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Publication details:

Fusion

Chapter No. 14

2201-7208 (ISSN)

Publication Date:

2018-12-01

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Editorial: Intersections in film and media studies

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Jodi Brooks, Kathleen Williams, Jessica Ford and Melanie Robson

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This special issue was inspired by film theorist B. Ruby Rich's Fall 2014 editorial for *Film Quarterly*, where in a piece titled "Film, Digitality, and Cultural Divides" Rich wrote,

Cinema itself is in a state of immense transition, yet it's hard not to notice that attention is lavished disproportionately on technology and auteurist style, with the question of theme, focus, and subject matter repeatedly sidelined. What, though, is 'filmable' today? And what is 'theorizable' in response? (5)

Film and media studies have shifted, merged, and evolved in response to the various industrial and technological changes in the media landscape. When and in what ways are the distinctions between different screen media forms important for discerning how screen texts circulate? What kinds of discussions – and what kinds of work – are valued and possible in this shifting terrain? And when, how and why do questions around technology and the future of cinema displace or overshadow questions around what can claim a place on the various kinds of screens that populate the contemporary media landscape? As Rich puts it, "What, though, is 'filmable' today? And what is 'theorizable' in response?"

In 2017, the Sydney Screen Studies Network held a program of seminars on the topic "Intersections in Film and Media." The program of 14 seminars, held at universities across the Sydney region, aimed to bring together the disparate research backgrounds of screen studies scholars to interrogate how they navigate the rapidly changing media environment in which they work. As well as presenting their own research, each presenter responded to the B. Ruby Rich quote that forms the stimulus for this *fusion* issue. A follow up symposium and roundtable panel were also held on the same topic at the end of 2017. What emerged from this year-long program was a diverse body of work grappling with similar core issues. Seminars covered topics such as piracy and distribution, spectatorship, fan culture, gender and sexuality, and arts policy. Such disparate topics stimulated by one short passage evidenced the fact that one core issue faces all screen studies researchers: it is becoming increasingly difficult to define screen media. It demonstrated that researchers working across the spectrum of screen studies increasingly question how to define (and at times argue for) their research object, given the rapid changes to our media environment as a result of new technologies, viewing practices, distribution patterns and potentials for interactivity. The conversations emerging from the symposium and roundtable at the end of the year triggered a discussion amongst the editors to further pursue this topic in a special journal issue.

Several of the papers presented at the 2017 seminar and symposium program were developed into articles for this issue, including those by Tara McLennan, Adam Daniel and Jessica Ford. Alongside these articles developed from work presented in this seminar program we have also included a number of other pieces that examine what cinema's state of "immense transition" means on "the ground" – for independent filmmakers, for film festivals and their organisers and audiences, and for the place and future of the disciplinary field of film studies. These include an edited transcript of a public forum on "Women, Film and Independence" that drew together filmmakers, academics, film programmers and curators to discuss what independence means for women filmmakers working in Australia today. In her piece "Across and in-between: transcending disciplinary borders in film festival studies" Kirsten Stevens grapples with how we can understand film festival studies within the contemporary interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary academic landscape. Stevens proposes that film festival studies offers the opportunity to move well beyond the traditional concerns of texts, nations and industry. Film festival research offers an approach to the study of screen environments that privileges understanding film through its social and cultural construction. Reflecting on what this period of "immense transition" in cinema means for the disciplinary field of film studies and how its concerns are understood and explored in the academy, Melanie Robson argues that a "key issue is that film students access all media—cinema, television, YouTube videos, podcasts, video essays—on the same devices via the same means; this means that not only are the platforms converged, but the experience of engaging with them are, too. In other words, it is increasingly difficult to differentiate between different forms of visual screen media in the classroom."

Fittingly, this issue opens with Adam Daniel's evocative article on how Virtual Reality (VR) filmmakers can produce an experience of spectatorship that is less dependent on narrative linearity. Daniel's essay offers a deep analysis of and engagement with Australian VR artist Lynette Wallworth's *Collisions VR*, which "tells the story of Nyarri Morgan's firsthand encounter with the effects of nuclear testing in the South Australia desert in the 1950s." Daniel contends that VR opens the possibility for manifold subjective experiences of space and time and brings together a number of key concerns for this issue. Also engaging with large scale work (and questions of scale), Wendy Haslem explores how the work of artist Pipilotti Rist renews cinema. Through a rich and detailed discussion of Rist's exhibition *Sip My Ocean* Haslem argues that "Rist's moving image work steps outside of the traditional exhibition space to reframe the history of the cinema and to imagine it anew for the future." Working on the smaller scale of networked data set photographs, in her essay "Memories in the networked assemblage: how algorithms shape personal photographs" Tara McLennan explores the ways that "The memory work of curating and storytelling with personal photographs is increasingly undertaken in digital internet-enabled spaces, and yet the desire to shape and craft narrative from a vast personal archive endures."

Two of the articles in this issue turn to the intersections between film and television. Jessica Ford and Daniel Binns explore the increasing convergence between film and television spaces and the lack of frameworks available to adequately conceptualise these

changes. In her essay “Feminist cinematic television: Authorship, aesthetics and gender in Pamela Adlon’s *Better Things*” Ford argues that, “feminist filmmakers and television creators are increasingly asserting themselves, their storytelling, and their politics on television and while television distributors and audiences seem to have made room for them, evaluative and interpretive frameworks also need to be reformulated accordingly.” In his piece “The Netflix Documentary House Style: Streaming TV & Slow Media” Binns writes that “documentary is dialectical, certainly, and it is discursive. To watch any on-demand content, though, is to engage in a discourse of platforms and infrastructure, of algorithms and aesthetics.”

In different ways and on different fronts the articles that make up this special issue of *fusion* engage with Rich’s provocation. They do so by exploring how and when the distinctions between different screen media are given value, for instance in terms of the criteria for film funding, in terms of which bodies or legacies of screen work are recognised and valued, or in terms of the place of film studies in the academy. In Rich’s 2014 editorial that served as the prompt for much of the work included here Rich asked, “Is it possible that a committed digital cinema could arise from the ashes of celluloid and resume the medium’s traditional relevance to popular events, historical movements and questions of inequality?” (5). The work gathered in this issue offers rich ground from which to continue these discussions.

Reference

Rich, B. Ruby. “Film, Digitality and Cultural Divides”, *Film Quarterly*, vol. 68, no. 1, 2014, 5-8.

To cite this article

Brooks, Jodi, et al. “Editorial: Intersections in film and media studies.” *Fusion Journal*, no. 14, 2018, pp. 3-5. <http://www.fusion-journal.com/editorial-intersections-in-film-and-media-studies/>

First published online: December 2018