



Exchanges: the Warwick Research Journal

Volume 1, Issue 1, October 2013

<http://exchanges.warwick.ac.uk>

**Watching Politics: An Interdisciplinary
Symposium on the Impact of Visual Cultures on
Politics, University of Warwick, 31 May 2013**

Adam Gallimore

Watching Politics: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Impact of Visual Cultures on Politics, University of Warwick, 31 May 2013

Adam Gallimore, University of Warwick

Jointly hosted by the Institute of Advanced Study and the Department of Film and Television Studies at the University of Warwick, the Watching Politics symposium brought together a range of disciplines to explore the social, cultural, aesthetic, historical, theoretical and, yes, political impacts of visual cultures on politics - and vice versa. With such a wide remit, it was interesting to identify how links between the various papers were established, frequently relating to this interdependence of influence and transmission between the two systems. Devoting attention across a diverse range of contemporary and past media, culture and politics opened up the event to consider a variety of interdisciplinary approaches and methodologies, encouraging a more holistic view of the relationship between visual cultures and politics.

The tone for the day was set by the plenary delivered by Stella Bruzzi (University of Warwick), titled “Tony Blair and Dramatisations of the War on Terror.” This paper centred on the manners by which defining political moments remain as lasting impressions through the propagation of various media forms. In the case of Tony Blair, this is evidenced in hypothetical dramas associated with his involvement in the War on Terror, such as *The Trial of Tony Blair* (2007). These texts emphasise Blair’s legacy and the way he will be remembered by future generations, and dovetail neatly with the publicity-courting, stage-managed figure of Blair in the era of New Labour.



Figure 1: Tony Blair (image courtesy of World Economic Forum 2009) portrayed by Robert Lindsay in ‘The Trial of Tony Blair’, Channel 4, 2010

Bruzzi contrasted the gentle mocking of Blair in the Michael Sheen/Peter Morgan texts (*The Deal* [2003], *The Queen* [2006], and *The Special Relationship* [2010]) with more critical, acerbic portraits of the Prime Minister, notably *The Ghost* (2010), which focuses both on the Blair as performer and mobilises familiar aesthetic modes of collage, archive, and documentary footage to comment on the real politician. As one commenter suggested, these depictions also parallel Richard Nixon's performativity, and raise the question of whether they are deceptive or self-deceptive political strategies.

These thought-provoking ideas about visual iconography and the fluid relationship between the real and the fictional recurred in subsequent panels. Maintaining a focus on the War on Terror, Nikolaj Lübecker (St John's College Oxford), Jo Oldham (Warwick), and Nike Jung (Warwick) each examined the pervasive nature of particular media discourses, noting a range of texts that support and disturb perceptions of the conflict with reference to war crimes, terrorism, conspiracy, and torture. Emphasised here was the importance of context and the active role of the viewer in interpreting political narratives and aesthetics. Katy Parry (University of Leeds), Kay Richardson (University of Liverpool), and Andrew Tolson (De Montfort University) each considered different dimensions of mediation, representation, and communication in the visualising of politics, from viral videos to British political news television programming.

The keynote speech was delivered by Ian Scott (University of Manchester), titled "Spectacle vs. Screenplay: Watching, Writing and Wrestling with Political Movies." Although claiming to examine the tension between visual spectacle and the political scenarios, this paper largely focused on the representation of the former, citing recent blockbusters such as *Olympus Has Fallen* (2013) and *White House Down* (2013) as examples of mainstream texts that may be criticised for being inauthentic, histrionic, or implausible, and he questions whether these have diminished the potency of political cinema. There is—and always has been—a fascinating dichotomy between real political ideas and representational forms, a contention between the iconic and the ideological, but Scott pointed to the lineage of Hollywood action cinema to demonstrate how spectacle has traditionally been seen to supersede narrative by proponents such as Geoff King, but this has been challenged by some filmmakers in more recent cinema. Scott argued that "politics and movies inform each other," evidenced in the joining of spectacle to ideological contexts. Among the key aspects of the keynote for such a multidisciplinary conference was the distinction between "worthy" political texts and films that simply utilise political contexts, and it remains debatable which form is more influential.

Focusing on spectacle as a political form, Scott provocatively argued that film has reached an impasse in that it is trapped by spectacle in ways that television is not. In the question-and-answer session that followed, a central focus was on the subtle divorce of destructive spectacle from associations with 9/11 despite continued symbolic, democratic agendas. Also of significance was the question of political intent, and how interpolative political effects contrast with Slavoj Žižek's persuasive argument that these approaches make cinema expressly unpolitical.



Figure 2: Olympus Has Fallen © Millennium Films

The subsequent panels were divided between the representation of political history in cinema and the role of new media in modern politics. In the former, Douglas Morrey (Warwick), Hannah Graves (Warwick), and James Harvey-Devitt (Anglia Ruskin University) considered significant political events and figures to explore the political functions and failures of cinema. These papers resonated with the earlier plenary and keynote addresses, providing a diverse yet complementary focus on the importance of cinema in political affect. The corresponding panel addressed the roles of various online media, including Reddit (Annika Richterich, University of Siegen), blogs (Rachel Mizsei-Ward, University of East Anglia), and YouTube (Jennifer Quigley-Jones, Warwick), in politicising audiences and furthering political discourses, another common theme throughout the symposium.

In the final panels, Simon Cross (Nottingham Trent University), Heather Nunn & Anita Biressi (Roehampton University), and Richard Wallace (Warwick) drew together themes of

continuity in party election broadcasts, reality TV series, and political satire in order to make sense of political systems and events. Chris Clarke (Warwick) evaluated recent finance documentaries, such as *Inside Job* (2010) and *Capitalism: A Love Story* (2010), through the lens of International Political Economics, providing a distinctive analysis of the “embedded liberalism” of these texts. Dee Marco (Warwick) addressed the racialised representation of the masculine hero, focusing on the figure of Nelson Mandela in post-Apartheid South Africa. These dynamic and insightful papers provided a strong close to a well-organised and engaging day of political and cultural debates.

A diverse range of papers were presented at the Watching Politics symposium, united under the broad theme of interrogating the mutual impact of politics and media. Engagement with this theme took many forms, and the breadth of papers was indicative of the symposium’s interdisciplinarity. In his closing remarks, organiser Greg Frame emphasised the importance of questioning what it is that we value about politics and media and how we can improve them in an era of declining political authority. The ways in which popular culture embeds particular political dimensions will continue to be central to our understanding of media politics, but also offer the potential to shape future research. Ultimately, the varied interests and approaches of contributors animated many lively discussions, and the symposium offered an intimate environment for engaging with an array of media and political scholars.