

Mike Dillon

# Making Difference

## Editor's Introduction

---

This special issue of *Spectator* was organized at a time of change for the journal's home academic department, the Bryan Singer Division of Critical Studies at the University of Southern California School of Cinematic Arts (SCA). The past few years have seen the retirement of some long-serving faculty, the hiring of others. A 2006 endowment from George Lucas has made possible a gradual, and massive, expansion in available Cinema School facilities that have made cutting-edge classroom technology an essential part of Critical Studies pedagogy. The renaming of the division to the Bryan Singer Division is also a recent affair, prompted by Singer's generous endowment to the program from which he graduated. A director with roots in mid-1990s independent cinema and now a staple director of superhero films (a genre that is surely now in its Golden Age), Singer comprises one of Critical Studies' more famous alumni; amid SCA's divisions, some of whose faculty are populated by other prestigious alumni and industry personnel, his contributions have raised the public profile of the department.

Of particular importance within the division has been a series of impactful changes in the funding of graduate students in the MA- and PhD-tracks. As of this writing, the department is nearing the end of a several-year long transition into a funding infrastructure that privileges combining stipends and fellowships for incoming PhD students, a notable switch from an older, stipend-only model. One salient ripple effect of the new model has been the increased availability of Teaching Assistant and

Research Assistant positions. This is projected to subtly alter the department's professional climate over time, changing the professional circumstances in which the graduate students most commonly collaborate with each other and warranting new standards by which TA labor is distributed across the Critical Studies curriculum.

*Spectator* marks these numerous and ongoing developments with *Making Difference*, an issue dedicated to the work of graduate students in Critical Studies. The demands of the department compel them to wear several hats—as students, as independent researchers, and as TAs. The latter role, in particular, is a crucial component to the student's professional affiliation with the school, measured both in terms of his or her participation in the day-to-day functions of the institution and, pragmatically, in the number of campus hours spent attending to TA duties while a semester is in session. Among the School's territorial divisions (which include film school staples like Production and Screenwriting as well as relatively contemporary additions like Interactive Media), it is Critical Studies that offers the large introductory courses that engage core histories, national medias, and essential theories and concepts most pertinent to film and media studies. While the Division of Critical Studies has a 3<sup>rd</sup> floor office in SCA's main building, an official, secondary headquarters can be found directly beneath it, in a battery of 2<sup>nd</sup> floor offices that house the Critical Studies Teaching Assistants. These TAs are easily the most active of the School's staffers in interfacing with SCA's large,

## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

undergraduate student body.

In addition to assisting the students through this unusual degree of exposure to the undergraduate curriculum, the graduate students of Critical Studies have exemplary service records. Many contribute regularly to the intellectual life of SCA through their organization and participation in campus events, which are often made possible by ZdC, a student council-like group that oversees academic initiatives led by the grad students. (Its name is a reference to Jean Vigo's French Poetic Realist film *Zéro du Conduit* [1933], about a primary school whose students rise up against the teachers.) ZdC's efforts include hosting colloquiums and guest speaker sessions (including talks from resident faculty, students, and visiting scholars) as well as coordinating an annual graduate conference, which has been a staple of the department since 2007; since then, one of *Spectator's* biannual issues has been dedicated to that year's conference and co-edited by PhD students. The cover image of this volume is the recently-devised logo for ZdC, designed to appear on the group's website and event announcements.

Amid the variety of social and professional events programmed by ZdC, it is noteworthy that several of these draw upon SCA's considerable resources and its ties with the neighboring entertainment industry in Los Angeles. Critical Studies occasionally liaises with the broader SCA events calendar to supervise one of the many special engagements hosted by the School, such as film screenings, panel discussions, or Q&As with filmmakers, actors, or other industry professionals (Figs. 1 and 2). When moderating discussions with



Fig. 1: PhD candidate Şebnem Baran (left) conducts a Q&A with Declan Lowney, director of *Alan Partridge: Alpha Papa* (2013).



Fig. 2: PhD candidate Leah Aldridge (center) on the film review show *Just Seen It* (PBS), interviewing actor Barkhad Abdi (left) on his Academy Award-nominated performance in *Captain Phillips* (Paul Greengrass, 2013).

guest speakers, graduate students are encouraged to tailor the conversation to their areas of academic expertise and invite the speaker to comment on a wider set of cultural or political topics than may be typical of interviews conducted on press tours. Guests have, on numerous occasions, complimented this line of questioning, having enjoyed the opportunity to share their thoughts on complex topics.

The unique intersection between university life and the hub of media culture that SCA occupies often makes it possible for grad students to orient their interests toward projects outside the parameters of Critical Studies. The majority of students maintain social lives with non-academics (including some of their spouses) who are currently working in or adjacent to Hollywood, and this provides the average Critical Studies student a favorable combination of industry access and media know-how to branch out into other ventures. Some of these connections have a direct and causal relationship to how certain dissertation projects take eventual shape, while others are wholly extracurricular in nature (Figs. 3 and 4).

At the end of the day, of course, Critical Studies remains a scholastic program peopled by students searching for interventions into their respective fields of inquiry. The personalities and identities that comprise the student body is perhaps most represented by the diversity of research subjects being pursued, as people direct their energies toward the texts, media platforms, genres, nations, labor economies, historiographies, authors, legal frameworks, stars, theories, and technologies that



**Fig. 3:** PhD student Catherine Peiper pitches the startup technology SNAPbasket—which allows low-income households to access local grocery pricing and budgeting information online—at the Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism.

will feature in their early conference presentations, publications, and dissertations. Critical Studies is motivated, ultimately, by an aspiration to make a difference within existing media discourses, to intervene in the available literature, to excavate unexamined texts or histories, and to proffer original interpretations. *Making Difference* is devoted to showcasing instances of this graduate research. The essays herein are arranged chronologically by each contributor's stage in the department, from ongoing PhD students in the early phases of dissertation research to recent graduates newly employed at other universities. Each was invited to contribute a piece that explores the notion of "difference" through the discourses and methodologies particular to his or her research. Or more precisely, the essays were tasked with addressing the myriad ways in which media produces or relies upon the construction of "difference" on artistic, industrial, or discursive levels.

Catherine Peiper's "Panic in the Circle" examines the phenomenon of flash mobs—coordinated group performances, typically playful, that erupt unannounced in public spaces. Such performances are the result of careful orchestration and sometimes even corporate sponsorship, but are often designed to appear spontaneous, organic, informal, and populist. Peiper argues that, despite their creativity and, theoretically, their capacity to demonstrate different, wholly non-normative uses of space, flash mob performances are made coherent through a set of common traits and visual

grammars when disseminated online and later popularized as viral videos. This, in turn, reinforces a tacit social agreement between performers and observers (including figures of authority) to respect the boundaries of the performance. This sort of mutual understanding, she claims, becomes an important factor in distinguishing the disruptive, though ultimately harmless stunts of flash mobs from genuine mob violence or organized political protests.

Next, Jeremy Heilman's "Mock-Doc Pedagogy and the Ethnographic Unconscious" features an extended analysis of Ben Rivers' faux-ethnographic documentary *Slow Action* (2011). The film is divided into four segments that each explores a futuristic island society in the aftermath of a global apocalypse. Throughout the work, River's ethnographic claims about the societies on display are comprised of multiple, obvious falsehoods, implying that the filmmaker is self-reflexively announcing his film as a piece of utter fiction. This provocative interplay between fabrication throughout Rivers' narrative and the truth-claims of the broader ethnographic film genre, Heilman argues, calls attention to the problematic politics and constructed nature of the documentary mode in general and the types of spectatorship it invites. In so doing, Heilman frames his analysis within the tropes of Otherness and manufactured differences that feature so heavily in ethnographic film discourse.

The faux-documentary format is likewise considered in Stephanie Yeung's "Fighting Form" (a contribution excerpted from her doctoral dissertation on contemporary media representations



**Fig. 4:** Makeup artist Whitney Banks transforms PhD candidate Heather Blackmore into a zombie.

## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

of the US military). Yeung argues that the recent, post-9/11 spate of mainstream films about American combat engagements in Afghanistan and Iraq demonstrate a tendency to stylistically recreate the visceral sensations of combat and firefights. As a result, however, they elide substantive questions about the political and moral rationales for those wars. In this context, she analyzes Brian De Palma's critically-maligned *Redacted* (2007), a fictionalized docu-dramatization of the events surrounding the real-life rape and murder of an Iraqi girl by US soldiers. Yueng identifies the film as an anomalous text that breaks from the commonplace visual and aesthetic codes of modern war films. Through his own assemblage of fictitious documentary footage, De Palma offers a different—even incendiary—representation of war and the subjective experiences of American soldiers.

Ken Provencher's "*My Life... A Sony Product*" also originates from subjects explored in his doctoral dissertation, a study of the connections between Hollywood and the Japanese film industry. This marks a departure from the previous entries, which all prioritize inquiries into how visual knowledge is produced within specific media formats and genres. Instead, his essay consists mainly of a recent corporate history of Sony Pictures, starting with its acquisition of Paramount Studios amid hyperbolic fears of an Asian takeover of American industries. During its subsequent, bumpy efforts to produce hit films, Sony followed a different strategy

from the major film studios by capitalizing on its ability to feature its own corporate products in its film narratives. Provencher refers to this practice as the merging of Sony's product hardware with the "software" of its film diegeses; he explores the implementation of this strategy through a textual analysis of the drama *My Life* (Bruce Joel Rubin, 1993), in which a soon-to-be father, upon learning he is terminally-ill, begins recording himself on Sony cameras to impart messages to his unborn child.

Lastly, the volume features a roundtable discussion with recent graduates of the Critical Studies track, each with a breadth of experience in planning courses with faculty, leading discussion groups as Teaching Assistants, and producing special events. The discussion reflects upon time spent in the program, framing the conversation around thoughts on the dissertation process, on the recent, observable changes in Critical Studies graduate life, on the department's relationship to the wider USC community, and on the field of film and media studies as a whole. And in keeping with the in-house nature of this special volume, *Making Difference* concludes with reviews of two recent books by Critical Studies alumni: *Coproducing Asia: Locating Japanese-Chinese Regional Film and Media*, by Stephanie DeBoer, and *Videoland: Movie Culture at the American Video Store*, by Daniel Herbert.

---

**Mike Dillon** received his PhD in Critical Studies from the USC School of Cinematic Arts. His dissertation, "Dead Zones: Human Mobility and the Making of Media Nationalism," examines intersections between entertainment media and political efforts to restrict or regulate transnational human movements in the global era. His work is published in *Film International*, *Journal of South Asian Film and Media Studies*, *Mediascape*, *Reconstruction*, *Film & History*, and *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, among other venues; his forthcoming projects include a chapter in the book *Negative Cosmopolitanisms* (McGill-Queen's).