

# Conference Review

**The Society for Cinema Studies Conference Special Focus: Cinema(s) in Canada.** Ottawa, 15-18 May 1997.

The annual conference of the Society for Cinema Studies (SCS) was held 15-18 May 1997 in Ottawa, offering a unique opportunity for Canadian archivists to join those working in historical and theoretical approaches to the interpretation of film, video, and sound productions. Composed of leading scholars, curators, and filmmakers from international academic, museum, and film production circles, the SCS selected the theme "Cinema(s) in Canada" for the 1997 conference, providing a mix of theories and historical narratives by scholars, educators, and practitioners. Many of the papers interrogated the existing ways in which we interpret film, video, and sound productions within and beyond our borders; others presented new practices and bodies of work for consideration in the audio-visual canon.

The conference also provided an interdisciplinary forum of central interest to the work of archivists by broadening our acquisition criteria and providing new frameworks for the context and preservation of our existing collections. While the overuse of terminology derived from semiotics, psychoanalysis, and film theory occasionally impeded audience comprehension, the majority of the presentations was insightful and challenging for archival practice. The discussions generated by the SCS conference stand quite apart from those in which we as archivists and conservators participate within (the confines of) our own disciplines: rather than reflecting on the hierarchy of the archival record, the necessity for universal standards, or the latest approaches to records storage, we were able to cross the boundary of "keeping" to the domain where our collections maintain active lives in culture. The session offerings were rich on all fronts, ranging from considerations of pleasure in daytime television (of note here was a comparative analysis of *The Young and Restless* with Québec's *À nous deux*), to the construction of national identity in early Canadian cinema, to representing the diasporas of postcolonial film practice. Examinations of

specific genres and media were also featured in discussions centred around *film noir* and the Hollywood western, as well as critical evaluations of *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Star Trek* at thirty. The conference was thus useful to archivists and their work by introducing a wide range of perspectives or methodologies through which we may consider media productions, including marginalized perspectives and the re-thinking of accepted interpretation.

In general, the SCS sessions, whether centred on mainstream or alternative practices, gave primacy to the points of production of specific titles and to the immediate reception of these works. In this sense, as archivists, we were able to consider both the materiality of the moving image/sound production *and* its positionality within culture as media phenomena. Conference participants interrogated how social meaning becomes embedded in specific works and, as importantly, how films, videos, and sound recordings in turn produce meaning in the culture through the points of production, distribution, and spectating. This production/reception axis provided archivists attending the sessions with an important role as respondents to challenge the limitations of these historical films and to propose the archival point of the continuum (“post-reception”). The works become part of the cultural *doxa* through preservation in collections and resuscitation by new users of the material, a timely dialogue as the cinema community becomes increasingly aware of this “afterlife” as a locus for cultural inquiry in its own right. In all these perspectives, the value of looking in non-traditional source materials – particularly those outside conventional film histories – is evident. Film scholars and other researchers are only beginning to delve into newspaper microfilm, theatre and corporate archives, urban and metropolitan collections, and other forms of alternative records. This is not to overstate the obvious, but these new and refreshing case studies show that much evidence of the early cinema does exist; however, re-establishing the historical record requires patience, time, and a willingness to look for the linkages.

In terms of the specific papers given at the conference, a handful stand as particularly relevant to the work of media acquisition. Mark Langer (Carleton University) delivered a profile of unheralded Canadian animator Bryant Fryer, who produced animation from 1927 to 1933. Veteran film historian Peter Morris (York University) weighed in with a provocative consideration of the career of film pioneer James Freer as a case in point demonstrating the Canadian tendency to dismiss the significance of our own cultural products. Considered to be the first person to make films in Canada, none of Freer’s films have survived and very little is known about him. Morris, in making the distinction between not knowing something and not noticing something, concludes that, in Freer’s case, a cultural choice of not noticing has been made, thus displacing the filmmaker from investiture into the official canon.

The centre point of the Canadian theme was the session considering regionalism, nationalism, and uses of irony in the films of one Canadian film auteur,

Guy Maddin, whose films include *Tales from the Gimli Hospital*, *Archangel*, and *Careful*. George E. Toles (University of Manitoba), screenwriting collaborator with Guy Maddin, revealed his techniques for freeing the writer's imagination (e.g., he imagines himself as Maddin). He related his favourite scenes from Maddin's films and commented on how he and Maddin shared perspectives on comedy and its ability to insinuate itself into the most horrible situations simultaneously to relieve and reinforce dramatic tension: Maddin "is interested in the laugh that escapes from us without our intending. The one we would retrieve, if we could." Tom McSorley (Canadian Film Institute) invited his audience to consider an imaginary biography of the filmmaker in the consideration of his works as examinations of time and place. "Being in time" is portrayed as an unsettling, bewildering experience. The films challenge us, argued McSorley, to re-think film history. *Archangel* is described as a pure fiction from the film to the press kit. The paper concluded with the concept of Canadian cinema as an unfinished cinema.

Several panels pursued the exploration and analysis of spectatorship, local exhibition practices, and practitioners of the early cinema, notably Charlie Keil's (University of Toronto) session, and proved a treat for those interested in a field which has been receiving more academic attention in recent years. Gregory Waller (University of Kentucky) examined the use of motion pictures in turn-of-the-century Chautauqua assemblies and the winter Lyceum circuits. These assemblies were discussed in their social, cultural, and entertainment contexts: lecturers, choirs, novelty acts, the curiosities and eccentricities all shared the billing with the new technology of movies, but the presentation often was shaped within these frameworks, and the agenda of the event promoters. The "chautauqua" was a potent symbol of progress and community, harmonizing social and religious values with wholesome family entertainment and the attraction of the event. People were drawn to these ephemeral tent cities, at once utopian and egalitarian communities. This framework is far different from the traditional image of how movies were first received, yet it is an equally significant one. In fact, early film was shown in many contexts, not only confined to novelty theatres and nickelodeons; clearly, images would have to be carefully selected for these specific audiences in order to be socially acceptable.

The rapid expansion of cinema houses in Des Moines, Iowa in the period 1907 to 1913 was examined by Richard Abel (Drake University). Although he suggests that one might consider Des Moines to be a minor and perhaps less visible stop on the film distribution circuit, his research indicates that many of the same exhibition and distribution pressures in larger metropolitan centres were to be found there. The types of film, number of reels, admission charges, promotional giveaways, special events, etc., show evidence of an emerging craft, industry, and local cinema entrepreneurship in a period when film itself was developing a language of images, convention, and form. The Des Moines

research illustrates how this evolution is still evident, and one can only imagine how many Des Moines have never been explored for their own cinema histories.

Kathryn Fuller (Virginia Commonwealth University) examined the itinerant showman Bert Cook and his travelling cinema adventures in upstate New York and Vermont. Here was the cliché of the travelling showman, but one who was capable of enduring in a business within a small repeat circuit of customers. Others certainly existed, but their stories are yet to be told and celebrated.

Other panellists challenged the very idea of a singular, coherent film historiography or cinema, integral to the discussions noted above. Emerging Black, Gay/Lesbian and Native cinemas contested mainstream practices which relegate oppositional voices/identities to the margins. Christine Stojanova (Concordia University) presented an examination of the marginalized immigrant voice in Canadian cinema, portrayed as cultural stereotypes, as a quick-fix to the dramatic structure, or as fictitious fantasies of the protagonists. Giles Walker's *90 Days* and John Smith's *Welcome to Canada* were among the productions discussed, centred on the question "Is it necessary for us to place groups in inferior positions to bolster our own subjectivity?" At one session, which asked the question "What is the Black and/or Canadian in Black Canadian Film?," presenters Kass Banning, Rinaldo Wolcott, and Warren Crichlow (all of York University) scrutinized the reception of emerging Canadian Black cinema, and warned against the trap of hailing "ghetto aesthetic" in Black documentary and feature film in the wake of the mainstream reception to Clement Virgo's *Rude* (1995). This caveat extended to the formation of historical narratives, as in the analysis of *A Road Taken*, a documentary about railway porters who began working in railway sleeping cars in Canada beginning in the 1920s. The paper observed the patriarchal focus of the men, and questioned how the porters regained their perceived masculinity while carrying out work that was considered feminine. Randy Gue (Emory University) discussed the Black movie experience in Atlanta, during a time when Jim Crow segregated seating policies and by-laws made attendance at public cinemas difficult. Bailey's 81Theatre, an all-Black cinema, was an example of the kind of social and business response to these pressures, and was where Black cinema showed images of a more realistic Black community to itself.

Apart from discussions about cinematic practices there were the screenings of films and video productions which in themselves offered much new material for the participants. Highlights included anthologies of new short titles curated by artist-run centres, providing exposure to a range of films and an opportunity to screen many Canadian films that did not receive wide distribution; *Dirty Laundry* by Richard Fung, one of the most potent offerings, detailing the quest for the origins of his family's presence in Canada and his own Chinese and Gay identities, predicated on oral history and the location of archival documents; and special screenings, held in conjunction with the Canadian Film Institute,

which featured the films of filmmakers discussed in panels, including a retrospective of the films of Guy Maddin, as well as the honour of the public premiere of Maddin's film *Twilight of the Ice Nymphs* and premieres of John Greyson's *Lilies* and Alanis Obomsawin's *121 Days*.

In sum, the conference opened new doors for consideration by archivists engaged in the construction of film history as gatekeepers in selection, preservation, and provision of access. By opening the parameters of discourse which produce the meaning in our audio-visual records, we are able to sift through "chestnuts" and emerging works alike in dynamic ways. A major detraction (and distraction) for conference participants was the multi-track arrangement of six to eight concurrent sessions, as well as screenings, caucus meetings, and the book fair. This congested structure effectively conquered and divided the participation for any one offering so that attendance for most formal sessions did not exceed ten people. The arrangement proved to be both a disservice to presenters, who worked hard to deliver remarks of the highest quality, and to the audience wishing to deliberate during the question and answer period.

In our view, this year's conference dedicated to dialogue about film in Canada was invaluable for our particular work. The Society for Cinema Studies, as a leading international organization dedicated to the consideration of film in culture, extended its own framework to take the investigation of Canadian cinema to a larger context. Beyond the specific benefit of attending the Ottawa conference, we see archivists playing a greater role in future SCS discussions by participating actively to encourage greater understanding regarding the "afterlife" of film, video, and sound productions, and to advocate for more inclusivity in discussions of interpretation and preservation. Anyone wishing more information about the SCS in general, its publication *Cinema Journal*, or the Ottawa conference specifically can contact the SCS website at [www.cinemastudies.org](http://www.cinemastudies.org).

**Steve Moore, William O'Farrell, Melissa K. Rombout**  
National Archives of Canada