

“Culture(s) on the Edge” Symposium
Thursday 29 November 2007
Burns 7 Lecture Theatre, Arts Building

Programme

9.30 Welcome: *Professor John Drummond*
Keynote Speaker : **Professor Jon Stratton**, *Professor of Cultural Studies in the Department of Communication and Cultural Studies, Curtin University of Technology.*


 10.30 Morning Coffee / Tea

11.00 – 12.30: Paper Session 1

11.00 **Simon Ryan** “The frame and the future: the programme of photography in the work of the Taranaki photographer W. A. Collis”.

11.30 **Wendy Parkins** “Why can't Hetty go home? George Eliot's *Adam Bede* and the Edge of Modernity”

12.00 **John Drummond** “Dunedin on the Edge”


 1.00 – 1.30 LUNCH

1.30 - 3.00 Paper Session 2

1.30 **Jo Smith** "Maori Television within and against the Settler Nation".

2.00 **Paola Voci** “Animating China”

2.30 **Marian Poole** “Music at the Cross Roads: Art Music in New Zealand, 1957.”

 3.00 Afternoon Coffee / Tea

3.30 - 4.30 Paper Session 3

3.30 **Rochelle Simmons** “Visual Culture and Marxist Art Criticism in John Berger’s Ways of Seeing”

4.00 **Catherine Fowler** “Taking it and Faking It : Performances of the Self in Recent Gallery Films”

4.30 **Discussion and wrap-up** 

Key Note Address:

Jon Stratton

“Culture(s) On The Edge—a few thoughts”

I have been asked to say something about the governing idea for this symposium—Culture(s) on the edge. My own presentation will be about one particular local culture on the edge—Perth, and how the local understanding of that city, coupled with Perth’s situation in the Australian postcolonial order as, in terms of percentage of total population, historically the highest receiver of British migrants of any major Australian city, has influenced the kind of music both consumed and produced there.

What interests me at the moment is not so much what has fascinated many of those who have discussed globalisation over the last twenty years or so—that is, the increasing movement of people, artefacts, ideas, finance capital, media images and so forth. I am thinking, for example, of Arjun Appadurai’s concern in *Modernity at Large* with global flows. Rather, I am interested in what people in particular places (though I know that this is a loaded word) do with these things. How if you like, local culture is produced and reproduced by active members of social groups interacting with each other generating, in the process, a lived socio-cultural environment. From this point of view, the increasing churn of movement of people, ideas and so on can be thought of not so much as impacting on a given culture as being woven, bricolage fashion, into the warp and weft of the everyday life that makes up the everyday practice of local culture.

I have been asked to begin by raising some general questions relating to the theme of the symposium. So, let me start by saying that I think ‘Culture(s) on the edge’ is an intriguing and, indeed, provocative topic. And I have spent much time wondering quite where to start. That bracketed ‘s’ would certainly be one very sensible place. Should we talk of culture in some generalised, abstract sense, or should we specify an awareness of the specificity of cultures? The brackets suggest an anxiety of purpose that is very understandable given the recent history of the term ‘culture.’ Those brackets are founded in those now classic debates between anthropologists and literary critics. Anthropologists inevitably, given their object of investigation, worked with definitions of what a culture is that lead to notions of cultural integrity—ideas that some cultures could be, in some sense ‘unsullied’ (and there are echoes here of Mary Douglas’ idea of purity as well as some modern political preoccupations of national culture)—and also with cultural difference and, necessarily, problems related to questions about cultural limits. What, then, we need to ask, are the limits—in the context of the guiding theme of this symposium we might ask where is the edge—of a culture? Where is its limen, or, but this really relates to the questions about what an edge is to which we shall come shortly, what can we say about the zone of

uncertainty, of indeterminacy, that marks the limit of a culture? In the modern world, and indeed the postmodern world that has been built out of that world, there are always attempts to firm up that limen, to do away with that uncertainty and indeterminacy, experiences which relate closely to the abject (see, for example, Julia Kristeva's discussion of the abject in *Powers of Horror*). Uncertainty and indeterminacy are thought to threaten order. They are the threat always present and always being suppressed in the borderlands. To give a specific example: think of attitudes towards refugees or, thought to be even more of a threat to national security (that is, to the order of the state), asylum seekers. In Australia the government's rhetoric stigmatised these people as 'queue jumpers'. Queues are a great example of the order upon which the state insists.

If the concerns of anthropologists lead to the pluralisation of the idea of culture, it was the literary critics, and those concerned with what, in Western thought at least, were considered to be absolute distinctions between High Culture and Low/Popular Culture who, in the first place, tended to think of culture more abstractly, as a general enterprise. It was this way of thinking that led to those important questions about the meaning of culture. These are questions that, in the Anglophone world, are often traced back to Matthew Arnold in the mid-nineteenth century (see *Culture and Anarchy* 1869). Anthropological understandings of culture also spring from this general background but took a very different turn.

Cultural Studies and Postcolonial Studies have been working over the similarities and differences in these definitions for the best part of thirty years now. The classic statement about the meaning of culture came from Raymond Williams who worked with, and on, the term for his entire career. Williams began his discussion of 'culture' in his classic book, *Keywords*, published in 1976, by writing that: 'Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language.' I do not want to work through what Williams wrote here. Rather, I want to suggest that that bracketed 's' signals with precision the complexity to which Williams refers and marks much of the terrain that is occupied by both Cultural and Postcolonial Studies.

I thought also of starting my brief talk with that 'on.' It is, after all, a deconstructive lever if ever I saw one! For starters, why 'on' rather than 'at'? What difference does the choice of preposition make? Let us think about this for a moment. 'On' carries the sense of emplacement. We say that something is *on* something else; that it is positioned there. 'On' bears a connotation of presence. It suggests the problematic relationship between 'place' and 'space.' In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau writes that 'space is practiced place' in the urban environment. More primordially we can reverse this usage and think about place as culturally worked over space. 'On' in 'Culture(s) on the edge' suggests the given presence of culture in a particular place.

We can better understand this by comparing ‘on’ with ‘at.’ ‘At’ has a vectoral quality to it. I would suggest that ‘Where are you at?’ implies ‘Where have you come from to reach the position about which I’m asking you?’ ‘At,’ then, carries a sense of arriving from somewhere. To stretch a point, I think we could say that ‘at’ carries with it, when used in relation to culture, a reference to the colonising force. It is this movement which is disguised by ‘on’ which, as I have said, carries the implication of presence, of a pre-existence, an ‘always already here’ which, then, in a radicalising move, needs to be unsettled, to have its foundations undermined in order to find out on what that ‘on’ is built. To put it simply, was there anybody here, any culture here, before the culture that is now *on this place*, occupying this space?

In the phrase under discussion though, ‘Culture(s) on the edge,’ ‘at’ would not necessarily imply a vectoral move of the culture. It could relate to a movement of the edge. In this sense, for example, an indigenous culture might find itself metaphorically moved as a result of the movement of the edge. That culture might find itself ‘at the edge’ because the edge has moved to produce that effect. An example here would be the indigenous cultures of the Amazonian rain forest who find themselves at (or, indeed, now positioned on, and note the ‘now’ here which gives the ‘on’ that vectoral quality) the edge of so-called civilisation as a result of the in-roads of the loggers and agriculturalists. And here we need to remember the historical connections in European modernity that Williams outlined in that article on ‘Culture’ in *Keywords* between Culture and civilization.

But, as I remarked at the start, I decided that I did not want to start at any of the points that I have just outlined. Rather, I want to begin thinking about ‘Culture(s) on the edge’ with the idea of the edge. What is it that we are talking about when we talk about the edge? In connection with Dunedin or, for that matter, Perth, the first and obvious answer would be that the edge is the modern idea of the edge of civilisation—or, indeed, the edge of Culture itself. What is this edge, then? Well, it functions in the modernist terms of a core and a periphery. In this case, the core would be Europe, and in particular Britain, and the periphery would be the colonial distance from that core: Dunedin (or Perth) as the outpost of the British (post)colonial order. What, then, is beyond the edge? In Dunedin’s terms this may well be the sea, the Southern Ocean, and then Antarctica. In Perth’s terms, as it happens, it would be the same sea and then Antarctica. But this is way too facile an answer. If Dunedin marks an edge of empire and of (British) culture then, outside of empire and (British) culture lie monsters—that is, outside of Britain and Europe and the now ex-colonies that used to belong to the countries of Europe, lie the heathen and uncivilised, the world and its people who the moderns considered lack culture (whatever that means), even the culture made available through the colonial order.

There are, then, structurally, two crucial modern edges. The first separates Europe from the rest of the world or, in recent terminology, Europe from its Others. This is the European edge; historically it was the border of power. Some of that power still resides in this structure. It was also this border that defined representation. Europe had the power to represent. The Others were represented and, in that representation, were incorporated into European culture. There is, though, another edge, the edge that marks the limit of empire and culture. Walter Mignolo, in *Local Histories/Global Designs*, is thinking about this structure when he wrote that: 'Border *gnosis* as knowledge from a subaltern perspective is knowledge conceived from the exterior borders of the modern/colonial world system.' This is the world of *Heart of Darkness*, the world beyond the power of European ordering. Today it is thought of as the world of terrorism, of suicide bombers, of Muslim 'fanatics', of those asylum seekers that I mentioned earlier. In the fundamentalist terms of American binary thinking, this is the world of that Other, the Axis of Evil.

Edges signal sites of transition. In *Modernity at Large*, Appadurai notes how: 'In many societies, boundaries are zones of danger, requiring special ritual maintenance.' This is how it was in the modern world and how it remains. Thinking again in Euro-American (post)modern terms, culture, whatever that is, is more threatened the closer one is, literally or metaphorically, to an edge. To put it more in Mignolo's terms, the closer a place is to the edge the more that place's culture is liable to be hybridized with that which is beyond the edge. This is an important element in the anxiety of borders that I mentioned earlier. The modern, and postmodern, need to preserve the determinacy of borders in the face of forces that threaten the purity—in Douglas' sense, that is, defined structurally in relation to pollution—of the culture within the border. In a globalised world, which is one of the defining features of the postmodernity, mobility has become a key element and borders, such as national borders, and indeed edges, are more insisted on as mobility appears to be blurring them. At the same time, culture(s) on the edge, whichever edge that is, are more interesting, more stimulating, more thought-provoking, and, yes, more threatening to the dominant order (sic) than cultures at the core—whether that core be Wellington, Sydney, London or New York, or the Euro-American heartland thought of generally—no matter how apparently hybridized that core may be. Because, at the edge, the transformational is less likely to be incorporated and thus always already made safe in the culture of that place on the edge than in the core, the site of established power and order.

Abstracts

“The frame and the future: the programme of photography in the work of the Taranaki photographer W. A. Collis”.

Simon Ryan
Abstract T/F

“Why can't Hetty go home? George Eliot's *Adam Bede* and the edge of modernity”

Wendy Parkins
Department of English

George Eliot's first novel, *Adam Bede*, has been subject to debate among literary scholars. Is it a conservative vision of cultural stasis, celebrating a pastoral way of life lost by 1859? Or is it a reflexive understanding of how modern Victorian England emerged from a rural past, and in fact marks Eliot's response to her own contemporary culture of the mid-nineteenth century?

In evaluating critical debate on *Adam Bede*, I will argue that the novel offers a complex representation of a 'culture on the edge' of modernity and show how Eliot explores issues such as women's place within modernity and the ethical conflict between individual autonomy and community. The fate of Hetty Sorrel, convicted for infanticide and transported to New South Wales (itself a culture on the edge, if not the brink, of modernity), will provide the crux of my consideration of women's modernity in Eliot's novel.

Author : Wendy Parkins is a Senior Lecturer in the English Department at the University of Otago. She is currently completing a manuscript entitled *Mobility and Modernity in British Women's Novels, 1850s-1930s*, to be published by Palgrave Macmillan.

“Dunedin On The Edge”

John Drummond
Department of Music

Dunedin was settled in 1848 as a New Edinburgh on the outer edge of the civilized world, a Free Church settlement designed to re-create an idealized pre-industrial community parish, a response to the ills and evils of the urban society of the homeland. Its music, according to its religious leader Thomas Burns, was to be church chanting and hymns; frivolous fiddling and dancing were deemed inappropriate to celebrate the first anniversary of the colony. As music was gradually introduced, so there was a focus on the high-culture music of Europe: instruction in pianoforte

and singing, the formation of a Harmonic Society, and in 1858 the first formal concerts.

But the discovery of gold by Gabriel Read at Tuapeka in 1861 changed all that. The 'Old Identity' of controlled Free-Church settlement was totally undermined by the 'New Iniquity' of gold miners flocking to Dunedin from Australia, America and further a-field. What the original settlers had considered to be 'civilized' - was now described by the newcomers as 'barbarism.' The story of Dunedin in 1862, articulated in the popular satirical songs of Charles Thatcher, is the story of a culture on a geographical edge, one which thought itself a safe haven, which now found itself on the edge of major transformation, as it struggled to cope with a much wilder, edgier culture that drew upon the centre-cultures Dunedin was supposed to avoid, and created its own rambunctious, radical cultural products.

Author: John Drummond is Blair Professor of Music at the University of Otago. Amongst other activities he has researched actively in the musical culture of the early days of the settlement of Otago, and has written a manuscript on the visits to Otago between 1862 and 1870 of the goldfields entertainer Charles Thatcher.

"Maori Television within and against the Settler Nation".

Jo Smith

Victoria University

Abstract T/F

"Animating China"

Paola Voci

Department of Languages and Cultures

The introduction of DV making in combination with the development of cyberspace and mobile telephones not only have affected social behaviours, but also re-defined the way that civil society in China reveals its "secrets." While one should not overrate new media's impact and their overall democratising power, they have opened up new public spaces for an increasingly transnational albeit very much localised Chinese popular culture. Among the most recently developed popular media, one finds flash animations. Short flash animations are no longer used just as an embellishment for a service (i.e. to make Internet websites or cellphone screens look "cute"). Not only have they become a familiar urbanite visual pleasure for all cell phone holders and Internet browsers, but they are commenting and reinterpreting Chinese post-socialist modernities with piercing humour and intense sadness. This paper analyses short animations as an expression of an individual, provocative, and perhaps unmarketable creativity. I focus on a variety of short animated movies (e.g. Cui Jian's video for his release of Mr. Red, the Xiaoxiao

animations, a number of sites privately run by animators in China, and the first three collections of animated movies presented at the Beijing Film Academy's Animation Academy Award.

Author : Paola Voci. B.A. with Honours in Chinese Language and Literature, Venice University ; Diploma in Film Studies, Beijing Film Academy; M.A. in East Asian Studies, PhD in Chinese, Indiana University

Her area of study combines East Asian Studies, Chinese language and culture, film and media studies, and visual culture. She has published on *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* and *Senses of Cinema*, has contributed to the *Encyclopaedia of Chinese Cinema*, and to several edited collections of essays. She is currently writing *China on Video* (Routledge), a book that analyses movies made and viewed on smaller screens (i.e., the DV camera, the computer monitor—and, within it, the Internet window—and the cellphone display).

“Music at the Cross Roads: New Zealand Art Music 1957”

Marian Poole

Department of Music

In 1957, the search for a New Zealand voice remained reliant to varying extents on the approval of its parent cultures in Europe. New Zealand was on the far edge of the globe, at the most distant geographical remove from Europe. A real sense of isolation from homelands instilled among some the need to relocate traditional cultures. The challenge of transforming New Zealand from a cultural backwater to a player on the world stage became and remains a defining feature of the New Zealand psyche.

Being willing to renegotiate cultural identity, the dilemma for New Zealand musicians lay in deciding which of the various European twentieth-century musical idioms promised the most valid and prestigious cultural future. While Lilburn's plea to “search for a tradition” overlooked the 100 years of colonial and Maori culture, and while New Zealanders were valued for their achievements overseas, indigeneity deferred to foreign idioms to gain local support. Deciding between adopting Anglo-centric, Euro-centric Modernism or a cultural eclecticism divided musical society. In 1957, four men, Peter Platt, Arthur Jacobs, Richard Hoffmann and Frederick Page all with newly gained authority, expressed these dominant arguments for the transformation and reinvention of cultural identity through art music.

Author: I am a PhD Candidate working with Prof John Drummond and Dr Vijay Devadas at Otago University on the “Influence of the Second Viennese School in New Zealand during 1940 – 1990”; music critic for the Otago Daily Times; registered Music Teacher of Piano;

Secretary/Treasurer for the New Zealand Musicological Society; and sometime composer.

“Visual Culture and Marxist Art Criticism in John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing*”

Rochelle Simmons
Department of English

John Berger’s collaborative television programme (and book) *Ways of Seeing* (1972) is difficult to classify. Widely quoted but seldom studied, *Ways of Seeing* touches upon many fields while occupying to no particular domain. Its anticipations of Visual Culture lend it a certain currency, however it bears as many features of traditional Marxist art criticism as it does of recent visual discourse. I argue that we need to regard this work in a multifaceted way, so as to explore its range of resonances. In addition to its Visual Cultural and Marxist art critical features, *Ways of Seeing* can be viewed as one of a group of innovative BBC programmes of the 1960s and 1970s that have a left political and/or a progressive cultural slant, including the political discussions of art that Berger engaged in from the late 1950s onwards. We also need to expand on some obvious approaches. For example, Berger declares his debt to Walter Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” in *Ways of Seeing*, but this interest extends beyond the nature of the mass produced image to Benjamin’s narrative strategies. Although *Ways of Seeing* insists upon the primacy of the visual over the verbal, Berger enlists Benjamin’s techniques of the dialectical image and of literary montage in order to cope with the problem of naming experience. Indeed, in the broadcast version of *Ways of Seeing*, the television medium allows Berger to deploy a fully actualized montage method.

Author : Rochelle Simmons is a Senior Lecturer in English at the University of Otago. She has an interest in contemporary literature and film and she is currently writing a book on John Berger and the Visual.

“Taking it and Faking it - performances of the self in recent gallery films”

Catherine Fowler
Department of Media, Film and Communications

This paper is interested in performances of the self in recent gallery films. Through a focus on the work of video artist Phil Collins it will argue that such work provides what Nikolas Rose has called “new images of subjectivity” that replace former notions of the self as

“characterized by a profound inwardness”¹ Therefore conceptions of the contours of the self - its perceived boundaries or 'edges' can be seen to have radically changed in contemporary media and culture.

In the past the internal universe of the self has been characterized as the realm of the private as opposed to the public, where we may conceal things from others yet reveal them to ourselves. However in these new images of subjectivity we see selves escaping from surface appearance, embedded in dialogue and articulated through self-display; disclosed through disguise, encountered through listening to confessions, thoughts and experiences, and evident in acts of social narration; distorted by self and social roles, shifted by surface performances and transformed by the act of telling. In short, the self is performed in more ways than ever before, and notions of its surface and its depths have shifted irrecoverably.

Author: Dr Catherine Fowler, Senior Lecturer in Film, University of Otago, Dunedin

¹ Nikolas Rose *Inventing Our Selves - Psychology, Power and Personhood* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 4.