

Elena Bonomo and Ken Provencher

Ephemeral Traces

Editors' Introduction

Nestled in the urban center of Los Angeles, the University of Southern California is surrounded by material traces, both historical and contemporary, of the media industry. The campus has not only served as the backdrop to numerous films and television shows—from *The Graduate* (1967) to *The O.C.* (2003-2007)—but also houses rich archival collections and cutting-edge interactive media technology. Amidst this setting, which has inspired the research interests of many USC graduate students, the ZdC Conference Committee selected the topic for the Sixth Annual Graduate Student Conference: “The Ephemeral Trace.”

As Priya Jaikumar aptly noted in her opening remarks at the conference, the subject of “The Ephemeral Trace” is provocative for scholars of both historical and new media: just as the records of old media are often lost or destroyed, new media barely leaves any physical trace. The impermanence of moving images and sounds complicates even further these transitory historical records. In pairing the concept of ephemerality with the “trace,” the ZdC Conference Committee hoped to evoke the complementary—in terms of historical objects with little material value—and contradictory—in terms of the remnants of that which is ultimately fleeting—nature of the topic. As such, the conference organizers sought to invoke the “ephemeral” as not merely an object of study but also a critical methodology, reminiscent of the work of Amelie Hastie and this year’s keynote speaker, Shelley Stamp.

Still, despite the inherent ephemerality of media as material objects, producers of cinema, television, and new media have simultaneously used these media to capture the ephemeral. Mary Ann Doane locates cinema’s preservational impulse in the “actualities” of early cinema—representations of the contingent, as Doane describes, “the stuff of everyday life.”¹ In these short films, cinema paradoxically gave structure to, or “harnesse[d],” the ephemerality of life.² The notions of contingency and ephemerality, often articulated as “liveness,” have been equally important to television scholars. Yet, despite television’s ability to preserve and present history as it happens, Jane Feuer argues, liveness, in all its ambiguities, is not the essence of television but the ideology of television, affirmed by television’s self-referential discourse. According to Feuer, “the ideological connotations of live television are exploited in order to overcome the contradiction between flow and fragmentation in television practice.”³ As a formal construction of ephemerality, liveness eases the inherently problematic nature of television. Today, as digital media seemingly offer endless space for storage, scholars contemplate the possibilities and the potential drawbacks of endless capacity, especially as digital archives posit an end to the physical trace.

Thus, the concept of ephemerality offers diverse interpretational frameworks to media scholars. Accordingly, the conference brought together a range of topics, from histories of early American cinema, to accounts of the ever-



expanding interactivity of Japanese *otaku* culture, to the theoretical implications of unwanted cell phone photography. Yet, within such diversity in topics, several recurring themes united the papers: materiality, individuality and subjectivity, self-reflexivity, and aurality, among others.

The Conference - April 7, 2012

Following the format of recent ZdC conferences, the Sixth Annual Graduate Student Conference was a one-day event in April of 2012, featuring the scholarship of M.A. and Ph.D. presenters from USC, the University of California, Irvine, and the University of California, Santa Cruz. The conference organizers grouped the papers into three panels: “Capturing Ephemerality,” “Remnants of Hollywood,” and “Alternative Archives: Theory and Practice.” Priya Jaikumar, Anikó Imre, and Kara Keeling, respectively, chaired the panels, offering their insights on the graduate student work throughout the day. This year, adding a professionalization element to the conference, Laura Isabel Serna facilitated a roundtable discussion between the staff of several research facilities around Los Angeles, including the Hugh M. Hefner Moving Image Archive at USC, the Huntington Library, the Academy Film Archive, and the

Seaver Center for Western History Research. Their remarks added a practical perspective to the historical and theoretical work presented at the conference. Finally, the event culminated in a keynote address, entitled “Feminist Media Historiography, Ephemera, and the Work Ahead,” by Shelley Stamp (Professor of Film & Digital Media, University of California, Santa Cruz). Stamp’s work not only brought together many of the themes presented during the day, but inspired new research methods for those scholars seeking to trace the ephemeral.

The Panels

The conference began with a panel entitled “Capturing Ephemerality,” moderated by Priya Jaikumar. The first paper, “A Spectral Pop Star Takes the Stage” by Forrest Greenwood, gave a vivid illustration of an ephemeral form of “new media”: the virtual pop star Hatsune Miku. A trademark creation of developers of digital software that allows musicians to give virtual “voice” to original pop songs, Hatsune Miku has grown to symbolize a participatory culture of amateur composers. However, Greenwood argued that as an animated avatar, Miku is just as much, if not more, a figure of consumption as production. Basing his thoughts partly on Anne Friedberg’s

concept of the screen as separating spectatorial from virtual space, Greenwood analyzed Miku as a virtual object of *otaku* fan culture. *Otaku*, according to Greenwood, desire Miku's materiality despite her virtuality, as seen in a series of live concerts catering to *otaku* that project a hologram of Miku in something approximating three-dimensional space.

While Greenwood theorized the ephemeral as an extension of virtuality into materiality, Karl J. Mendonca's paper, "Without a Trace," theorized it as the inevitable consequence of personal media technology development. Continuing Greenwood's exploration of the way consumers interact with ephemerality, Mendonca in his paper focused on his online project FotoCache (<http://kathacollage.com>), a repository of "unwanted" images from consumer cell phones. With reference to Steven Shaviro's concept of the "post-cinematic," Roland Barthes's idea of the work as "text," and Ravi Sundaram's notion of "recycled modernity," Mendonca argued that by considering a work composed of discarded digital images, such as FotoCache, we can examine our own use of personal media technologies as a form of deletion as well as production.

The presenters of the second panel, "Remnants of Hollywood," turned to the archive to explore ephemera, ephemerality, and the emergence of the film industry in America. In her paper, "Apparitional Girlhood: Material Ephemerality and the Historiography of Female Adolescence in Early American Film," Diana Anselmo-Sequeira located the largely forgotten but pervasive image of mystic girlhood in the early twentieth century. Through her analysis of D.W. Griffith's short film *What The Daisy Said* (1910), Thanhouser's *The Portrait of Lady Anne* (1912), and the lost feature-length serial *The*



Mysteries of Myra (1916), Anselmo-Sequeira placed the recurring cinematic image of supernatural female adolescence in conversation with contemporaneous theories of both science and mysticism. Ultimately, Anselmo-Sequeira argued that histories based solely on preserved objects remain incomplete. In the remnants, she uncovered an important understanding of female youth and sexuality in the early twentieth century that persists in contemporary media.

Nicholas Emme, in the paper "The Reality of Illusion," also used a neglected Hollywood work, the 1930 Warner Bros. film *Show Girl in Hollywood*, to explore the ephemeral—in this case, an early-Hollywood example of self-reflexivity. Using archival research to underpin his textual analysis, Emme showed how the film's attempt to reproduce and market the making of a film as a commercial subject simultaneously revealed and concealed the "reality" of Hollywood filmmaking at that time. With its star, Alice White, and the film itself marginalized in Hollywood history, Emme demonstrated that from a present-day perspective, this film that purported to "expose" the mechanics of Hollywood ultimately represents a form of concealment.

The coming of sound to Hollywood feature films served as a significant turning point in Katie Walsh's paper, "Selling Masculinity at Warner Bros.: William



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Powell, A Case Study.” By examining various ephemera, from press books to interoffice memos, Walsh showed how William Powell—celebrated for his debonair demeanor and smooth voice, not his physical features—garnered the contractual power that led to his short-lived career at Warner Bros. According to Walsh, while Warner Bros. failed to capitalize on the new form of star masculinity that Powell embodied, MGM succeeded, casting Powell as comic detective Nick Charles in the highly successful *Thin Man* series (1934–1947). Ultimately, Walsh contended that sound technology, among other changes in the industry, encouraged filmmakers and audiences alike to rethink stardom.

Finally, though not presented at the conference, Kwynn Perry’s article “Black Valuation and the Economy of the Cinematic Soundscape” also examines the significance of cinematic sound in relationship to acting and performance—as sound, according to Perry, functions as a source of visual and narrative value for Black actors of Classical Hollywood. Through her analysis of *Gone with the Wind* (1939), *Casablanca* (1941), and *Hellzapoppin’* (1941), Perry illustrates how the Black sonic tradition enabled Black actors to reassert their value despite the prevailing visual culture that represented Black bodies as of less value than White bodies during the period. Here, Perry views the ephemerality of sound as productive, allowing a venue for Black agency and expression that remains uncontrollable by White hegemony.

Workshop Panel and Keynote

Following a lunch break, Laura Isabel Serna moderated an “Archives Workshop Panel” with several special guests to discuss the scope, the

history, and the accessibility of local cinematic archives. Dino Everett, archivist at the Hugh M. Hefner Moving Image Archive at USC, spoke of over thirty thousand USC student films currently archived in the basement of the school’s Norris Theater. Good or bad, they have been documenting Los Angeles from various points of view over several decades; current students have been accessing them to extract and insert stock footage in their own productions. Everett stressed the need to hold onto “old technology” as long as possible; seeing things as they were originally meant to be seen, he explained, may depend on access to technology of the time of production. Natalie Russell, librarian at the Huntington Library, also argued for retention of old media, given the instability of digital media. “My vellum manuscripts have been around for a really long time,” she said, “and even if my DVDs are going to last five hundred years, I don’t have a five hundred year old DVD yet to know that it’s going to last five hundred years.” Like Russell, the other panelists specialized in collecting and preserving works of distant periods or non-commercial forms. Mark Toscano, preservationist at the Academy Film Archive, presides over one of the largest



collections in the world of avant-garde film, in itself an endangered category of film due to its low commerciality. And Betty L. Uyeda, collections manager at the Seaver Center for Western History Research, is concerned with documenting the history of Los Angeles County and Southern California through photographs, paper ephemera, manuscripts, maps, and government records from the early nineteenth through the mid-twentieth centuries. An important issue for all the panelists, who are devoted to preservation, was a dedication to physical materials that may be aging, but have proven their reliability and durability, unlike new digital media.

Delivering the conference's keynote address, professor Shelley Stamp spoke eloquently about her efforts to document the life and work of cinema pioneer Lois Weber. A contemporary of D.W. Griffith's, and with an output of films arguably comparable to his, Weber has nevertheless required a form of scholarly resurrection. The problem with researching Weber's career, Stamp said, is that Weber left no papers, diaries, or memoirs, and therefore her presence "must be entirely constructed

by ephemeral traces"—mainly publicity and interviews. Tracing the life of someone through ephemera, Stamp claimed, is like researching the life of Hitchcock's Mrs. Bates, who exists only through her son Norman. Stamp related her efforts to that of feminist historiography, which she argued is not about inserting women into an existing historical trajectory but by first recognizing absences. The state of women in film history, Stamp said, is acknowledged but then set aside "with no possibility of ever changing conventional narrative"—that is, the narrative that presents Griffith as a lone pioneer.

The conference concluded with a reception for the attendees, where students, faculty, and guests had a chance to reflect on the recurring issues of archival preservation, historical excavation, interactivity, and immediacy presented throughout the day. The papers in this issue of *Spectator* represent the varied but significant contributions—from unearthing unremembered, lost, or unwanted texts to understanding subcultures—that the topic of "Ephemeral Traces" brings to the field of media studies.

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End Notes

1 Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 142.

2 *Ibid.*, 144.

3 Jane Feuer, "The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology," in *Regarding Television: Critical Approaches—An Anthology*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1983), 16.