

New Media Affects: A CCLC afternoon symposium

Wednesday 17th May 2017, 2.30-4.30pm

Lecture Room 3, Arts Building, University of Birmingham, Edgbaston B15 2TT

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Programme

Logging In and Zoning Out: Netflix and the Ends of Sleep

Dr Tina Kendall (Anglia Ruskin University)

While the new landscape of multi-channel networks, video on-demand services, and other streaming TV platforms has arguably opened up 'more attentive and impassioned viewer engagement,' it has also, as my paper will suggest, facilitated renewed opportunities to simply zone out, with many viewers strategically curating their Netflix playlists with the dullest and most soporific shows they can find. Indeed, discussion forums on Reddit and SourceFed passionately debate which Netflix shows are most likely to 'lull viewers into a dreamlike state' (TheRossEverett 2012). Capitalising on the phenomenon of binge viewing, the Netflix website actively invites viewers to 'watch [themselves] to sleep,' with detailed instructions about how to make their own sleep-detecting 'Netflix Socks' that automatically pause the show if the viewer nods off. A similar invitation for a kind of soporific spectatorship is in evidence in the Nordic 'slow TV' phenomenon—extremely long form episodes of mundane everyday events, such as knitting and train rides, in real time—which Netflix has recently acquired for its platform, with the seemingly paradoxical affirmation that 'binging has never been so boring' (Mei 2016).

What are the implications of such trends for the ways in which television viewers are engaged both cognitively and viscerally with their screens in the age of Netflix? If emerging scholarship in television studies has tended to emphasize the more affectively gripping (Ndalianis 2012) and cognitively demanding (Mittell 2015) forms of televisual spectatorship in a post-network era, my paper is interested in the more banal, soporific, and boring affective modes that are also established between bodies and screens. While television has long had the potential to bore spectators, this paper explores some of the specific ways in which modes of televisual dis-affectation and embodiment are constructed, mediated, and experienced in a post-network era. At stake in such trends, this paper argues, is a re-framing of television as a form of ambient mediation, which works below, or to the side of, more standard forms of attentive engagement and absorbed spectatorship (Roquet 2016). My paper will argue that framing these televisual trends as techniques of ambient mediation can help us to understand some of the paradoxes of agency that confront both sleep viewers and their over-excitabile counterparts in the age of post-network television.

'Viewers with a job to do': True Crime Documentaries and The Extraordinary Case of Making a Murderer

Dr Tanya Horeck (Anglia Ruskin University)

Credited with boosting Netflix subscriptions by the millions over the 2015 Christmas holiday season, Moira Demos and Laura Ricciardi's *Making a Murderer* (2015) quickly

became a major cultural talking point and further increased true crime's mainstream popularity. Netflix's first true crime series was seen to lend itself to the practice of binge-watching, as viewers spoke of their compulsion to finish the series in one or two sittings. As Mark Seltzer (2007) has shown, this intense viewer involvement has always been part of true crime's appeal, but digital culture has intensified the viewer's role in the meaning-making process. Exploring this emotional investment, this paper argues that it is no coincidence that true crime documentary has burgeoned since 2000. It is a subgenre that lends itself to an idealized fantasy of the digital era's participatory and interactive viewership. This paper looks at the ways in which true crime documentaries and their invitation to viewers to become actively involved in criminal justice—exemplify what Mark Andrejevic has referred to as our contemporary “culture of detection” (38).

But if recent long-form true crime texts such as *Serial* (2014), *The Jinx* (2015), and *Making a Murderer* are part of a longer tradition of true crime documentaries that position their spectators as “viewers with a job to do” (Clover 246), then in what specific ways do they extend the notion of the “interactive spectator?” With a look at the shared conventions of these shows, all of which revolve around the story of a lost and murdered woman, this paper considers how post network true crime feeds into what Jodi Dean has described as the “key technocultural fantasy” that “the truth is out there” (8). Of particular interest here is how recent true crime documentaries construct a notion of the viewer's agency and how that agency is in turn tied to a fantasy of interactivity which promises that all can be revealed through watching, clicking, linking, and searching (Dean 8). Focusing on the kind of affective labor shows such as *Making a Murderer* invite viewers to perfect, the paper examines how their binge-watching qualities relate to a 24/7 digital attention economy in which human attention itself is “commodified” (Crogan and Kinsley 1). Finally, it considers how the kind of attention capture solicited by true crime documentary in the digital age of “clicktivism” is held in tension with traditional documentary ideals of social “change” and action.

Trigger Happy: ASMR Videos and Networked Spectatorship

Dr Rob Gallagher (KCL)

For years now online communities have been exchanging and creating videos which induce ‘autonomous sensory meridian response’ – a blissful tingling sensation held to alleviate anxiety, pain and insomnia. While it remains a fairly niche phenomenon, ASMR testifies to the impact of the new ways of producing, locating, sharing, discussing and organising audiovisual content that have emerged in the wake of ‘Web 2.0’. While individuals report experiences of these ‘tingles’ going back decades, it was only with the advent of search engines, social media and video streaming platforms that a discourse and a culture of ‘ASMR’ began to coalesce. Algorithmic curation mechanisms, content monetisation schemes and quantitative feedback systems have also played a crucial role in the crystallization of ASMR video formats – a role arguably as important as that of human intentionality or creativity. ASMR culture, in short, offers a vivid illustration of how the social web is fostering new practices, cultures and conceptions of spectatorship.

In particular it points to a new emphasis on affect, framing videos as means of altering viewers' moods, feelings and physiological states. In ASMR circles, videos are treated not as semiotic systems to be interpreted or creative expressions to be

appreciated, but as inputs that succeed or fail in producing the desired somatic outputs – as ‘triggers’ rather than texts. In this respect, ASMR betrays the influence of the cybernetic worldview that, as Alex Galloway and Seb Franklin have shown, underpins contemporary technoculture. And yet many of the accounts of ASMR published online demonstrate the continuing purchase of models of selfhood and subjectivity more indebted to humanism, romanticism and psychoanalysis than cybernetics, stressing depth, interiority and the formative character of early experiences.

These attempts to explain and explore particular individuals’ susceptibility to particular triggers afford us an opportunity to think through the vicissitudes of networked spectatorship and the implications of the ‘trigger’ metaphor, registering the strain under which familiar conceptions of the subject are coming in the online era.

Speaker Bios

Based at King's College London, **Dr Rob Gallagher** is a postdoctoral researcher on the European Research Council-funded Ego-Media project, which addresses the impact of new media on understandings of identity and forms of self-presentation. His research focuses on the role of the voice and the function of avatars, mouthpieces and proxies in digital identity work.

Dr Tanya Horeck is a Reader in Film, Media & Culture at Anglia Ruskin University. She works on digital violence in contemporary film and media culture, with a particular interest in questions of affective labour and response. Her current work explores the complex processes by which violence is mediated across multiple online platforms. Her research interests include: rape culture and digital feminist activism, true crime, and viral videos of violence.

Dr Tina Kendall is Senior Lecturer in Film & Media Studies at Anglia Ruskin University. Her research addresses questions of negative affect, violence, and spectatorship in contemporary cinema and media. Her current research project focuses on boredom, speed, and the attention and affect ecologies of twenty-first-century media.