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On the Fringe: Understanding Alternative and Subversive Media

Notes from the Editors

When the Cinema and Media Studies department held its annual graduate student conference in the fall of 2015, borders worldwide were already in an increasing state of crisis. The conference theme, “On The Fringe: Understanding Alternative and Subversive Media,” seemed a timely intervention; the conference participants offered invigorating and provocative ideas to help us think through the import and implications of media for structuring and making sense of our world. As we prepare our conference issue of *Spectator* for publication in 2017, however, these topics have taken on a new and terrifying relevance in the United States. Our own national borders have become not only the site of xenophobic, bigoted rhetoric but of increasing state-sanctioned surveillance and violence, but also, always, *resistance*. The questions asked in these pages – questions about privacy, juridical and human rights, oppression, mediation, national identity, trauma, and dignity – which may have briefly seemed still in the realm of the historical or theoretical when they were presented at the 2015 conference, have now taken on an immediacy and a materiality that at times feels impossible to reckon with. Academic institutions such as ours have long benefited from an imagined borderlessness, from a sense of international community, an openness to the marginal, and a commitment to research and truth. It is clear that these ideals are now under siege and in need of vigilant protection and continued, unapologetic cultivation. We hope that the articles contained in these pages may serve as a reminder of the ways that media has been complicit not only in the oppressions that have proliferated in the United States over the past several months, but also in the ways they may still offer us tools for resisting. They point us toward necessary strategies and methods we must pursue for transcending borders

(national, political, conceptual, and otherwise), and for reconsidering our own roles and privileges not only as spectators, but as scholars and citizens with a responsibility to protect the marginal, the subversive, and the radically open in an increasingly closed world.

Reflections on the 2015 ZdC Graduate Student Conference

As the production, consumption and reception of media worldwide has shifted over the past several decades, it has become increasingly difficult to define and delineate between “mainstream” and “alternative” or “fringe” media. Dr. Alexandra Juhasz, a professor and activist, writes: “the binary terms ‘mainstream’ and ‘alternative’ obscure a great deal of cross-fertilization, mimicry, and hybridization: actually, both media use experimental as well as conventional forms; either format can espouse conservative ideology; ‘alternative’ videos can have budgets larger than those of the ‘mainstream,’ and can make a lot more money.”¹ Mainstream and alternative media are always and necessarily in conversation with one another; their development has not been parallel so much as it has been intersectional, defined by overlap, reciprocity, and exchange. The advent of digital media since the time of Juhasz’s writing has only further blurred the lines between public and private, inside and outside, art and artifact. How does fringe media provide us with alternative viewpoints, and what might those media look like in a contemporary media landscape? What does it mean for a fringe media to become mainstream, and what are the political and theoretical issues inherent to the study of marginalized media?

To explore these questions, the ZdC Cinema and Media Studies Graduate Student Association organized a two-day conference titled “On the

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Fringe: Understanding Alternative and Subversive Media,” and held October 16th - 17th, 2015. The conference began with the panel “Alternative Medias and Urban Space,” and included presentations by graduate students from three different institutions. PhD Candidate Matthew Dewey, from the University of California in San Diego, opened the panel with his paper “Moving out/in: Public Access Television and the Shifting Politics of Urban Geography.” Dewey’s work discussed the practice of creating Public Access Television programs in San Francisco in order to demonstrate how Public Access Television “reproduces and negotiates everyday spatial relationships.” Following Dewey was a presentation by David Stamps, a Master’s candidate from California State University, Northridge. Stamps’s paper, “P is for Pornography: Exploring PornHub’s Entry into Mainstream Advertising and the Media’s Coverage of Porn Being Publicized in Public Places,” looked at the release and reception of billboards and other large scale advertising campaigns launched by the pornography website, PornHub. These advertising campaigns caused controversy as they became a physical manifestation of a particular fringe media, one that is often considered taboo, entering the mainstream of public space. Rounding out the panel was Debjani Dutta, a PhD student from the University of Southern California. Dutta’s paper, “Choreographing Spaces - K-pop Flash Mobs and Fan Activism,” delved into the phenomenon of seemingly spontaneous flash mobs in public spaces, where fans of Korean pop music (K-pop) gather together to perform choreographed dances to various hit songs. All three presentations provided illuminating and critical analyses of the relationship of fringe media to public space.

The next panel, “Technology and Discourse: Fringe Networks and Public Perception,” included presentations by two of our featured authors: Lisa Han and Daniel Grinberg, both of whom are PhD students at the University of California in Santa Barbara. Han and Grinberg, whose papers are discussed in further detail later in our introduction, both presented on mediatic forms of surveillance. Joining Han and Grinberg were PhD students Philana Payton and Darshana Sreedhar Mini from the University of Southern California. Mini began the panel with her paper, “The Pandit Phenomenon:

Internet Celebrity, Controversy and Media Convergence in Kerala.” Her spirited delivery and complex analysis of media engagement with India’s most hated internet celebrity, Santhosh Pandit, energized the audience in the room and set the bar for the rest of the presentations. Philana Payton also captivated listeners with her presentation, “Home is Bound to the Horizons of Reach,’ Technically: Constructing a Digital-Diasporic Model through Cecile Emeke’s Strolling/Flaner Web Series.” Payton used the ongoing web series, *Strolling*, created and directed by Cecile Emeke, as a platform to discuss the importance of technology for connecting the Black diaspora across the globe. She suggested that Emeke’s web series, which asks strangers Emeke comes across to reflect on their lived experiences as Black people, as well as on prominent social issues, helps reveal the different overlaps, fissures, and complexities of experience for those within the diaspora, strengthening international communal ties. The four papers presented in this panel illustrated a diverse array of media and its uses, illuminating how fringe media can both surveil and connect us.

After the two morning panels came a series of memorable events. First, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences gave a presentation on the history of film advertisements in Hollywood, and brought material from their archives for conference attendees to examine up close. Later, USC was honored to present the Eisenstein Award to Taiwanese director, Hou Hsiao-hsien. The event included a screening of Hsiao-hsien’s 2015 film, *The Assassin*, followed by a fascinating Q&A with the director, moderated by USC professor Akira Lippit. The audience for the event was so large that many guests were forced to stand at the back of the theater, and some had to be turned away. Finally, the evening concluded an event titled “The Legacy of Blaxploitation.” Co-organized by the ZdC Cinema and Media Studies Graduate Student Association and the African-American Cinema Society at USC, the event consisted of a panel discussion featuring legendary director Melvin Van Peebles (*Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song*), actor Antonio Fargas (*Foxy Brown* and *Starsky & Hutch*), director Scott Sanders (*Black Dynamite*), and actor Michael Jai White (*Spawn*, *Black Dynamite*). USC professor Christine Acham moderated the discussion,

during which the four creatives reflected on the significance of Blaxploitation films, the industry's appropriation of, and capitalization on, the genre, and the importance of supporting Black creatives in the industry. The panel also responded to criticisms of Blaxploitation's representation of Black people, and in particular women, and offered their views on how and why the genre developed as it did.

The conference's second day continued with a lively and diverse series of panels, followed by a roundtable discussion and closing keynote. In the first panel, entitled "Finding the Radical in the Commercial: Genre, Exploitation, and Cult Cinema," speakers engaged in a critical dialogue around "mainstream" media that nevertheless challenges or complicates normative artistic practices. Following Robert J. Ashmore's paper on Vietnam War films (included in this issue), Benjamin van Loon, from Northern Illinois University, presented a paper entitled "'Troma, *The Toxic Avenger*, and the Paradox of Cult Communities," which engaged with the relationship between cult media, fan communities, and the ways that production and reception shift when cult figures enter the mainstream. The panel ended with a lively and occasionally hair-raising paper by USC PhD candidate Isaac Rooks, "'What Big Eyes You Have: Animal Point-of-View Shots in Horror and The Limits of Vision.'" Rooks explored the unusual but powerful use of animal point-of-view shots in horror films to consider the boundaries of the visual, and the delicate relationship between identification, subjectivity, and narrative in cinema.

The next panel, "From Regional to National: Spaces of Vision and Subversion," included presentations by two more of our featured authors, Jheanelle Brown (USC) and Bianka Ballina (UC Santa Barbara), as well as a paper by Eleanor Huntington, a Master's student at the University of Southern California. Huntington's paper, "Timor-Leste's First Narrative Feature, *Beatriz's War* (2013)," examined cinema's role in developing national identity by considering the case of the first film made by Timor-Leste, also known as East Timor. Timor-Leste became the first new sovereign state of the twenty-first century in 2002; its legacy of colonization by multiple foreign nations and its struggle for independence both have an important relationship to the modes and methods

of its self-representation through narrative film. In examining the cinematic production of a former colony, Huntington explored the unique potential of cinema to communicate the social realities of a people whose rights have been repeatedly infringed upon throughout history. Closing the panel was Bhargavi Narayanan, a PhD student from the University of California in Santa Barbara, with her paper, "Realism Through Modernity: The Case of Early Tamil Cinema." Narayanan, in her paper, invoked the case of realism in Tamil cinema to examine the ways that diasporic populations have historically engaged in the construction of ethnic and cultural identity across borders.

The final panel of the conference, "Media of Moral Anxiety: Sexuality, Pornography, and the Social Imagination," included papers with a very diverse range of subject matter and methodology. Anirban Baishya, a PhD candidate at the University of Southern California, began with his paper, "Pornography of the Poor Image: MMS Scandals, Virality and the Pornographic Imagination in India," an ethnographic account of the circulation of softcore pornography in India through multimedia messaging service networks. Baishya contextualized and theorized this particular form of widely circulated--and yet still underground--media within the complex social, economic and political realities of contemporary India to understand the ways in which media that circulates outside of standardized networks of production and reception can help us access the underpinnings of cultural and national imagination. Following Baishya's paper, Kevin Chabot, a PhD student from the University of Toronto, presented "Snuff Film and Bootleg Circulation," a thorough (if harrowing, for the more squeamish among us) account of the elusive, mythical snuff film and the many forms of fringe media and circulation it has inspired. Ennuri Jo, from the University of Southern California, followed with "Tracing Polyamory and Dissent in Eros + Massacre," an engaging look at the representation of polyamorous relationships in one of the Japanese New Wave's most iconic and experimental films. The panel closed with Matthew Connolly's insightful and thoroughly researched paper on gay porn theaters in New York City, which we have published in this issue.

The afternoon capped off with a lively faculty

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roundtable comprised of Dr. Akira Lippit, Dr. Priya Jaikumar, Dr. Marsha Kinder, and Dr. Michael Renov, entitled “Academia and Marginalized Fields of Study.” Fatimah Tobing Rony, an associate professor in the Film and Media Studies department at the University of California at Irvine, ended the day with her conference keynote. The keynote, entitled “After the Third Eye: Theory and Practice,” was a fascinating reflection on, and update to, Tobing Rony’s seminal book published in 1996, *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle*. Tobing Rony explored her own artistic practice over the past several decades as a way of understanding how fringe media can be informed and transformed by critical theory. Using her 2008 film *Chants of Lotus* as a case study, Tobing Rony discussed how the film, which was co-directed with Nia DiNata, Lasja Susatyo, and Upi, was distributed through the mainstream networks of the festival and museum circuits worldwide as well as a series of artist-organized, community-based, traveling public screenings across Indonesia. *Chants of Lotus* tells four stories about the experiences of marginalized women in Indonesia, touching on subjects such as AIDS, teenage sexuality, and child trafficking. The film was heavily censored by the Indonesian government, but despite this, Tobing Rony revealed that the community screenings across Indonesia included vigorous post-screening discussions with audience members about the issues raised in the film. This allowed Tobing Rony to see her own theorizing on the significance and potential of independent, alternative media spaces put directly into practice. In her keynote, Tobing Rony presented clips from the film alongside documentation of its journey across Indonesia to illustrate her own continued research and participation in transnational filmmaking. In doing so, she offered an exciting vision for the future of artistic and academic collaboration across borders.

In this Issue

Our issue opens with two essays that examine the state’s appropriation of screen technologies in order to normalize and execute various forms of surveillance. Lisa Han’s article, “Screening the Pre-Infant: Ultrasound and its Realisms,” looks at ultrasound imaging of fetuses as a specific media

form which not only diagnoses the mother’s pregnancy, but also surveils and defines the body itself. Han suggests that we conceive of the ultrasound not as a visual technology, but rather as an experience that uses various forms of avisuality, anti-visuality, and invisible media to construct a coherent narrative for parents awaiting a child, ultimately producing a body’s intelligibility. At the same time, Han provocatively contends that the use of a screen technology to “look” within the body and identify a fetus’s size, sex, and relative health becomes a way to normalize the idea and experience of everyday surveillance among citizens.

While Han focuses on the surveillance and screening of the pre-infant, something often taken for granted as an inconspicuous medical procedure, Daniel Grinberg’s “Classifying Information: The Opaque Logics of Terror Watchlists” delves into more overtly political applications of media in the service of surveillance. Arguing that terror watchlists are themselves a mediatic form, Grinberg asserts that watchlists fringe and infringe upon bodies that are arbitrarily designated as threats. Grinberg describes the fringing effect of watchlists as a form of “militarized immobility” to emphasize how the state employs “logistical blockages, obstructions, and stasis against its targets...preventing bodies or information from flowing freely” (see Grinberg, this issue). While Han’s theorization of the ultrasound shows how media technology can constitute the body through surveillance, Grinberg’s analysis of the state’s strategic use of watchlists reveals how such technology can also remove the body from legibility, instead marking it as a threat that needs to be contained and immobilized. Both essays reveal the differing ways that state institutions come to use and abuse media in the name of security, whether it is securing the pre-infant’s health or securing the “safety” of the nation.

Jheanelle Brown’s “Audiovisual Black Subjectivity in Kahlil Joseph’s *Double Conscience*” takes a different approach to the theme of fringe media, revealing how artists from fringe communities can repurpose and reclaim media technologies to intervene in dominant cultural discourses. Using Kahlil Joseph’s film installation, *Double Conscience*, as a case study, Brown argues that the multi-screen, double projection of Joseph’s film – set to the soundtrack of Kendrick Lamar’s

album *good kid, m.A.A.d. city* - works to render a collective Black subjectivity while audio-visually representing W.E.B. duBois's concept of double consciousness. This example illustrates how media can be reappropriated for potentially subversive purposes by fringe artists.

Similarly, in «Solidification and Flux on the «Gay White Way»: Gay Porn Theaters in New York City, 1969-1973,» Matthew Connolly, from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, charts the shifting exhibition strategies of two seminal New York City gay porn theaters during the early 1970s. In exploring both the content screened in these spaces and the advertising and trade materials they produced, Connolly constructs an interconnected web of media histories that offer us a new perspective on media outside the mainstream. Connolly importantly recovers some of the oft-forgotten media histories of marginalized communities, whose work as producers, distributors, and consumers of fringe media deserves a place in the canonical accounts of cinema history.

Robert J. Ashmore, from the University of Southern California, traces yet another left-out, parallel narrative in cinematic history in his paper, "I Can't Believe a Soldier Would Do a Thing Like That': The Monstrous Vietnam Veteran in the Exploitation Film." Ashmore looks to a series of B-movies and exploitation films produced in the United States during the Vietnam War to consider the ways in which representations of the veteran, already a potent symbol throughout American history, shifted as public opinion of the war changed. In these films, America's own mythologies are called into question and destabilized. By examining the figure of the monstrous veteran, returned from the faraway world of war and violence to wreak havoc on American soil, Ashmore picks up important questions about the elements of our culture that go forcibly unseen. These are the elements that exceed the bounds of historical narrativization just as they exceed the cinematic or televisual frame – the bloody casualties, unspeakable traumas, and lingering effects of war that, in spite of our best efforts to discard or ignore them, remain implacably on the fringes of our history, ready to re-emerge at any given moment.

The final article in the journal, "The Marvelous

City: Audiovisual Representations of Post-Special Period Havana" by Bianka Ballina, from the University of California at Santa Barbara, further examines the relationship between the fringe and national identity. Where Ashmore's paper brings us to the conflicted edges of American identity, Ballina's concern is with Cuba, whose geopolitical status has itself been relegated to a certain 'outsideness' vis-à-vis the United States and has remained on the fringes of American national discourse for the past half-century. Ballina looks at the ways in which the concepts of nation and history have been repeatedly re-asserted and re-negotiated within Cuban media and, in particular, the significance of absurdism and fantasy in documentary representations of Havana produced throughout the 2000s. By tracing what she describes as an "increasingly fragmented" national identity, Ballina not only considers Cuba's shifting and ambivalent relationship to both the national and global, but exposes the ongoing dialectic between individual, lived experience and broader discourses of the state. As Cuba enters a new relationship with the United States, and as borders around the world find themselves increasingly in crisis, we feel that a re-examination of the very literal, physical fringes of the places we inhabit is particularly pressing.

Rounding out our issue is a photo essay and interview with Los Angeles based independent filmmaker and video artist, Leila Jarman. Jarman discusses the making of her debut film *Voice of the Valley*, a documentary following two Jordanian women who produce and host the country's first female-run, journalistic radio program about the Jordan Valley. She discusses the challenges and rewards of making an independent film in an unfamiliar country and language, the ethical concerns inherent in documentary filmmaking, the difficulties and benefits of being a female director, her interpretation of what being "on the fringe" means, and more.

We hope you enjoy reading this issue. The conference participants, as well as the authors published within this journal, have pushed the boundaries of our thinking to the fringes and beyond with their scholarly and creative work. We are so grateful to have their contributions grace these pages.

Notes

1 Alexandra Juhasz, "So Many Alternatives: 'The alternative AIDS video movement,'" *Cineaste* 20, no. 4 (1994): 32-35

Eszter Zimanyi is a PhD student and Annenberg Fellow in Cinema and Media Studies at the University of Southern California. She is a co-organizer of USC's Middle East Film Screening Series, and served as the editorial assistant for *Return of The Mecca: The Art of Islam and Hip-Hop*, a 120-page commemorative book celebrating the art exhibit of the same name. She also acted as a curatorial assistant for *Histories Absolved: Revolutionary Cuban Poster Art* and the Muslim International, which showcased rare posters from Cuba's OSPAAAL collective. Eszter's work has been published in *Transnational Cinemas*, *Media Fields Journal* and *Jadaliyya*. Her current research considers the historical and ideological connections between the Cold War and the War on Terror through examining narratives of displacement and exile between Eastern Europe and the greater Middle East. Her research interests are migration, diaspora, and refugee studies, global and transnational media, postcolonialism, documentary, digital media.

Emma Ben Ayoun is a PhD student and Annenberg Fellow in Cinema and Media Studies at the University of Southern California. She completed her Bachelor of Arts in Cultural Studies and Philosophy at McGill University in Montreal, Canada, and her Master of Studies in Film Aesthetics at the University of Oxford in the United Kingdom. She is currently co-president of the ZdC Cinema and Media Studies Graduate Association at USC. Most recently, she presented a paper on feminist readings of Bourdieu and contemporary British crime drama at the *Screen* conference in Glasgow, UK. Her research focuses on illness as metaphor in global cinema, gender theory, and new media.