an application by St Andrews and Glasgow Universities, the Carnegie Trust agreed a grant to fund a series of conferences which would help to establish a Scottish Consortium for Film and Visual Studies. This will be a multi-faceted project that will evolve gradually and could provide a forum for research collaborations, practice development, knowledge transfer activities, archive work and postgraduate activity. It is intended to be open to all interested staff whatever department you work in and we hope to make contacts outside Higher Education particularly in Scottish Screen (and Creative Scotland), the archive and with practitioners.

The international speaker at the first conference will be Professor Patrice Petro, Director of the Centre for International Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and Professor of English and Film Studies. She is currently President of the Society of Cinema and Media Studies and in a good position to offer an overview of how our disciplines are developing.

Future Histories of the Moving Image
16-18 November, 2007
University of Sunderland
Sunderland, UK

Hosted by the Centre for Research in Media and Cultural Studies, University of Sunderland and jointly organised with the British Artists’ Film and Video Study Collection (University of the Arts London) and the Visual Research Centre REWIND Project (DfCAD at the University of Dundee), in collaboration with Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies.

Uniting scholars, archivists and curators, this conference animated important discussions on the impact of digital technology on the moving image. The tenor of the excellently organised conference was set in the two exhilarating keynote speeches cum manifestos. The first from Patricia Zimmerman (Ithaca College, NY, USA), who addressed the migratory nature of the archives as information and images circulate from platform to platform and from community to community. The possibilities of the migratory archives were listed and praised for its open quality—active, evolving and participatory rather than fixed, static, and closed. Later in the weekend Rick Prelinger (Prelinger Library and Archives, USA) combined a Powerpoint slideshow and oral presentation to dynamic effect and compellingly illustrated his case for the virtues of pre-existing material. (His presentation is available at http://www.futurehistories.net/)

Presenters mapped out these elements and explored the academic, theoretical, and methodological frameworks that would both enable further study of digital media and facilitate the production of digital media archives. One panel explored ‘Cinema as Database’ with discussions of the works of Chris Marker, Hollis Frampton, and Steven Spielberg, while others turned to the uses of the digital as an alternative archive or presentation space. Heather Norris Nicholson asked how the digital interface impacts the nature of archival research while Annamaria Motrescu (University of Bristol, UK) used online amateur footage to outline the production of British colonial identity on film. The curatorial properties of the Internet and its contribution distribution and exhibition of artwork and film were explored by both Sarah Cook (University of Sunderland) and Maeve Connolly (Dun Laghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Ireland)—the latter of whom injected ambivalence, asking if these digital schemes always managed to expand the canon, or if they replicated the occlusion already experienced by artists’ cinema in Ireland.

In these panels and others, the real remained at the heart of the virtual: I presented on CitizenTube, the new political branch of YouTube, which had become a channel for Darfur action campaigns; Tobias Hochscherf and James Leggott (Northumbria, UK) addressed the use of digital video in facilitating the community-based Amber Film Collective; and Christo Wallers demonstrated how the Open Source model became the operating ethos and framework for the real-life Star and Shadow Cinema in Newcastle. Further issues of practicality were explored in discussions by digital archive managers for LuxOnline (UK), the British Universities Film and Video Council, and others. How does one set about creating and maintaining a collection? More forums continued to discuss sustainability and usability issues. The materiality of the virtual was never quite so apparent as when Steven Ball (University of the Arts, UK) recalled a server theft, which reminded us that the digitising of film libraries is not a simple solution for preservation.

It is a rare opportunity to take part in such a conference, characterised by levels of passion, commitment and enthusiasm that still have its participants referring to the event as a ‘love fest’. Organiser Julia Knight keeps the spirit of the conference and its mission alive online with the Future Histories of the Moving Image Research Network (http://www.futurehistories.net/).

Leshu Torchin
The 3rd Annual Film Studies PG Conference, funded by the department and organized by students, once again demonstrated the dynamic and thriving research environment in the Department of Film Studies at St Andrews. We were honoured by the presence of Prof. John Hill of Royal Holloway (University of London) as an academic guest to comment on the papers, and as a keynote speaker to give a talk entitled "What were these Guys up to?" : Shifting Perspectives in Film Studies".

This year the conference was divided into two sessions: "Cinema and Deleuze" and "World Cinema", which demonstrate general key interests in the department. The session of "Cinema and Deleuze" grouped three papers using the theories of Gilles Deleuze together and examined how these theories can provide an insightful way of looking at films. Serazer Pekerman illustrated the spiritual passage of Muharrem in Takva [A Man's Fear of God] (Ozer Kiziltan, 2006) in terms of visual representation of the pattern and centrality, using the theories of Deleuze and Guattari. Yun-hua Chen explored colour in the Western European bourgeois indoor space constructed in Michael Haneke's films and argued that colour works as a terrain of negotiation between body and space. David Fleming then discussed aggressive animalistic postures and enduring forces of bodily violence in the hooligan-film I.D. (Philip Davis, 1998) in relation to Deleuzian "body-without-organs" which help inexorably alter normal (molar) perceptions regarding issues of identity, time, and space. After a short break, the following session "World Cinema" took us to the contexts of Russia, South Korea and Turkey. Lars Kristensen contextualised the songs "Stand by Your Man" in Postmark Paradise (Thompson E. Clay, 2000) and "On the Hills of Manchuria" in Urga (Nikita Mikhalkov, 1991) within a postcolonial perspective and discussed the representations of Russians in a broader post/national context. Yun Mi Hwang examined recent South Korean historical dramas – sageuk – in relation to the stability of the nation, using Blood Rain (Dae-Seung Kim, 2005) and Shadows in the Palace (Mee-Heung Kim, 2007) as examples. She analysed how the films use history as an illusion to recuperate and purge the nation's past. Caman Banan closed this session with her paper examining the supernatural characteristics attributed to looking, or the metaphysical connections between the gaze and the order of things, through Sufi poetry of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and through the everyday reflected in the novels of the nineteenth century.

After lunch Prof. John Hill summed up the whole conference and gave us valuable feedback in terms of structure, presentation skills and content. The summary of the papers was followed by a screening of The Quiet Man (John Ford, 1952), which was later used as an example in the keynote talk given by Prof. John Hill. His talk engaged with various issues raised earlier in the day, such as the changeable nature of certain fashionable trends in the field, the importance of integrating theories with textual analysis, and the difficulties of methodology. He traced the history of film studies as a new discipline in academia and considered the change in significance of film texts with shifting critical perspectives.

The PG conference is a wonderful opportunity for us to present our research throughout the year and to exchange ideas with fellow PhD students, staff and academic delegates. The discussion continued in an informal and relaxed way over dinner and some pints afterwards. We were delighted that it went smoothly and were very grateful to everyone who helped make this possible.

Yun-hua Chen
Russia on Screen: Identity and Appropriation
10 May 2008 Queen Mary University of London

At this timely conference, the Centre for Film Studies was one of the best represented institutions with two papers. With a picture of Viggo Mortensen as Kolya in Cronenberg’s *Eastern Promises* (2007), the conference invited people to speak on “the tensions between Russian cinema’s own explorations of identity and more popularly consumed representations of Russians and ‘Russianness’ in Western cinema.” This resulted in a conference that managed to spread out its field of investigation to many corners, covering topics as diverse as ‘friendly’ Hollywood WW2 representations; Hollywood’s use of Russian music; British literary adaptations of Russian classics; representations of the Russian prostitute in fiction; Soviet aviation theme in films; the construction of Russianness in Thaw films; post-Stalin images of the revolution; post-Soviet remasculinisation in war films; post-Soviet Fatherhood (Dr. William Brown); new Putin cinema; Russians as semi-European; and the framing of cinematic representations of Russians abroad, and of foreigners in Russia.

Already by the first keynote speech by James Chapman (University of Leicester), entitled *From Russia with Love*, the attendants were made aware that the conference was meant to break free from its national cinema straight jacket. Chapman traced the representations of Russians in the James Bond film cycle, saying that these figures change according to the climate of cold-war British-Russian relations, currently at a new all time low with the Litvinenko case still looming. The second keynote speech was given by Julian Graffy (SSEES, University College London), in which he tracked characters travel from the centre to the periphery in both Soviet and recent Russian cinema. Beginning with Kozintsev’s *Odnal’ko*, where the newly-wed young teacher Elena travels to the Altai Mountains to educate the indigenous population, and ending with Pyotr Buslov’s gangster flick *Bumer* (2003) where four wounded hard-men find rescue in the countryside, Graffy asserted that the periphery provide these characters with a moral lesson, pointing to importance of the inclusion of the hinterland into the Empire or, latterly, to the worthlessness of modern technologies.

At the lunch break we were treated with a video installation by the London based Czech artist, Pavla Alchin, in which she interweaves on a split screen the imagery and sound from a British and a Soviet made film on World War II. Both films have the legless pilot fighting (and manage) to become a whole person again, but for Alchin the two cinematic representations relate to specific spaces, which enable us to explore socio-historical and metaphorical meanings in the differences and similarities in the two films. The installation well defined the aspiration of the conference as the junctures between specific representations and their readings.

Lars Kristensen

Spielberg at 60
University of Lincoln
20-21 November 2007

Although there is much debate about Steven Spielberg’s genuine age, the completion of the director’s alleged 60th year provided the perfect excuse for academia to redress the critical imbalance toward cinema’s most commercially successful filmmaker.

The conference came hotly on the heels of the publication of three monographs about Spielberg, written by Warren Buckland, Lester D Friedman and Nigel Morris, who acted as the conference’s conveners. Also in attendance as keynote speakers were Spielberg biographer Joseph McBride, Peter Krämer, Murray Pomerance and Linda Ruth Williams.

The conference also enjoyed a panel discussion of Spielberg from the respective authors of the three recent monographs and outspoken film pundit and scholar, Mark Kermode.

Taking place in Lincoln’s state-of-the-art Media Broadcast Production Centre, Spielberg at 60 also included screenings of Spielberg’s first film, *Amblin’* (1968), *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence* (2001), and a rare Welles-inspired film made for Spielberg by then-partner Amy Irving, entitled *Citizen Spielberg* (from which Friedman took his monograph title).

Papers on Spielberg varied greatly, ranging from textual analyses of various of Spielberg’s works, to ideology in Spielberg’s *œuvre*, representations of history and space in the work of Spielberg, to the science fact or science fiction of *Jurassic Park*.

The conference also included my paper on representations of capital in the work of Steven Spielberg, which was intended as a wide-ranging and provocative evaluation of the ambiguity created by the gap between the seemingly anti-capitalist stories that Spielberg tells and their function as the capitalist Hollywood product *par excellence*.

Receiving generous attention from the local media, Spielberg at 60 was an impressive conference thanks in no small part to the contributions of Nigel Morris, Kerry Swarbrooke and others. Perhaps, thanks to the conference, scholars won’t have to reduce the name Steven Spielberg to a whisper when talking in academic circles.

William Brown
Society for Cinema and Media Studies
6-9 March, 2008
Philadelphia, PA, USA

In March I went to Philadelphia for my first ever SCMS conference (the annual event of the prestigious Society for Cinema and Media Studies). I had heard wild stories about the enormous variety of papers on offer, the sheer scale of the conference, and its frantic pace, and indeed I was not disappointed.

The conference lasted four days and consisted of multiple panels beginning at 8am (!), organised over three floors in the cavernous Loewe skyscraper, in downtown Philadelphia; there were also academic publishers selling books and DVDs in the basement, so my physical experience was one of constant shifting between the various levels, trying to work out which panel I was going next, while attempting to look cool and not at all lost at the same time. However, I was certainly not just there to listen: I was chairing a panel entitled ‘Space and Place in Eastern European Cinema’, where I was also delivering a paper on a recent Estonian film, Somnambul (Sulev Keedus, 2003). My three co-panelists were presenting on contemporary Rumanian and Russian cinema, and on 1950s Estonian film culture. It was very exciting to take part in this particular session, as for me it was the culmination of a year of exploration of this new topic; our panel was very well received, and it was great to meet other people working in this still fairly under-researched field.

The conference provided a fantastic opportunity to hear the latest scholarly work on film and media, in an international context; I guess the only regret was the impossibility of being in more than one place at the same time! The panels were all extremely interesting; last but not least, there was a tempting variety of film books on sale, not to mention difficult-to-find DVDs. So all in all, it was quite a Film Studies feast – although one was left with very little time to explore and appreciate Philadelphia, which was a pity. As far as the conference itself, my only disappointment was the frustration of meeting so many interesting people for impossibly short moments; as everyone, including me, was constantly flitting between panels and floors, there was hardly any time to properly get to know anybody. Hopefully, next time I’ll manage my time better – and given that the next SCMS appointment is in Tokyo, some breaks from the punishing panels schedule will be a must!

Elisabetta Girelli

The annual conference for the international professional organisation was quite possibly its largest yet, with approximately 16 sessions, each comprising 20 panels and one screening, not to mention copious offsite events and curtains. The experience was overwhelming and thrilling, if a bit frustrating as one must become mercenary in panel attendance in the attempt to see what’s new in one’s field of research and to enjoy the presentations of both established and new scholars alike.

Organised around a larger subject of space, smaller themes emerged: I followed the one regarding the place of digital media virtual worlds in both scholarship and activism. An early panel chaired by Jonathan Kahana, a scholar of documentary and politics (NYU), offered explored the media architecture of community through interesting papers delivered by activists Louis Massiah (Scribe Video Centre) and Elissa Perry (Leadership Learning Centre). Massiah runs the Precious Places Community History Project, which provides local neighbourhoods with cameras and social scientists to chronicle community histories from the ground up. Perry presented on the dynamics of social change offered by the ‘social web’.

In later panels, scholars mapped out the connections of YouTube and politics: Henry Jenkins (MIT) gave a stimulating paper, ‘The Public Sphere in a Hybrid Media Ecology’; YouTube, Network Television, and Presidential Politics, in one of the best attended panels. That he practically filled a ballroom is a surprise; Jenkins is always a provocative and engaging speaker. Broderick Fox (Occidental College) explored art, early political activism and ‘strategies of appropriation’ that now appear over the Internet (a discussion that would have fit into Zimmerman’s migratory archive as Fox touched upon the migration of the image from platform to platform). With my paper on YouTube and strategic representations of genocide in Darfur (a project, I’ve been refining and developing over the year) I was part of this thematic flow, which continued by exploring the impact of the virtual through cybershiasporas, blogging, and Second Life. How do we understand these audiences who are now positioned to be community chroniclers, activists, and cultural commentators and how do we understand these new media within a larger history and landscape of film and television?

These questions received further methodological possibilities in an utterly enjoyable and informative panel entitled ‘Paratextual Architectures and the Shifting Boundaries of Television’, which featured talks by Jason Mittell (Middlebury) on the subject of wiki-fandom, Louis Stein (San Diego State University) on website/games for television programmes (designed to extend engagement). Here questions of fan participation and industrial produced online interfaces were seen to directly impact upon the consumption of the (official) diegetic worlds. At the same time, Jonathan Gray’s delightful ‘Where is(n’t) Springfield? Placing The Simpsons and Television’ brought up the question of a stable place in what Jenkins had earlier termed a ‘hybrid media ecology’. When a video game is produced to advertise a film of a television show, where do we stand and what tools do we use for analysing the phenomenon? These issues that seem limited to fan engagement and consumption can be linked to the activist and political dimensions of these media and to the presentations listed above.

Only one component of a massive international gathering, these panels and presentations augured new and necessary directions in film and media studies and functioned to enrich my own research and methodological explorations.

Lesha Torchin
My visits to the Vienna Film Archive and the Chinese Taipei Film Archive

Hou Hsiao-Hsien and Michael Haneke are the protagonists in the first half of my thesis, so I was thrilled to be able to pay visit to the Chinese Taipei Film Archive and the Wien Film Archive, which house the most thorough collection of their works.

The Chinese Taipei Film Archive is tucked away in a quiet corner in the middle of the hustle and bustle of Taipei city centre. It aims to preserve films made in Chinese languages or by the overseas Chinese people who are from Taiwan (Republic of China). It also promotes the academic research of films and supports the development of the film industry in Taiwan. The film archive has a wide-ranging collection, including Chinese classics made in Shanghai in the 1930s, Taiwanese melodrama in the 1970s, social realist films, documentaries, newsreels, and restored Taiwanese dialect films. There is also a wide range of film-related materials such as photographs, dialect film catalogues, film festival programs, magazines, books, recording, editing, and pre-viewing equipments from 1950s. I enjoyed the precious opportunity of watching Hou Hsiao-Hsien’s early films which are not easily accessible in Europe such as Lovable You [Jiu Shi Liu Liu De Ta] (1980), Cheerful Wind [Feng Er Ti Ta Cai] (1981), A Summer at Grandpa’s [Dong Dong de Jia Qiu] (1984) and Daughter of the Nile [Ni Luo He Nu Er] (1987). It was also my great pleasure to go through Chinese literature on Hou Hsiao-Hsien published in Taiwan.

Like Haneke’s early migration as a child from Munich to Vienna, my research trip in search of Haneke’s early TV films is also a border-crossing journey starting from Munich. The border between Germany and Austria is practically unseen and almost unfelt nowadays. Apart from occasional passport control in the train, the train route from Passau to Vienna is an uninterrupted smooth space. Soon after crossing the invisible border the train stops in Linz, a medium-sized city in the north-east of Austria where a shocking family suicide took place. This social event was sensational at that time and later inspired Haneke to make his first feature film The Seventh Continent (1989), which portrays the objectified bodies in Western European bourgeois society.

The Vienna Film Archive [Wien Filmarchiv] is situated in the centre of Vienna on the south bank of the Wien River. It is in the South-East corner of Augarten, a vast classical garden and is part of a series of walking-stick shaped buildings with transparent side walls. The film archive is equipped with a reading room, a film documentation centre with a wide collection of film posters and programs, a library with 30,000 books, 17,000 magazines, PhD theses and very well-organised newspaper clippings from the Austrian, German, French, English and Italian press. They also have a wide collection of VHS and DVDs with a special focus on Austria. The study room is a great place to work, with a calm and relaxed atmosphere and friendly fellow researchers. Mr. Thomas Ballhausen, who has published several literary works in different genres including Die Universitäten in 2007, is in charge of the Wien Filmarchiv. He kindly granted me access to their studio cinema where I enjoyed luxurious private screenings of Michael Haneke’s TV films, including Drei Wege zum See [Three Paths to the Lake] ((1976), Wer War Edgar Allan [Who Was Edgar Allan] (1984), and Die Rebellion [The Rebellion] (1993). I also enjoyed the opportunity of doing some research on media reception of Haneke’s early films which were rarely discussed in English literature. I am very grateful to the friendly and patient staff in the Wien Film Archive who made my stay so memorable.

Conducting research in these film archives has been a wonderful experience. It is inspiring and exciting to get a full view on Hou Hsiao-Hsien and Michael Haneke in Taipei and Vienna. For more information on these two film archives, visit http://www.ctfa.org.tw/aboutus1_1e.htm and http://www.filmmarchiv.at/.

Yun-hua Chen
Extracts from a Trip to Cannes

I applied for press accreditation to the Cannes Film Festival in late March, well past the deadline, on a whim. It involved carefully cutting out clippings, making up a letterhead with The Saint’s editor, and jamming the Union General Office printer with blotting paper while trying to print a makeshift business card. The result was probably the most bootlegger application the Cannes press office had ever seen, leading someone to take pity on the poor student journalist from Scotland and send them a press pass voucher. That was one of the most exciting letters I’ve ever opened, and it led me to book the cheapest room I could find in Cannes for reading week. Weeks later I found myself sitting in my surprisingly clean hotel room, choosing what I would wear for my first day at the festival.

After sorting through the avalanche of paperwork — the endless lists, kits and packs I set out early in my first morning in Cannes for the Palais, where everything but the parties takes place, to pick up my press pass. It was a short walk made longer by the oppressive steam that enveloped the city for the duration of the festival, but it gave me time to take in Cannes. It was still quiet then, and only when I got close to the Palais did the plentitude of grey festival bags hint at the 35000 press and industry people who would descend on Cannes for the opening weekend. After waiting in a short line, I was holding my yellow press pass and a festival bag with the coveted press schedule. The press passes are awarded according to circulation, with white indicating the highest and yellow the lowest (someone needs to rethink the colour scheme), and my colour became a barrier to many of the things I wanted to do at the festival, one that I usually found a way around.

I spent the rest of the day looking around the Palais — the gargantuan, art-deco film mecca which houses the main theatres, the press conference room and the cavernous Marche du Film. I was surprised by how American it looked, and by the amount American films being shown in and out of competition. The French may hate Americans (as I discovered with my American-sounding accent), but the Festival loves American films — the star power they provide helps prop up its reputation as the festival. The stillness of the huge place left me completely unprepared for the weekend, when it would become the thoroughway for thousands of journalists and industry people. The Marche passes would introduce themselves and pitch their films in hopes of free promotion, before I told them The Saint’s circulation, which usually ended the conversation. The journalists, on the other hand, surprised me with their friendliness during the first few days, which were like freshers week at St Andrews, with everyone introducing themselves and gossiping about which parties to go to.

Watching films was more difficult than I thought it would be, as I discovered on the first day when my yellow pass got me rejected from the first screening of Blindness. I remember staring at the "completely full" signs for quite some time before wandering into the Palais to vent my sorrows on my blog, with another sad yellow-pass about to do the same. We paused before the wifi lounge to survey the press conference room, which was right beside it, and noticed that it had not been blocked off by security yet. Intrigued, we crept inside to find it completely empty, and we decided to park there until the Blindness conference later that day. We spent the intermittent hours jacked up on the awful, but free, Nespresso offered next door, listening to the videographers jockey for the best spots for their massive tripods, and nervously turning our passes over so the colour didn’t show. After the long wait, I found myself shyly asking screenwriter Don McKellar which character he found the most difficult to write. When he clipped back that they were all equally difficult, I was momentarily horrified: director Meirles said that making Julianne Moore’s character more than a “flat angel” was hard, which led to comments from Moore and Bernal. The domino effect, something that I would observe at subsequent conferences, saved me from complete humiliation in front of some of the best film writers in the world. It also gave me the confidence to stay for the Jury Press Conference later that day and sneak into three other conferences over the weekend, and play paparazzo when my sneaking wasn’t successful.

I did manage to see six features screenings, and my favourites were Serbs, Blindness, and the first half of Indiana Jones IV. Getting into the latter involved waiting for hours with 500 other journalists, only to be told by a couple of nasty security guards that no yellow passes would be allowed in and that the line wasn’t in the right place, despite the sign. This made me understand how seasoned attendees either completely ignore most of the rules and have a good time, or abide by them and hate it because they can’t see or do anything. Sneaking in was worth it for the Indy screening, where film fever was at its peak. The enthusiasm at the first NPH screening in St Andrews couldn’t match the hysteria inside the theatre when Spielberg peeked into the orchestra section, or the outraged booing when the closing credits rolled.

Before I left, I took one last stroll along the Croisette, the wide street between the beach, the Palais and the city. Over the weekend, the town had been flooded by pass-carriers and cinophiles and the festival cars and people winding around them couldn’t even move. Hundreds of people were bulging over the fences to the Grand Theatre Lumiere, more were begging for tickets to screenings at the entrance to the Palais, and the paparazzi camera clicks were so frequent that it sounded like it was raining. The love of film radiating from the masses that came to Cannes permeated the entire city. It is a festival one can never become accustomed to, or jaded to, and that first-time glow, as I learned from returning journalists, just doesn’t go away. Hearing the dreamy chimes that open screenings, meeting journalists who had a real passion for film, and feeling like I had seen the insides of each film by listening to the talent behind them at the press conferences are experiences that I won’t have anywhere else. Cannes was the most bureaucratic, insane, crowded festival I have ever been to, and if given the chance to go again, I’d apply for accreditation in a heartbeat, and find a way to get one of those coveted white passes.

Katherine Meyer
For more please visit yesicannes.blogspot.com
"I Know It When I See It"
Second Annual Postgraduate Study Day
Sex in the Cinema

Following the success of last year’s postgraduate study day on Indian cinema, the Film Studies department decided to go ahead with a second study day, scheduled for Thursday May 15, 2008, and organised by the PhD students. Several potential topics were forwarded, including Latin American cinema, before the decision was made to focus on sex in mainstream film and what constitutes artful depictions of sex as opposed to outright pornography.

Thus ‘Sex in the Cinema’ became our theme. It was also decided that the day should take the form of a symposium that would involve MCitt and PhD student presentations, a film screening and the appearance of a guest speaker. Fortunately, the department was able to contact Professor Linda Ruth Williams of the University of Southampton, whose interests include psychoanalytical theory, D.H. Lawrence and erotic thrillers. Additionally, she is the author of Critical Desire: Psychoanalysis and the Literary Subject, The Erotic Thriller in Contemporary Cinema and Sex in the Head: Visions of Femininity and Film in D.H. Lawrence.

With members of staff, guests from other disciplines, and postgraduate and undergraduate students all present in the Board Room, Williams opened the day’s events with an absorbing presentation on the status of sex in modern cinema – “I Know it when I See It: Sex, Simulation and Classification in mainstream cinema since the 1990s”’. What followed was an overview of some of the films which have posed problems for the British Board of Film Classification in recent years, notably works such as Gaspar Noé’s Irreversible (2002) and 9 Songs (2004). What soon became apparent is that the BBFC is still struggling to maintain some sexual restraint in film just as ‘real’ penetrative sex has slowly made its way into mainstream cinema (and we were certainly going to see proof of this later on).

After a short coffee break, it was the turn of the students to lead the discussion by presenting clips that represent various forms of sexual intercourse in a variety of contexts. Lie With Me (2005) was shown as an example of how a sexually-explicit American film is received within a Muslim culture. Park Jin Pyo’s Too Young to Die (2002) revolves around the tender relationship between an elderly couple and challenges the viewer to confront a type of sex not usually deemed suitable or desirable for mainstream cinema audiences. Two Ang Lee films were also presented: Lust, Caution (2008) highlighted issues of sex and censorship within different national contexts, while the reactions to Brokeback Mountain (2005) indicates that Hollywood is still reluctant to depict gay sex despite suggestions that mainstream cinema has opened the gates to more sympathetic treatments of homosexual characters and relationships. Of particular interest was a clip from Destricted (2006) which bombard the viewer with a fast-paced montage of sexual images taken from various mainstream and independent films. When confronted with such a barrage, it becomes uncertain as to what images are real and which ones are simulations, therefore rendering the censorship of the scene problematic. The purpose of these clips was to introduce conflicted debates on sex in film and to generate further debate on the pornographic image and in this respect the student-led workshop was a success.

After lunch and with the mantra ‘voyeurism is participation’ in mind, the attendees were treated to a screening of John Cameron Mitchell’s Shortbus (2006). Promoted as one of the most sexually-explicit films to enter the American mainstream, Mitchell’s film has a lot to live up to and, as those who saw it will affirm, it did not disappoint in this regard.

The film involves a sexually, socially and racially diverse group of people in a post-9/11 New York – a sex therapist unable to achieve an orgasm, a dominatrix struggling to connect with those around her, and a gay couple whose relationship problems are complicated further by the arrival of a new lover. As the characters tussle with issues of sex, love and friendship, they gravitate towards the exclusive club Shortbus, a sexual and artistic haven for New York bohemians. Meanwhile the viewer is confronted (or treated depending on your point-of-view) to moments of actual, penetrative sex, masturbation, self-fellatio, ejaculation, and a novel rendition of the ‘Star Spangled Banner’. Some covered their eyes, others laughed and, by the end, many appeared to be in a state of shock. Suffice to say, Shortbus is not a film that is easily forgotten.

In the screening’s ‘aftermath’, a round table discussion took place that tried to locate the pornographic image in art cinema. With the student presentations and Shortbus firmly in mind, it was debated whether or not explicit depictions of sex or even sex itself are necessary in cinema and why some choose to incorporate it, or not as the case may be. Attention was also drawn to the idea of sex as integral to individual and communal identity, and whether cinematic sex helps to construct this. In the context of Shortbus, it was suggested that this may be especially pertinent to New York’s bohemian scene in the early 21st century just as new initiatives ‘cleaned up’ the city and sexual permissiveness again came under scrutiny.

Although the study day was a great opportunity for a focused and sincere discussion of sexuality, sexual politics and film censorship, it should not be forgotten just how relaxed and at times humorous the day had been, with all the talk of national male genitalia, female orgasms and the — humorous— possibility of having snuff films as next year’s topic!!

Once the discussions had reached their climax, David Martin-Jones summed up what had been a fascinating and hugely enjoyable day. A large debt of gratitude is owed to those who organised the event, as well as the presenters, staff members, invited guests and, of course, Linda Ruth Williams. All helped to make ‘Sex in the Cinema’ a worthwhile academic experience that shows how the Film Studies department is continually striving towards challenging and innovative investigations of cinema.

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