



Popular Culture Association of Australia and New Zealand



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(PopCAANZ) Brisbane, Australia, 24-26 June, 2013**

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Paul Mountfort

‘To boldly go...’: an overview of proceedings

The study of popular culture encompasses such a heterodox set of practices that it is difficult to identify a discipline area that stands outside its compass, let alone one which defines it. This sheer scope is witnessed in the diverse areas covered at the 4th Annual Conference of the Popular Culture Association of Australia and New Zealand (PopCAANZ) in Brisbane, Queensland, 2013: animation, architecture, business, creative writing, comics and graphic novels, cyber culture, design, entertainment, fashion, fiction, biography and life writing, film, food studies, girlhood studies, gothic, history, law, manga and anime, music, performance, radio and audio media, religion, science, sound and voice, sports, television, textiles, toys and games, and visual arts. Yet, for all that, academic snobbishness – and perhaps a lack of modishness – can still conspire to marginalize and balkanize practitioners working from popular culture studies’ many disciplinary bases.

PopCAANZ was established to provide such practitioners with a progressive regional forum. It grew out of conversations with the (American) Popular Culture Association in San Francisco in 2008 and New Orleans in 2009. With their national conferences bursting over state lines like William Gibson’s *Sprawl* – in San Antonio, Texas, in 2010 there were over 4000 presentations – the idea was to seed the study of pop culture more globally within a kind of loose federation of regional branches. From this was born not only PopCAANZ (inaugural conference Sydney 2010) but the East Asian Popular Culture Association (EAPCA, Taipei 2011), the European Popular Culture Association (EUPOP, London 2012) and the Popular Culture Association of Canada (PCAC, Calgary, 2014).

The popular culture ethos has always been worlds apart from many academic associations, as is reflected in the American PCA annual conference brief. Rather than cultivating only established scholars, the PCA favours a mix of Faculty and emerging researchers, professors and postgraduates. Instead of canonizing academic superstars as keynote speakers, you are as likely to bump into an actor from a cult tv series such as the classic *Star Trek*. Some participants walk the line between the scholarly and fandom, and

there is indeed an emphasis on the performative, from round table discussions to movie screenings. However, let there be no mistake: the scope of scholarship on show is breathtaking and second in scale only to the MLA within the humanities globally.

PopCAANZ has both followed in the footsteps of this mission and boldly gone its own way. In four short years (Sydney 2010, Auckland 2011, Melbourne 2012, Brisbane 2013) it has grown a constituency of around 30 areas and 150 papers. It has forged a close link with one of the most vibrant and exciting independent academic publishers in the world, Intellect Books (UK), in a partnership that has seen not only three volumes of tri-annual issues of *The Australasian Journal of Popular Culture*, but a number of full-length book publications, including a co-authored work by current and former PopCAANZ presidents Vicki Karaminas and Toni Johnson Woods, *Shanghai Street Style* (Intellect, 2013). In providing a dedicated space for the performance and publication of such research it is transforming the landscape of popular culture studies in Australasia, as well as helping promote regional practitioners within a global community of practice.

The review process for the papers included in this volume has been no less rigorous than for the journal: the vetting by area chairs, double-blind review, and editorial oversight is modelled on the Intellect template. 32 papers have made it into the final compilation. At around 3,500-4,500 words a piece, these represent crystallizations of some key insights from the diverse fields of animation; fiction, biography and life writing; film; food; gaming; gender and queer; gothic; comics and manga, history, law, music, performance, science, and visual arts. 32 papers is beyond the scope of a Proceedings editorial to address in detail, and the connecting threads I chart below may be more a matter of fortuitous constellations than a guide to some overarching *mise en scène*, but they certainly provide some pointers as to where it's at right now in this most cosmopolitan interdisciplinary nexus.

Under **Animation**, Corompt looks at the representation of character type through the 'morphological riddle' of the caricatured cartoon hand, while Kennedy alleges a 'caricature of emotion' in the way animators often simulate character acting. In the **Fiction** area we find a triangulation of sex, crime and food: Beckton tracks the emergence of the 'Steamies' genre, while Bydder investigates the rise of the 'everywoman' in detective and thriller fiction in the 1920s, and Franks et al. look at the sometimes poisonous role of food in a popular crime novel series. The two **Biography and Life Writing** papers reflect on alienation in life writing (Sturm) and the application of ethical egoism theory to Jane Bussmann's autobiographical *The Worst Date Ever* (Weinert), while the sole film paper applies Hegel and

Steiner's notions of comedy and tragedy to the topical von Trier's *The Boss of it All*. The cross-over of cuisine and fiction continues in the **Food** area with Brien's consideration of the eating disorder memoir as food writing; identity politics are interrogated in Adams' study of the impact of America on post-war Australian food culture as mirrored in Betty Crocker's lookalike Aussie clone, Betty King, and Fredericks and Anderson questioning of whether Aboriginal cookbooks promote indigenous foodways or reinforce western culinary traditions.

Szuk applies auteur theory to the arena of digital **Gaming**, while it's all wargames for Gehrman and Smith, who under **Gender** interrogate the reification of the soldier as a model of new masculinity in mass media constructions. Along similar lines of critique vis-à-vis gender construction, Parkes looks at challenges to the representation of the white trash family through the 'prism of queerness' in *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, while Scholfield goes where few others have gone before in 'examin[ing] the imagery of the anus' in selected Australian artwork and cartoons. **Gothic** is another stellar – and dare we say sexy – emerging field of popular culture studies, with Finegan viewing the *Twilight Saga* franchise as a site for valorizing posthuman desire while Pyke frames the emergence of the genre in the context of print production and distribution technologies. Under **Graphic Novels and Manga** Russell enters the asteroid belt of the 'panty glimpse' and associated moral voids in Doreamon, while Mountfort subjects the Tintin franchise to an uncompromising post-Situationist reading ('great snakes!').

Hoe is concerned with an up-to-the minute consideration of how online digital **History** is transforming how Australians relate to information. Moll makes the point that amid the endless recycling of popular cultural heroes, *The Lone Ranger* remains yet-to-be re-authored – perhaps explaining why the masked hero has also been relegated to history (the 2013 Verbinski movie notwithstanding). Talking of lawmen, given the popularity of law and order or crime shows, it is no surprise that **Law** is another strongly emergent pop cultural area. Bainbridge charts the rise of *vernacular jurisprudence* in tv series *Boston Legal*, *Dexter* and *24*. As if in reply, Beasley and Tucker independently track down the behind-the-scenes roles of the 'authenticity consultant' and 'prison consultant' in *LA Confidential* and Foxtel's *Wentworth*, respectively. Meanwhile, Watts investigates another area of jurisprudence: representations of the princely body following the fear and loathing provoked by Prince's Harry's night in Las Vegas. In their **Performance** paper, Dundler and Welsh briefly evoke the ghost of Hunter S. Thompson in suggesting why the next time a character jumps off the page of one of their plays and tries to strangle you, you'd better have a shotgun ready (and

perhaps subsequently a lawyer) while Dwyer investigates rehearsal practices in educational setting, but not before Jeanti St Clair and Denise N. Rall explore the Bluesfest **Music** festival through the eyes of fandom.

Li and Orthia consider representations of science in *The Big Bang*, and how against the odds the show has stimulated viewer-interest in something as deeply unfashionable as... **Science**. It's a universe away, perhaps, from **Visual Arts** and Kelly's specular investigation of transgressive eroticism in music videos from Madonna to Lady Gaga, McBurnie's excision of the strange taboo against artistic representations of 9/11 (and study of the rare exception of Gary Panter's drawings), and Panegyre's charting of the appropriation of Munch's *The Scream* in popular cultural representations – but no less weird and wonderful for that.

For those who participated in, as well as those who missed, the 4th Annual Conference in Brisbane, the 2014 port of call in this first five years of PopCAANZ's mission is Hobart, Tasmania. We look forward to witnessing similarly diverse and inspiring pop culture flora and fauna within – to borrow a phrase from Roland Barthes – the 'galaxy of signs' that is the study of contemporary popular culture there, 18-20th June 2014,

Auckland

20 December, 2013

