



The Media Studies Conference 2005

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These sessions will give teachers opportunities to catch up with some recent research in a seminar context. They are not designed to offer practical teaching advice or resources.

1. [The Truth is Out There... Realism and the Moving Image](#) *Richard Armstrong*
2. [Studying Reality TV: Critics, Debates and Approaches](#) *Su Holmes*
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1. The Truth is Out There... Realism and the Moving Image

Richard Armstrong

Writer and bfi Associate Tutor

Since *The Blair Witch Project*, *Big Brother* and its spinoffs, we have witnessed a range of moving image texts which invoke the relationship between images and experience, while the proliferation of image capture technologies has re-ignited academic debates around realism. If the term 'Realism' has traditionally been associated with particular movements and genres - Italian Neo-Realism, British New Wave, soap opera - as recent trends demonstrate, realism is whatever we lose ourselves in, from *EastEnders* to *The Matrix*.

So what are we talking about when we talk about realism? When the Lumières filmed their employees leaving the factory, they established a set of assumptions about cinematic realism that has persisted for over a century. Critics habitually use stock words – "gritty", "raw", "down dirty" - to evoke the preoccupation with treating everyday life and proletarian conditions truthfully and sympathetically that marks such as *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* and *EastEnders*. However, Hollywood 'realism' is the most pervasive in cinema. The other key film-historical paradigm is the Méliès example: fabulous effects constructed for the camera as in a rocket going to the moon. By the age of *The Matrix*, the ability to gull the spectator into believing in the 'real' has become even more fabulous. And less involved in monochrome streets and tenements. Even a Hollywood romantic comedy like *One Fine Day* deploys effects impossible without Méliès.

The truth is that there is no such thing as realism. There are only realisms. This session will explore the play of assumptions in a range of films to show how they enlist the spectator's trust in their worlds. Drawing upon recent theoretical work, we shall see how ideas about the veracity of the moving image have been challenged, rendering increasingly fluid the contract between the spectator and the screen.

2. Studying Reality TV: Critics, Debates and Approaches

Su Holmes

Lecturer in Film & Television, University of Kent

Reality TV, or 'popular factual programming', has rapidly come to occupy a place at the forefront of the contemporary television landscape – its scheduling practices, critical circulation, and viewing cultures. In this respect, with a narrative peopled by broadcasters, producers, critics, academics, participants and viewers, the cultural debate around Reality TV has been as visible as the emergence of the television form itself. Meeting enthusiastic reception and derision in equal measure, this debate has represented a field where the cultural significance, implications and meanings of 'Reality TV' have been worked through. Opinions on Reality TV are expressed everywhere in today's media landscape and while such commentary on television is certainly not 'new', it has become increasingly self-conscious.

This session explores some of the implications of studying 'event' or 'talk about TV': how do we approach the analysis of programming which comes to us attached to debates about everything from the commercialisation of television ('Trash TV'), the present and future of modern fame, to the 'exploitation' of participants and viewers? How do we situate these debates within the study and analysis of Reality TV?

The session begins by exploring aspects of the development of Reality TV, and the discussion around the blurring of genres in contemporary television, before moving on to address its construction of 'ordinary' people as celebrities, and use of 'interactivity' to engage its audience. How and why has Reality TV been perceived as the ultimate example of the trivialisation of modern fame? Does it mark a radical break with the past? Do the programmes construct fame differently? Does the use of 'interactivity' simply represent the triumph of 'greedy' broadcasters making us pay for their programmes, or has it substantially 'empowered' audiences by offering them a more active engagement with television? Programmes considered will include *Big Brother*, *Pop Idol*, *The Salon* and *I'm a Celebrity Get me Out of Here*.

3. So Maybe, I Judged You Just A Little Bit: *Sex and the City* and Towards a New Feminist TV Criticism

Dr Janet McCabe *Research Associate (TV Drama), Manchester Metropolitan University*

Kim Akass *Senior Lecturer in Film Studies, London Metropolitan University*

Referring to *Sex and The City* as 'trash TV' Caitlin Moran, in her scathing *Times* review of *Reading Sex and the City* (McCabe and Akass, I. B. Tauris, 2004) muses on how intellectual heavyweights are wasting their time 'deconstructing lowbrow culture in a highbrow way'. Her reasoning? Well, let's face it *Sex and the City* 'isn't a radical, taboo-busting "redefinition of the modern woman who chooses to remain unmarried", it's about four women who spend every week desperate to find a nice man and settle down' (ibid.) What proves intriguing about Moran's condemnation is that it echoes the opprobrium heaped upon *Sex and the City* when it first arrived in Britain in 1999. It seems to us more than a mere coincidence. We would argue in fact that this is indicative of a wider problem facing current feminist scholarship about how best to talk about and theorise the representation of woman in a post-feminist age. This session will discuss the paradoxes and inconsistencies defining the very structures of current feminist thinking. It indicates to us a kind schizophrenia embedded into the post-feminist debate and structuring current feminist thinking, one which speaks the

empowering language of feminism while still policing, moderating and judging women - their sexuality, their behaviour, their life-style choices.

4. Theory, Practice and Subject Identity: A Discourse Analysis

Julian McDougall

Programme Leader and Lecturer in Education, Newman College of Higher Education, Birmingham

This session will consist of a presentation arising from research for my PHD in Media Education, which explored the competing versions of subject identity at work in contemporary English Media Education, particularly the relationships between learning, assessment and teacher-identity. The research is based on the development of 'Subject Media' (the official, assessed form of media learning in England) from key players and from teacher-examiners working with the OCR AS specification.

The starting point was an interrogation of the suggestion that Media Studies might offer a radical departure from the cultural politics of 'Subject English' through a critique of dominant theory/ practice discourses, assumptions about critical thinking and evidence of learning.

The critical questions addressed in the research were:

- What different ideas about subject identity and development are at work?
- Where do boundaries between academic, practical and vocational versions of the subject come from and how are they sustained?
- What is the relationship between the 'spirit' of the subject and its assessment practices?
- How might power/ knowledge be located in discourses about theory and practice?

It will provide a short summary of the research findings and a range of interpretations, related to recent discussions about theory and practice.

This session will be of particular interest to practitioners engaged in educational research, Media Studies teachers working with OCR's specifications, colleagues interested in the theory/practice debate and people with an interest in the contemporary nature of assessment practises. A hypothesis for discussion will be the suggestion that vocational learners might be engaged in more theoretical practice than their A Level counterparts, and for this reason teachers working with students on National Diploma and AVCE courses are particularly welcome as well.

5. Music and Sound in Film

Annabelle Pangborn

Composer and Sound Designer, London

This session will explore the art of sonic story telling. Music and sound in film responds directly to the film's narrative to create atmosphere, shading, expression and mood. The sound track constantly mediates between the literal representation of narrative and the lateral space of ambiguity, and in the case of shorts, animation and dance films where the narrative is often abstracted or experimental, the place of music and sound becomes more crucial in its role to connect the audience to a familiar reality, regardless of genre. Often used to underscore the film's action, music inhabits a dual narrative of objective and

subjective responses. Music particularly is always more about the film's subtext, working best with moments of the irrational, of loss of control, the poetic, the symbolic, the universal, people's dreams. Together, music and sound, more than any other element in the film, enables the audience to exist in a parallel world of a representation of reality and memory. We glimpse the familiar, suspend our disbelief and respond to a residue of emotion, the fleeting moment of recognition. Together image, music and sound create meaning.

6. Serious Games - A Fundamental Learning Revolution?

Zsuzsi Pek

Researcher, University of Warwick

The number of non-entertainment or "Serious Games" currently being developed is rapidly increasing. Consequently, using and exploiting interactivity, as originally developed by commercial entertainment games (electronic video games) but now being capitalised upon by non-entertainment games, is at an all-time high, as research and products in the area of serious games escalates.

The result is that a completely new, complex and potentially larger set of highly engaging, experiential learning tools has been created. Serious games are applications of interactive, digital technologies, which extend beyond the traditional entertainment videogame market, and look set to create new forms of experiential and interactive learning which are radically different from traditional learning experiences. They are set to ferment a fundamental revolution in the way that we will in the future collect, experience, interact with, and use knowledge and learning.

This session will question whether such a "fundamental learning revolution" is simply a technological promise, which won't deliver in practice and become yet another broken promise of the "dot.com" hype. We will look at the current research and development underpinning the new generation of serious games and what implications they have for learning and creativity. Do they have something to offer as "tools" in the formal education process and if so where do the future of such games lie in the overall education process?

7. The Office

Ben Walters

Deputy Film Editor, Time Out

The Office's place in the sitcom hall of fame already seems assured, with David Brent taking his place in a line of self-deluding ogres that can be traced back through Alan Partridge to Basil Fawlty, Albert Steptoe and Tony Hancock. In this session I will explore the series' production history and reception, its TV context and its skewering of turn-of-the-century British work culture.

Coming on the tail of the 90s docusoap craze, *The Office* adopted not only its formal apparatus (the fly-on-the-wall shooting style) but also its preoccupation with narrative development across a series – an approach apparently at odds with the circular plotting of traditional sitcom. At the same time, the characters' acknowledgement of the camera both encouraged closer emotional association and made the series' regular bouts of mortification that much harder to bear.

This acknowledgement also places the series at the apex of a move over the course of 90s TV comedy in which the camera increasingly became part of the subject matter. Following the formal spoofs of *The Day Today* and *Knowing Me, Knowing You*, *Mrs Merton* and Ali G further muddied the line between 'reality' and

'performance', while cod-documentaries such as *Human Remains* and *Marion and Geoff* exploited the vulnerability of the documentary and video-diary subject. The introduction of a hand-held, faux-verité style in *I'm Alan Partridge* and *The Royle Family* invited viewers to look at comedies through a 'gritty realism' lens that had previously been co-opted by emergency-service dramas from *ER* to *The Cops*.

At the same time, *The Office* offers a realistic perspective on the burgeoning new white-collar economy. The series' main plot motor – the streamlining of the company to maximise profits – is a process of change alien to the stasis of traditional sitcom (from, say, the 50s to the 80s) and the British society it stood for. In some respects, Wernham-Hogg, like many British offices, is 'an American workplace' – the subtitle of the NBC remake of the series, whose success or failure has yet to be determined at the time of writing.

Ben Walters is the author of *The Office* (bfi Publishing, forthcoming).