

Slip on Your Ruby Slippers, Ru: AJ and the Queen or The Slippery Slope of Mainstreaming

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Genre & écrans. L'intersectionnalité dans les séries télévisées et le cinéma anglophones

Université Le Havre Normandie, 5-6 March 2020

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Link to conference programme:

https://bu.univ-lehavre.fr/IMG/pdf/programme_colloque_g_e.pdf

- 1 Continuing the RIN project “Genre & écrans,” l’Université Le Havre Normandie welcomed speakers from various disciplines to discuss notions of intersectionality in a plethora of British and American television series and films. These talks analyse the multi-layered representations of gender, race and class in the audiovisual fictions presented, as well as the real-world ideological implications anchored in British and American culture that these reflect.
- 2 To begin the conference, first keynote speaker **Geneviève Sellier** (Université Bordeaux Montaigne) discusses the French film industry which has thus far been resistant to change, and in particular the world of film critics, in her paper “Intersectionnalité et critique des fictions audiovisuelles : l’expérience du site *Le Genre & l’écran*”. She paints a troubling picture of an elitist cultural tradition born first in literature and persisting in the film industry, which is severely lagging in terms of equal representation. Critiquing the patriarchal model of film criticism, Sellier denounces its tendency to focus on the aesthetic elements of film, concentrating on highbrow films, rather than on the feminised popular movies, which are seen as belonging to popular culture and therefore of secondary importance. This is followed up by an illustration of how the efforts made to remedy these inequalities have been both insufficient and superficial, keeping up appearances rather than addressing the institutional barriers that are not

only preventing women and people of colour (and often both at once) from winning the most prestigious film awards, but also continuing and cementing a long-standing history of under-representation. Speaking of her website (www.genre-ecran.net), Sellier explores how fiction constructs gendered identities and hierarchies, with many women critics and editors relegated to TV magazines aimed at female markets, denied a place amongst the mostly white, male elite.

- 3 Presenting her paper, “Consumer Culture and Women in 1930s Hollywood Cinema: An Intersectional Review,” **Sonia Abroud** (Université de Caen Normandie) begins by deconstructing the use of consumption as a marker of identity during the 1930s, notably one of feminine identity intertwined with that of class. Displaying Hollywood representations of glamorous actresses from films such as *A Star is Born* (1937), *The Women* (1939) and *What Price Hollywood?* (1932), Abroud shows how glamour was perceived as a sign of upward social mobility and as such, an obvious and systematic step in the transformation process towards a new identity for American women. The various visual signifiers of said glamour, emphasised by Abroud via closeup shots in Hollywood movies, equally found their way into highly influential women’s magazines which used celebrities to advertise beauty products and make a direct link between beauty culture and consumption. Analysing the obvious gender discrimination this entailed, Abroud also demonstrates how this created inherent social discrimination which necessitated the undergoing of a certain “metamorphosis,” or “makeover” in the portrayal of high society women, the latter term a point of discussion following her presentation.
- 4 With an interesting and unique take on representations of race in Kevin Greutert’s 2014 movie *Jessabelle*, which tells the story of the possession of a young white lady by her deceased, black half-sister, **Mikaël Toulza** (Université Toulouse II Jean Jaurès) engages with a discourse that has been prominent in the horror genre of late—as remarked by Sylvaine Brennetot with reference to Jordan Peele’s *Get Out* in the discussions that followed the presentation. Engaging also with a discourse that is much less prominent, however, “Voodoo and the Limits of Whitesplaining in *Jessabelle*” highlights the fact that the intersectional approach has been “hesitant” in its approach to religion, despite the considerable impact it has upon identity politics. Toulza’s own in-depth cinematographic analysis is anything but hesitant though, and touches upon subjects such as the use of stillness in representing conservatism, the imposter as a metaphor for white guilt in Louisiana and the negative treatment of the black male body. Outlining the gimmicky, “white” representation of voodoo, Toulza reveals an insecure, toxic white masculinity at the core of the story, and offers an interpretation of Greutert’s film as a racial revenge narrative which is steeped in stereotypes despite its good intentions.
- 5 According to **Elizabeth Mullen** (Université de Bretagne Occidentale), *The Handmaid’s Tale*, which she describes as “speculative fiction,” struggles with questions of race. Watching the enslavement of white people and the consequent treatment of their bodies has a disturbing familiarity for people of colour, argues Mullen, who challenges the notion that racism was eliminated in the series by highlighting the roles played by people of colour. Indeed, her paper “‘Not all Handmaids’: Fraught Representations of Race in *The Handmaid’s Tale* (2017-)’” shows that there is little acknowledgement of the experiences of people of colour within the diegesis, and that the series even relies on racialised stereotypes, such as the “woke sassy sidekick” amongst these secondary

characters, who are deemed disposable. The oddly individualised focus, as Mullen notes, is almost always on white protagonist June, reflecting her “contextually ahistorical reactions.” She furthers this argument by pointing out that there is ample opportunity for an intersectional approach, with moody shots of June stood in front of the Lincoln Memorial but one example that stands out as a failure to represent the black community on the part of the show’s creators. Mullen dissects several scenes from the series, drawing attention to the significance of people of colour’s positions in various shots and the continued failure to make obvious associations with the Civil Rights Movement. This point is emphasised by Mullen’s thought-provoking statement: “gender oppression *trumps* racial oppression, pardon the pun,” which is met by laughter.

- 6 **Medhi Derfoufi**’s (Université de Rouen Normandie) presentation of his paper “Gayness while Keeping Male Gaze: Ambivalences et contradictions de l’esthétique dans *Mindhunter* (2017-)” discusses representations of gay characters in *Mindhunter*, a series which on the surface is socially conscious and non-discriminatory, presenting openly gay characters against a backdrop of fictional realism. Derfoufi describes this approach as typical of producer David Fincher, who relies on a deliberate ambiguity of genre, the series presenting itself almost as a documentary. Characters such as burdened housewife Nancy reflect the show’s political awareness, Derfoufi argues, and he develops this point with a breakdown of main character Wendy, whose icy character represents society’s treatment of her homosexuality. Wendy facilitates an intersectional approach to a variety of social issues such as sexual harassment and the struggle for social promotion. The other major point of discussion from Derfoufi’s presentation is the character Holden Ford, played by gay actor Jonathan Groff. The show received a mixed reaction to Groff’s character, according to Derfoufi, in part due to an expectation that Ford should be gay. In contrast to his typically masculine partner, certain sections of the show’s viewership identified Ford with the trope of the narcissistic genius that Derfoufi suggests has recently been reinterpreted as gay, citing examples such as Benedict Cumberbatch’s Sherlock Holmes.
- 7 Taking on *Black Mirror*’s much-discussed episode “Nosedive,” in which members of a supposedly utopian society are given a rating out of five based on their social interactions, **Jérémy Cornec**’s (Université de Bretagne Occidentale) line of analysis in “You need up votes from quality people’: Représentations et discriminations dans ‘Nosedive’ (*Black Mirror*, S0301, Octobre 2016)” examines representations of class, race and gender in this futuristic society, revealing the discrimination taking place in our own. His comments on the female characters in the episode echo many of the sentiments expressed by Sonia Abroud, notably the expectations of glamour and sociability placed upon women, as he explains how a fragile housewife stereotype is gradually valorised rather than enforced within the hierarchical society presented in the episode. With white, mostly blonde characters making up the desirable elite, Cornec outlines how director Joe Wright also uses colour to create visual discrimination. The aesthetically pleasing pastel colours used by Wright give the viewer the impression of seeing “life through rose-tinted glasses,” as Cornec put it, which contrasts directly with the sombre and cold greens and blues used as backdrops for the unnamed black characters, who almost invariably find themselves at the bottom of the social ladder, usually in service roles, and denied social promotion. Reinforcing this conclusion, Cornec also compares two characters with the same rating—a lazy,

cynical white man and a polite, hardworking black man: a quantifiable representation of white privilege.

- 8 Looking back to the past, unlike the previous speaker, **Victor Faingnaert** (Université de Caen Normandie) applies an intersectional approach to two period dramas set in Britain during the aftermath of World War One in his paper “Des lendemains de Première Guerre mondiale différents : Approche intersectionnelle de *Peaky Blinders* (2013-) et *Downton Abbey* (2010-2015).” Contrasting the series, both in terms of their respective genres and the objects of their stories, a Birmingham based gypsy gang in the former and an aristocratic Yorkshire family in the latter, Faingnaert speaks at length about the class struggle and themes of discrimination and domination, comparing *Downton Abbey* to the 1971 *Upstairs, Downstairs* series. From shell-shock, the “social disease” suffered by working-class men in *Peaky Blinders* to the sexual assault of a domestic at the hands of a lord in *Downton Abbey*, he considers the associations and consequences of one’s class as well as one’s gender in social dynamics of domination, which were also dependent on geographical location. Indeed, Faingnaert makes interesting observations about the directors’ choices of setting and the differences between contemporary rural and urban culture and communities, including, for example, treatments of and attitudes towards homosexuality.

- 9 **Florence Cabaret’s** (Université de Rouen Normandie) talk on “*The Mindy Project* (2012-2017) : une série qui défie l’intersectionnalité ?” presents both an intradiegetic and extradiegetic intersectional analysis, which begins by drawing our attention to the rare representation of an Indian-American woman in US sitcoms in Mindy Kaling, the show’s creator, executive producer and lead actor. Kaling’s show gives a certain behind-the-curtain glimpse at life as a woman belonging to an under-represented ethnic group in the US and the discrimination that this entails, but this, of course, goes along with the expectation of intersectional representation on the part of critics and viewers, as Cabaret highlights. Discussing these expectations, Cabaret also examines the show’s awareness of its failure to meet them via its responses; for example, Mindy’s statement “it’s so weird being my own role model,” which also brings into question the character’s flaws and her compatibility with the role model notion. Indeed, her character deliberately subverts the stereotypical representation of the South-Asian woman as reserved and having no love life, argues Cabaret, in order to use comedy to critique on another level, giving the example of Mindy’s desire to be a white rom-com heroine when her character actually lives as liberal a lifestyle as any white American woman. In fact, one key part of Cabaret’s thorough analysis focused on the episode “Mindy Lahiri is a White Man” (in which the character inhabits a white man’s body), as she considers self-consciousness and the representation of otherness via linguistic idiosyncrasies and body language, as well as the “reconditioning” of women to succeed in a patriarchal society.

- 10 Discussing her paper “The Intersectional Politics of Woke: *Big Little Lies*, *The Morning Show*, and #TimesUp, or, Underestimate Reese Witherspoon at Your Own Peril,” our second keynote speaker, **Brenda R. Weber** (Indiana University Bloomington), explains that Reese Witherspoon has been a bonafide American movie star for over two decades. Yet, as with most female celebrities, her career has waxed and waned over the years, a factor of both the vicissitudes of fame and of aging for women in Hollywood. In direct relation to the limited movie roles for “older” women, Witherspoon took matters into her own hands as she turned 40, with the establishment of her own production

companies (Hello Sunshine and Pacific Standard), a retail store (Draper James), a book club, and most specifically to our discussion, several long-form serial dramas, adapted from novels that had been featured in her book club: *Big Little Lies* (HBO, 2017-present), *The Morning Show* (Apple TV, 2019-present), and *Little Fires Everywhere* (HULU, 2020-present). These series all feature tight ensemble casts of A-list female actors, embroiled in stories that take on pressing topics such as domestic abuse, the #MeToo movement, and class / race inequities. Witherspoon's second act, which is to say her career at middle age, has largely required re-branding herself as a feminist powerhouse, who uses her public platform and the stories she creates for television to work in service of the broader empowerment of "all" women. In this, Witherspoon has come to serve as a recognizable meme, standing for the concept of being politically woke, an increasingly popular slang term meaning to become aware of social injustice and advocate for progressive change. Much like Witherspoon's Elle Woods in the *Legally Blonde* movies, a character whose Barbie Doll looks cause others to underestimate her intelligence, Witherspoon functions as a feminist powerhouse who is both shrewdly strategic and "unapologetically pretty," or so reads the text on her Hello Sunshine website. There is much to admire in this stance, but also much to critique. While Witherspoon has given new cachet to feminism as a sisterhood of cocktail parties and Galentine's Day celebrations, she has also committed the error of second-wave feminism that flattens all women's experience into white, elite, able-bodied, and heterosexual women's experiences, thus performing a form of social harm on those who become erased through her hailing of sisterhood. For some, this essentialism would disqualify and discredit Witherspoon, in word and deed. Rather than ending with this critique, however, this presentation calls for an analytic of radical empathy that does not require a perfect politics before one can speak but instead calls for the cultivation of a more balanced inquiry that, in turn, might foster a broader plurality of intersectional thought and identities.

- 11 Analysing one of the best-known television series of all time, **Jessica Thrasher** (Université Le Havre Normandie) opens her presentation "'The Worst Mother Ever?': Maternity Narratives, Intersectionality and Hierarchies of Motherhood in *Friends* (1994-2004)" by musing on the reception that the show has received, posing the question of generational differences and whether it is still deemed appropriate today, given the differences from the cultural context in which it was originally aired. Criticisms have included its treatment of women, particularly significant given Thrasher's current area of research, as well as homophobia and a lack of representation of people of colour. Addressing these criticisms, Thrasher calls for an appreciation of context, stressing that the sitcom also "creates space for narratives pertaining specifically to women, while attracting millions of viewers." While these narratives include reaffirmations of conservative stereotypes of women, Thrasher proposes that they also offer "more nuanced interpretations of the experiences of motherhood," even if these occur within a heteronormative context. Certainly, the show subverts Samuel Chambers' conception of "sanguinuptial families"—biologically related and anchored within the institution of marriage—which Thrasher describes as innovative given the existing institutions rooted in American culture at the time. Thrasher goes on to consider the question of class, presenting a detailed deconstruction of a scene which pits middle-class American Rachel against young, working-class, Italian-American Dina, both of whom face very different treatments for being pregnant.

- 12 **Sébastien Mignot's** (Université Le Havre Normandie) paper, titled "Caught in Crossfire: Black Gay Characters at the Intersection of Post-Racial and Post-Gay Discourses in American TV Series (*Noah's Ark* (2005-2006), *Empire* (2015-), *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (2015-2019), and *Sirens* (2014-2015))," provides an expansive investigation into the representations of homosexuality and race, particularly the combination of the two on-screen, which he proves to be a rarity in itself—a common theme which unites the research presented throughout this conference. Revealing statistics not dissimilar to those cited by Geneviève Sellier the previous morning, Mignot denounces the lack of parity in American sitcoms where both sexuality and race are concerned, emphasising his point with the suggestion that gay black characters are also often integrated with straight white ones, as seen in *Sirens*, with little importance given to sexuality as a facet of identity. On the other hand, Mignot also discusses the reliance on the ritual of coming out as a kind of rite of passage or confirmation of validity in representations of gay characters. Likewise challenging the discourse of a post-gay / post-racial era created by some, Mignot indicates how said discourse denies identity politics, and reasons that many sitcoms still rely on tired tropes and essentialist notions, such as the heightened masculinity of the black man, the result of which is the "fragmentation and irreconcilability of gay black identities."
- 13 For **Amy D. Wells** (Université de Caen Normandie), *The Man in the High Castle* was supposed to be entertaining but soon became frightening, with striking visual aspects such as the "American Reich" flag now seeming "all too real," as Wells put it. Outlining her intersectional approach in "Juliana Crain: A Case Study of Intersectionality from *The Man in the High Castle* (2015-2019)," Wells asks, "is it cheating to take a white female character as the object?" Stressing the influence of Barbara Tomlinson on her work, Wells goes on to emphasise the differences within "whiteness" such as religion and political orientation. Most importantly for Wells' analysis though, the main character of this series, Juliana Crain, is sexualised throughout, and Wells quotes Luce Irigaray, stating "I still believe her texts are relevant today—that's the big joke on us." The character's identity, as Wells puts it, is primarily sexual as her continuous objectification is the one constant throughout the three geographically and ideologically different regions presented in the series, whereas other non-sexual elements of her identity do vary.
- 14 **Georges-Claude Guilbert**, president of the GRIC research group at the Université Le Havre Normandie, began his presentation, "Slip on Your Ruby Slippers, Ru: *AJ and the Queen* (2020-) or The Slippery Slope of Mainstreaming," by referencing another one of his works in progress, a book which considers the term "camp" and its definitions, for which one must go back to Susan Sontag. Guilbert states that as part of this current project, he is researching country singer Orville Peck, who he claims has more to do with RuPaul than it may seem. Discussing *RuPaul's Drag Race*, Guilbert highlights the importance of the construction of femininity as well as representations of race and even linguistic considerations, before going on to talk about the mainstreaming of RuPaul's products. This mainstreaming can be put down to several factors, including their globalised status and popularity on social media, which have led the show to be added to streaming giant Netflix. Despite this, Guilbert argues that *AJ and the Queen* manages to keep the progressivist message of *RuPaul's Drag Race* while playing with its fictional form, employing his coined Latin neologisms *realitatis femina* and *realitatis vir* (as opposed to *dramatis personae*) to demonstrate the deliberate ambiguity between

characters in a universe where drag has not been mainstreamed by icon RuPaul. Through the conversion of drag culture and gay icons into mainstream commodities, RuPaul can help people, particularly a younger, more easily influenced audience (represented here by ten-year-old AJ), to accept themselves and fight what he calls their inner saboteur—the internalization of oppression.

- 15 TV series increasingly represent diverse populations and delve into sociopolitical ramifications of intersectional issues, but none quite like *Orange Is the New Black*, according to **Anne Crémieux** (Université Paris Nanterre). Indeed, the show was conceived, marketed and received as a vehicle for voicing intersectional issues and represents poor non-white female characters more than any other show in the USA. Presenting her paper, “Intersectionality Is the New Black (*Orange is the New Black* (2013-2019)),” Crémieux describes the series as a new chapter in the representation of lesbianism in prison and addresses tropes such as the “pushy bulldyke,” before stating that the story is really about solidarity between women. A rich set of characters, including a transwoman who becomes the target of transphobia, drive a long narrative that allows the series to confront various intersectional issues. Crémieux describes the use of flashbacks as a characterisation trope employed by predecessors such as *Lost* and *Friends* and explains that though the show was initially criticised for foregrounding white protagonists, later seasons delved into the perceivably “shallow” black characters. This progression was accompanied by a change in marketing that Crémieux suggests was driven by the show’s reception and subsequent fan art: “I believe that intersectional discourse at the heart of the series was significantly processed and remediated by its fans and may have enhanced it. Clearly as things became more political, *Orange Is the New Black* focused on racial issues and de-centred its look.” Concluding this presentation, Crémieux cites Kimberlé Crenshaw’s *Mapping the Margins*, referencing the “intersectional position of disempowerment and undocumented women of colour” which underpins the pressing issue of Donald Trump’s ICE detention centres represented in the final series of *Orange Is the New Black*.
- 16 This conference sparked moments of lively debate which revealed a wide range of fascinating opinions and analytical approaches from the experts present, though this did nothing to take away from the feelings of kinship and solidarity amongst the speakers, several of whom remarked upon the continued and persistent under-representation and appreciation of Gender Studies in the world of academia. The conference was eye-opening and thought-provoking, and was a pleasure to attend. Many thanks to organisers Georges-Claude Guilbert and Kevin Drif.

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