Academia and Public Policy in the wake of COVID-19

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Open Session - Audience may join the discussion

The consequences of the global pandemic have triggered upheaval in academia, exacerbating existing structural inequities and complicating teaching and research. The SCMS Public Policy Committee (PPC) wishes to turn this moment of crisis into an opportunity to make its charge more legible and useful to the general SCMS membership. The aim of this seminar is to open a direct line of communication with SCMS members in order to ascertain which policy issues are foremost on their minds as they teach, research, mentor, and organize in the COVID era. At the top of the committee’s current agenda are the following issues and lines of inquiry:

Faculty Organizing: Faculty unions at schools like Florida Atlantic University have illustrated the power and efficacy of labor organizing in higher education, yet many schools and states prohibit or delimit unionization. Are there any public policy solutions to these obstacles or alternate modes of organizing that approach the effectiveness of unions?

Fair Use: While the Fair Use exception creates the appearance that the licensing issue is settled, we know of universities that do not acknowledge the exception, an issue that has become even more fraught in the move to remote teaching during the pandemic. Should media scholars consider adjusting how we frame our use of media in the classroom? Do remote teaching circumstances require new additions and exceptions to Fair Use policies and principles?

Academic Labor: We are also interested in working on the question of academic labor as it relates not only to contingent faculty but to tenure-track and tenured faculty, as well. Given the massive shift to online teaching in 2020, what mechanisms of oversight might be viable to address issues of workload, compensation, class sizes, intellectual property and content ownership, surveillance, and data management? What productive and achievable public policies can be generated to address these issues?

Participants should write a short position paper of no more than 1500 words responding to one of our topics and/or introducing a new topic for discussion. The papers should identify central challenges or concerns related to the topic and create a proposal for how the PPC might address those challenges or concerns. Participants and auditors are expected to read these papers in advance of the seminar. The seminar will begin with small group discussions of each topic and end with a full group conversation.
Activism Onscreen: Environment, Identity & Social Justice

Mette Hjort, Hong Kong Baptist University
Missy Molloy, Victoria University of Wellington

Open Session - Audience may join the discussion

Activism—that is, stimulating engagement with specific issues to inspire political action and social change—is fundamental to cinema, although its influence on film's cultural status has generated less attention over time than the medium’s value as entertainment. While scholars have celebrated cinematic takes on important historical events (e.g. The Battle of Algiers, No, and Selma) for their capacities to enliven history, the strategic use of film and related media to motivate progressive, or even radical, forms of civic engagement has not been a primary focus of academic study. Approaching activism as a major thread of contemporary screen culture reveals its relevance across media industries, modes and genres far beyond explicitly political or historical films. Moreover, the intersection of cinema and activism seems especially pivotal at present, when overlapping crises have exposed the potential for wide-scale social shifts.

To establish a framework for film and media study centered on activism, we will distribute texts that demonstrate fresh interest in this dimension of contemporary screen culture, categorized under a variety of subject headings, including radical film culture (Newsinger), useful cinema (Charles Acland and Haidee Wasson), political cinema (Ewa Mazierska), protest cinema (Anna Schober), and the public value of moving pictures (Mette Hjort). These readings support the categories that will structure our discussion of activism onscreen: environment, identity and social justice. We will invite participants to comment on these texts and on the capacity of screen media to promote social and political action in the medium of their choice (short written and/or video essays are welcome, as are other media and genres). Spotlighting activism as a main feature of film culture underscores the fact that a film’s significance unfolds over time in concert with communities of viewers who engage with it to address specific elements of their social experience (as evident, for instance, in the reception histories of Born in Flames, The Circle, Bamako and Where Do We Go Now?). Our hope is that seminar participants will collaborate to refine and expand our perspectives on cinema’s social and political potentials.
The Ethics and Politics of Military Media Studies

Anna Froula, East Carolina University

Open Session - Audience may join the discussion

Business is booming in war and media studies, which in and of itself is tragic. Yet it means much work ahead for scholars to keep apace with the ways that film, TV, video games, and other media attempt to grapple with the current terms of the United States’ ongoing wars in ways that public discourse has not. Wars intersect with intensifying crises in climate change and infrastructure readiness, global hunger, and increasingly toxic environments. This seminar asks participants to explore the ethics and politics of conducting research on military media culture and teaching it in the classroom. Military media culture is an umbrella that also includes peace and security studies, surveillance studies, militarization (of police forces, borders, concentration camps, etc.), propaganda, commercial news coverage, and “militainment” (war games, fashion, toys, etc.).

War culture can, and often does, bleed over into trauma culture, which raises the stakes in classrooms, especially when students are military dependents and/or veterans who could be traumatized or re-traumatized by the course content and discussions. Other ethical concerns may arise when civilian instructors teach stories about veterans as well. The pressure to produce public-facing scholarship that is critical of military culture and its agents can be also be risky.

I invite a range of methodological approaches that engage with one or more of these questions:

What key texts are most appropriate and engaging to explore issues of conflict, trauma, war, and poverty? What theoretical or methodological approaches are most valuable, and why?

How might discussions of war, politics, conflict and genocide help raise questions about the ontology of different media, their relationship to time and memory, their utility as tools of war, surveillance, memorialization, and cultural amnesia?

How should we go about discussing these events, especially when they seem particularly distant, unfamiliar, or even irrelevant to students today? Or, how do we teach these events to students who have been involved in war and conflict themselves as personnel, military family or as refugees or immigrants?

What are the ethical concerns about citizens of a country waging multiple wars abroad who are constructing much of the scholarship about those wars?

Participants will submit position papers in February. I will pair participants and ask them to devise 3-5 discussion questions for the seminar. Auditors are welcome to speak.
Filming Research: The Desktop Documentary

Kevin B. Lee, Merz Akademie
Evelyn Kreutzer, Northwestern University
Ariel Avissar, Tel-Aviv University

Closed Session

Desktop filmmaking is an emerging form of audiovisual media production that presents the world as it is subjectively experienced through computer screens and other networked interfaces. In aesthetic terms, desktop filmmaking treats the computer screen as both a camera lens and a canvas, realizing its potential as an artistic medium. This production format has promising implications for the audiovisual practice of film and media studies (i.e. videographic scholarship), as it allows the scholar to document, narrate and present their process through the networked media interface. To date, this potential has been most fully realized through the desktop documentary, which both depicts and questions the ways we explore the world through the computer screen. At its best, desktop cinema not only presents screen-based experience, but critically reflects upon it.

This seminar provides participants with first-hand introduction to the format and production process of desktop filmmaking. Participants should have basic proficiency using a video editing software, but little-to-no direct experience making desktop-based videos. The seminar will feature hands-on practice done in advance of the conference. In mid-January, the conveners will host a Zoom session with the participants, to review the technical skills needed to make desktop-based videos and to share examples. Participants will then be given the specific parameters for the exercises they will be required to make, creatively combining audio, visual, and textual media/sources within a desktop-based video. Each participant will hand in their video by late-February.

The resulting videos will be circulated among the seminar participants and auditors in advance of the conference. The conference session will include screenings, a discussion of the format and group feedback on the individual videos. We hope this seminar will inspire further engagement with the desktop documentary format among the attendees, and we aim to contribute to the growing interest in videographic, cross-media approaches to media scholarship.
Geographies & Genealogies of World Cinema

Manishita Dass, Royal Holloway, University of London
Samhita Sunya, University of Virginia

Open Session - Audience may join the discussion

“World cinema” often evokes cinema in circulation, or a shifting constellation of films that cross national boundaries and travel beyond their origins with a certain ease. While translation, as a condition of literary circulation, has been a central concern of world literature debates, we insist that an account of world cinema demands not only an attentiveness to audiovisual translation (among other practices that enable films to cross territorial, linguistic, and aesthetic borders), but also to methods of historiography that attend to archives and genealogies in the Global South. Though the emergence of “world cinema” as a scholarly category in the Anglophone world has been a relatively recent phenomenon, thinking about cinema in relation to the world can be traced back to the early twentieth century, far beyond western cinephile circles. In fact, the horizons of film cultures in the so-called margins of the world system have often been (or compelled to be) more cosmopolitan – more aware of the world -- than those of their metropole counterparts.

What does the atlas of world cinema look like from these relatively unexplored vantage-points? How does the notion of world cinema change as it travels? What are the critical and methodological challenges that recent scholarly cartographies of world cinema (see bibliography for examples) bring to film historiography and theory? What kind of pressures might these apply not just to the category of world cinema but also to film historiography and the geo-political imaginary of Anglophone Film Studies? This seminar is driven by a desire to connect the scope and scale of the planet to the historiography and historical ambition of cinema from various geographic, temporal, and institutional perspectives, and to shift the question of world cinema from definitional or pedagogical discussions to a conversation about film historiography.

The seminar is structured around group discussion of key themes drawn from pre-circulated position papers responding to these questions:

1. What does the term “world cinema” mean for your work?
2. What intervention might be offered by the genealogy/geography/imagination of world cinema that you are tracing in your work? How would you describe its implications for film historiography?

Each participant will write a 3-4-page position paper and comment on one other paper prior to the seminar. Auditors are encouraged to read the papers but not expected to comment before the seminar.
How to Practice Moviegoing in the Streaming Age

Paul Moore, Ryerson University
María Vélez-Serna, University of Stirling
Martin Johnson, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Open Session - Audience may join the discussion

Since the Covid-19 pandemic shuttered movie theaters worldwide in March 2020, moviegoing has transformed. While some theaters remained closed for many months, others experimented with recreating the shared experience of cinema by gathering an audience online. In this seminar, we propose participants explore how research on current practices in online moviegoing can draw from historiographic, methodological, and theoretical tools developed for the study of moviegoing in physical locations, as well as those tools used to study online communal practices.

While many scholars, including Barbara Klinger, Ramon Lobato, and Chuck Tryon, have considered how home viewing and digital distribution enabled new ways to watch movies, these studies have primarily conceptualized home viewing as a private, asynchronous alternative to the public, social, and synchronous experience of seeing films in a movie theater. And yet, in the pandemic we have seen cinemas, distributors, streaming services, film festivals, and audiences all seek out tools—such as Netflix Party, Twitch, and Vimeo—to make the “virtual” experience of cinema also a social and more-or-less simultaneously experienced event.

Although almost all of these practices were possible before the pandemic, many developed with other media—such as news, gaming, and influencing—in mind, participants in this seminar will test the hypothesis that the widespread adoption of extra-textual cinematic engagement will change how audiences seek out future moving image experiences, even after the pandemic subsides. A few of these changes have long been anticipated, such as studios making films available for home streaming on the same date as their theatrical debut. Other practices are more novel, such as the creation of home-viewing events around the showing of individual films or specific local cinemas (now open to attend from home). The increased geographic reach of arthouse, repertory, and other specialty theaters through their virtual operations give them access to new audiences, many of whom may not otherwise have access to such theaters.

Seminar participants will be asked to prepare a short paper on any practice of moviegoing in this new circumstance of “the streaming era.” While we are particularly interested in papers that consider post-pandemic developments, we also welcome papers that explore other aspects of movie distribution, exhibition and reception that have been reshaped in the context of streaming.
Media Histories of Care

Hannah Zeavin, University of California at Berkeley
Olivia Banner, The University of Texas at Dallas

Open Session - Audience may join the discussion

COVID-19 has forced medicine and psychiatry onto their tele-platforms, a shift some claim will be permanent. For the health technology industries, this moment is a welcome one that accelerates to its next stage of evolution the total digitalization of care, and makes possible increases in scale of client numbers and in scope of geographic spread, especially to rural communities, and from the Global North to the Global South. For care workers and their patients, this sudden transformation can be less welcome, as it seems a sudden shift away from environments of in-person care to one that is completely digital. In this same moment, disability activists are highlighting that after decades of being told remote access to care was impossible, those barriers have evaporated. By reconfiguring social and temporal relations, everyday media technologies encourage new dynamics between doctors and patients, between activists and medical institutions, as well as new approaches to diagnosis and therapy.

We seek to ask questions about the current moment and its historical genealogy in relation to media and cinema studies methods, and to generate ideas about the intersections among critical race studies, feminist theory, crip theory, and mediated medicine and its histories. Taking these three points of departure—histories of medicine, histories of media, and histories of power—scholars in this seminar will explore their intersections to understand how, where, and why the medium can become the medicine, and to what effects. We invite papers from across a range of disciplines that address screen media, digital care, medical knowledge, and activism that contests established medicine.

Possible topics may include: the history of mutual aid networks and care organizations; big data and its histories; cinema and psychiatry, mediations of deinstitutionalization; medical racism and surveillance, and telemedicine/teletherapy.

Responsibilities: Participants will supply a 3-5 page writing sample (position paper, project description) to be distributed in advance of the seminar. Both participants and auditors will read and comment on this writing.
The Potentials of Media Misuse

Liron Efrat, University of Toronto
Nea Ehrlich, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev

Open Session - Audience may join the discussion

In the late 1990’s, the pioneering work of the art collective JODI focused on the potentials embedded in misusing technology. Their works ranged from stripping down websites into inaccessible code, to using screens as easels and as sculpting materials. Aspiring to alienate the seemingly 'natural' ways in which we use digital technology, JODI exposed technologies for what they are: tools that can be used in numerous, creative, and contradictory manners.

Our seminar deals with questions related to misusing media, as we consider both political and ethical misconduct along with the creative possibilities enabled by misusing technologies. Generally, we differentiate between two modes of media misuse. The first is when we use media in a different way than what it was designed for, and the second is when tools are intentionally designed to be misused. While the first mode of misuse may lead to digital activism or varied forms of culture jamming, it can also lead to unethical employment of technologies that can be expressed in contemporary phenomena like digital surveillance or Zoom bombing. The second mode considers the potential in intentionally designing media that functions in a way that is different from our expectations. Recognizing that media misuse introduces a multiplicity of meanings and practices, we invite scholars and practitioners to debate the added value and the diverse forms of media misuse. We are especially interested in the 21st century developments of these topics in both practice and theory as a continuation and transformation of their 20th century precedents.

Seminar applicants will submit a 250 words abstract describing their research topic (by Jan 18, 2021). Once accepted, they will be asked to submit a five-pages paper that will be shared with all the other participants and audits (by Feb 15, 2021). Each participant and audit will be asked to read the papers; each participant will also be assigned to review and comment on two other papers (by March 9, 2021). These comments will be available only to the paper’s author and to the seminar conveners. Participants will also be asked to prepare 1-2 questions, targeting a specific paper/author or designed to initiate a group discussion (by March 15, 2021). The seminar will begin with a short introduction, in which each participant will be given 2 minutes to present their research topic. Audits will be invited to contribute to the conversation throughout the seminar. The seminar leaders will moderate and expand the discussion through cross-section questions.
Spectacles of Anti-Black Violence: Teaching Horror 'With Everything Going On Right Now'

Lauren McLeod Cramer, University of Toronto
Catherine Zimmer, Pace University

Open Session - Audience may join the discussion

As asked to identify the genre of *Get Out* (2017), director Jordan Peele famously referred to the film as a "documentary." The comment acknowledges his audiences’ multiple realities, that some were experiencing the inventiveness of this film as a new and exciting development in the genre and others were viewing it as a surprisingly literal rendering of their everyday lives. The film is both the spectacle of anti-black violence and learning about anti-black violence—a convergence that describes the focus of a distinct portion of contemporary horror film/TV and the most recent expression of the Black Lives Matter movement. This seminar will focus on the challenges of teaching horror productions like *Get Out*, *Lovecraft Country* (2020– ), *Bad Hair* (2020), and *Candyman* (2021) that reconfigure the genre by centralizing the historical realities of anti-blackness, at the same time this film/TV circulates amongst citizen-documented videos of police murdering Black people—videos that themselves exist within a long history of images of anti-black violence that have served both as racist fetish objects and validation for anti-racism. Inundated with scenes of terror, but overwhelmed by the complexity of looking at anti-black violence or even recognizing these images as violent, what horror are we teaching?

The title of this seminar reflects the strange positioning of horror pedagogy during a time when quotidian anti-blackness is more broadly seen and recognized as horrific, even as that recognition is euphemized as a "rough time" we are going through at this moment of public health and political crises. Resisting the affect of shock as a way to disavow these horrors, this seminar seeks expansive approaches to horror pedagogy that consider both the challenges of teaching terrifying images and the disturbing dynamics of a "classroom" experiencing multiple realities. How do we look at a genre dominated by metaphor when confronted with the literal? Where does horror pedagogy situate itself in relation to students’ and/or instructors’ vulnerability, trauma and uneven exposure to current horrors? Simply, how does one teach horror in the face of the horrific?

Participants will be asked to address these questions by providing teaching materials (class descriptions, syllabi, assignment prompts, etc.) and brief abstracts describing their pedagogical approaches, which auditors will review in preparation for discussion.