This year, the Society for Cinema Studies held its annual conference at the University of Iowa, in Iowa City, April 13-16. Even though more than 200 people had registered in advance, the attendance in itself was higher and the Conference can be considered to have been successful in attracting film scholars (members and non-members of the SCS), many of them well-known specialists in their field, from all over the country and even from abroad: Canada, West Germany, Israel, Finland... The Conference comprised 54 panels and a number of other activities: film presentations, workshops, book exhibits, meetings,... but aside from the quantity, the quality of it all was impressive.

Cinema Studies in the United States.

I was able to gather from this Conference that Cinema Studies in the United States are very alive and dynamic. That conclusion in itself is surprising since scholars working solely in that field are quite rare: most of them divide their work between Cinema Studies and other subjects, mainly semiotics, literature, communications and English. Back in the sixties, most Cinema Studies departments, emerged from the confines of the English and Literature departments, and these historical bonds left their traces and in some institutions still hold. Secondly there are not that many important centers of reflection on film: the most renowned are with the universities of Iowa, Madison-Wisconsin and UCLA. As could be expected, these institutions had more lecturers present at the conference than other universities, but mirroring the situation in the field many other universities were also represented and some with as many as three or four papers being presented.
Notwithstanding this overall situation, one could draw from the variety of topics addressed in the panels the conclusion that film scholars in the United States are very active and dynamic and research in a wide array of directions. Topics covered ranged from film theory to history of film and historiography, addressing also film genres (comedy, horror and science-fiction mainly) along with presentations on documentary films, avant-garde, television, music in film and, a theme often referred to—spectatorship.

Quite a number of presentations on specific films used psychoanalysis and at times semiotics as theoretical tools in various areas of work (feminist approach, questions of spectatorship, study of the representation of Vietnam in films,...) Psychoanalysis itself was often discussed within the numerous panels on film theory. It seems that both psychoanalysis and semiotics are still quite frequently used and are believed to have yet more to offer. Given this interest, Reda Bensmaïa (University of Minnesota) in a pre-program lecture gave a particularly enlightening reading of Gilles Deleuze’s “L’Image-temps” and his re-appropriation of Bergson and Peirce, giving the tone of quite a few of the presentations.

Among other themes in film theory were: narration and narrative theory, postmodemism, cognitive theory, phenomenology, cultural and theoretical approaches to genre and text, the disappearing signifier, Foucault’s “Power/Knowledge” and media practice, and film theory and documentary. Additionally two panels were concerned solely with film theory: “Reconsidering Film Theory I; Theoretical Foundations” and “Reconsidering Film Theory II: Identification and the Screen/Mirror Metaphor”. Nick Browne (UCLA) (considered to be the specialist in the field of history of theory and actually working on a “Genealogy of Film Theory”) expressed the opinion that although there is no such thing as an indigenous American film theory, there still is an American way of dealing and using foreign theories and adapting them to the American setting. The same point of view emerged from many of the presentations where the debts/links with foreign theorists where acknowledged while their theories or theoretical paradigms were used with American material (films, publicity stills,...) and in dealing with American society. The interest for theory in itself was striking as it occupied half the pannels.

In retrospect the topics treated were marked by frequent disciplinary criss-crossing. If ever we were not convinced of the openness and interdisciplinarity of Cinema Studies, the Conference would have proved it in practice. For example panels related in one way or another to feminism or to women in film, could be at the same time dealing with film theory while those bearing titles related to film theory could host presentations on feminist topics. The same applies with a mixing of theories and techniques, one borrowing from the other. In general, many subjects or fields of interests overlapped, and we could often find a pollination of theories or of techniques of analysis.
That becomes even more obvious when we consider the number of panels and presentations concerned with spectatorship. The questions of the origin and the characteristics of the spectator (ethnicity/race/nationality, gender, etc) underlay quite a few interventions with such panel titles as: “Gender and Nationality in Film”, “Sexuality, Race and Spectatorship”, “Social History and Audience Studies” I and II, “Gender and Sexuality”, “Social Spectator and TV Reception”, “The Social Spectator”, “Social Spectator, Theory and Film Reception”, “Sexuality, Ethnicity and the Text”... Spectatorship seems, at this time, to be a central concern for many theorists (particularly with feminist theorists) with different people using different theories to grapple with it, this being typical of the pollination of theories.

Two other major themes emerged from the Conference: the SCS preoccupation with the issue of racism and the representation (presence/absence) of black people within the SCS itself, and the renewed interest in the history of American cinema. The first theme was dealt with in a major activity: an homage to James Snead, a highly respected scholar author of a landmark research on the image of Blacks in American cinema. His recent death being seen as a real loss for the whole community of film scholars, the SCS took the opportunity of this tribute to him to open its doors more widely to black scholars and filmmakers.

Present at this tribute were Coco Fusco (New York council for the Humanities), Camille Billops (Independent filmmaker, sculptor and co-director of the Archives of Black American Cultural History), Manthia Diawara (University of California-Santa Barbara), Isaac Julien (independent filmmaker (his recent “Looking for Langston” was presented—U.S. premiere—at the Conference) and co-founder of the Sankofa Film and Video Collective) and Billy Woodberry (independent filmmaker and recipient of a Rockefeller Foundation fellowship). All expressed their wish to be considered as full-fledged Americans, balancing the need for Blacks to get special treatment in the film industry (both at a representational level and at the production level) and their hope of not needing this special treatment, in years to come. The previous day, the SCS Conference had held a meeting of its “task force on race and class” and a few hours before the tribute had offered one panel on “black feminism”. The only other instance where black people were considered were on the panels on jazz and film. The critique of underrepresentation of Blacks in the SCS was well founded and found its rightful place in this tribute.

The second theme: the history of American film and American cinema, was expressed through a great number of panels, whether entitled as such or not. Panels such as “The Rise of Feature Films” and “The Pre-Feature Film as Non-Classical Cinema” along with “American Film Industry” gave base for another panel entitled “Contextualizing Film History” where Jan-Christopher Horak (curator of film at the George Eastman House) gave an overview of the richness of the collection of films but also of the collections of equipment, stills, publicity material, etc., of the International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House. His presentation had been preceded the night before with the showing of two impressive restored nitrate
prints: “Wizard of Oz” (1910, 35mm short) and “Lonesome” directed by Paul Fejos, (1928, 35 mm tinted with sound segments, 71 min.). Although quite a few histories of cinema have already been written, the passion for the past is reviving and the opening of the collections of the Eastman House to researchers is exemplary of it. We must however emphasize a change in the paths of research which drift away from the usual “Hollywood Industry” trend, becoming more preoccupied with non-industrial film and the social usage of film.

As could be expected with an American Conference, considering the overwhelming importance of the film industry in the States, we were offered demonstrations of the most recent technologies in high definition video and high fidelity surround sound by Gold Ribbon Sound Cinema Inc. and The Criterion Collection of The Voyager Company. The brilliancy and quality of the images of the nitrate prints seen earlier invited comparisons with these: although the quality of modern sound techniques was definitely better, we cannot say the same of the video images on the wide screens.

Feminist Film Scholars.

During the four days of this conference, I paid special attention to the status of women in the SCS. Women were everywhere: chairing panels, hosting social activities, directing workshops and participating at all levels. Not only where there 71 women giving presentations in the panels (for 137 men), but women also chaired half of them not limiting themselves nor where they restricted to so called feminist topics.

As a matter of fact, the status of women in the Society for Cinema Studies seems to be that of peers with everyone. Nevertheless, the SCS has a Women’s Caucus which saw fit to organize a workshop addressing the inequity still existing in society entitled “Surviving Academia: Coaching from Case Studies” with such topics as job interview, tenure & promotion and pay equity. The job market in cinema studies being restricted as it is, participants in the workshop were provided guidelines to ensure that they get fair and equal treatment in their job research and situation. However a decision was made to cancel the meeting of the Women’s Caucus itself so that the women could attend the meeting of the Task Force on Race & Class, which was scheduled at the same time.

I was fortunate enough to be able to meet and interview a few feminist film theorists during the Conference, and tried with their help to map out the network and centers of activity of American feminist film theorists. In fact, there seems to be no real center per se of feminist film theory in the United States. People studying in the field are usually counseled to work with mentors of their choice rather than to try to find a feminist group of research in Cinema Studies. Feminist research centers do exist but their major areas of research usually are in social sciences rather than in the fields of communications or cinema. On the other hand, well-known feminist scholars like Teresa de Lauretis or Mary Ann Doane for example, who publish regularly and see there texts studied and cited (which was the case at the Conference
itself) seem to attract students. But, even though they are not working in a vacuum and maintain contact with other feminist film theorists they still do not direct feminist film study centers. In any case, this absence of a center of feminist thought in cinema studies seems to be beneficial to young, less experienced people, permitting them to make a dare at either doing research or publishing, practically on their own.

In absence of a specific center of study, feminist film scholars still manage to meet through journals and periodicals. The main journal, “Camera Obscura”, was founded in the late 70s following the dismantle of the former “Women and Film”. The journal is very active in publishing scholarly papers on all topics relevant to women and film. The editors are actually working on a special issue which will be out by December 1989, on the major topics of research in the field, centering on what seems to be “the” major concern—female spectatorship. Questionnaires regarding their activities and subjects of research were sent to a great number of feminist film scholars in the United States and the special issue will be composed of the unedited answers. Additionally, overview essays regarding the importance of the issue of spectatorship in a number of other countries (Germany, England, Italy, Australia and Canada) will be included. This special issue should have a major effect on networking among feminist film theorists and permit everybody to know what the others are working on.

The other points of contact are cinema journals (“Wide Angle”, “Film Quarterly”, “Quarterly Review of Film and Video”, “Cinema Journal”, “Discourse”, “Screen”, “Millenium Film Journal”, “Jump Cut”, etc) and some feminist periodicals (“Signs”, “m/f”, “Genders”, “Heresies”, etc). Oddly enough, cinema journals receive and accept more contributions from feminist film theorists than feminist journals. The absence of major centers of feminist film studies seems to be responsible for this situation.

Again, this absence of official points of contact makes meetings like this annual conference even more important as this is were scholars meet, men and women. On the whole, as a matter of fact, the situation for women in cinema studies seems to be not very different from that of men. Feminist film theorists use the same basic theories (mainly psychoanalysis and semiotics), though applied differently. But even that difference is no longer specific as men are now seen to work on feminist topics and with a feminist paradigm: e.g. Ben Singer (New York University) lectured on female spectatorship, Wheeler Dixon (University of Nebraska) on Alice Guy, and Adam Knee presented a paper on femininity and fifties science fiction. The boundaries are falling apart.

To a certain degree I had the feeling that the most interesting research, in certain areas (like spectatorship and representation) was contributed by feminists, not to say that women were absent from other topics of research. We are entering an era where being a female scholar is not necessarily being a feminist scholar.
After Thoughts on this Conference.

As this was my first Conference of the Society for Cinema Studies, I cannot compare this year’s conference with the previous ones. Nor can I make any pronouncements on the evolution or shifting of interests from one area to the other. Nevertheless the main trends were evident enough: the history of theories and of cinema, a nascent area of research, seems to hold promise. The same holds true of the question of spectatorship: it is a very rich topic and one that has not been sufficiently covered until now. Not to say that the previous sites of interest, like the question of point of view so popular a few years ago in the periodicals is no longer interesting but the interest has now shifted from the film and its makers to the film and its viewers.

In the future, American scholars will be looking less and less to foreign countries for their theoretical paradigms. Reappropriating foreign theories, they are “nationalizing” them by developing them in an American fashion. The long-recognized pragmatism typical of America in a way grounds the very ethereal and abstract theories of the Europeans. The other advantage of the Americans is their number: people working on spectatorship all over the country make varied contributions that add up to a more complete picture of the issue. And again the absence of major centers of study, gives one the impression that his/her research is as valid as any, as all are working alone, like “lone rangers”. As such the competition therefore is on a one to one basis.

Competition is an American word, and competition here exists in the world of film scholars. Research definitely benefits from it. The dynamism of this Conference stands as a proof of it.