

Media Conduction: Festivals, Networks, and Boundaried Spaces

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This article reports on extended qualitative fieldwork regarding media festivals, including those concerning both film and comic book culture. It is also an initial attempt to shape the trends and patterns suggested by this fieldwork into a theory of media conduction. My interest is in how the festival environment represents a kind of rift through which a normally hidden or out-of-reach area of meaningful activity becomes visible to those not already connected to the event, and how organizers use the value of this access to promote both their event(s) and the media persons and practices with which they stand in symbiotic relationship. The theory of media conduction attempts to account for the power discourses present in the space and time of the media festival, with particular reference to the era of synchronic, interactive, networked electronic communication technology, sometimes referred to as “Web 2.0.”

Introduction

This article is a report on extended qualitative fieldwork investigating the phenomenon of media festivals, particularly those related to both film and comic book culture. It is also an initial attempt to shape something like a theory of *media conduction* from the trends and patterns this fieldwork suggests. I define media conduction as movement of information due to a difference in level of access (from a high-access to a lower-access region) through a transmission medium (e.g., festivals, conventions, events) that simultaneously reifies the value of that access. The usefulness of this term, I hope to show, is twofold. On the one hand, it uses the concept of conduction as it is defined with regard to the transfer of heat or electricity to point out a similar process with regard to information and access, and to clarify how this process occurs along a *circuit* and produces *power*. Media conduction as a concept also offers another avenue for exploring the decreasingly defensible binary of consumption and production, and not simply by juxtaposing and connecting two segments of these words (i.e., “consumption” and “production”; cf. “prosumer” in Toffler, 1980). Rather, media conduction as a concept augments its semantic play with a subtle exploration of power relationships often assumed to be transcended in the more emancipatory notions of consumer/prosumer power (Fiske, 1992).

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Below I tie together several disparate areas of inquiry: relationships between media, place, and space; previous considerations of the festival phenomenon; fandom and "fan" practice; previous studies and theoretical considerations of the production/consumption continuum; new media networks; and the political economy of the entertainment industry. All these streams converge into a series of research questions: What sorts of opportunities do festivals of various stripes afford their constituents? What meanings do attendees, organizers, volunteers, or invitees derive from their experience of these occasions? What is the function of festivals or conventions (henceforth, "cons") within the larger construct of the industries they are affiliated with? How might a more detailed engagement with the festival space further interrogation of the nature of "convergence culture" (Jenkins, 2008)? My data suggest media conduction as a useful concept for approaching such questions.

Theoretical Background

Media, Place, Ritual, Boundary

In the field of cultural geography, several commentators have explored the relationship between people, places, and the symbolic systems that bind them (Basso, 1996; Ingold, 1995; Jackson, 1984; Sauer, 1925; Tuan, 1980). The resulting literature has been complicated and enriched by a turn to the examination of tourism (MacCannell, 1976; Urry, 1990) and its relationship to the nature of places subject to it (Edensor, 2005; Minca & Oakes, 2006; Veijola, 2006). Many have since engaged the symbiotic relationship between toured places and media texts (Beeton, 2005; Crouch, Jackson, & Thompson, 2005; Crouch & Lübbren, 2003; Gonzalez, 2008; Jones & Smith, 2005; Peaslee, 2009, 2010, 2011a; Reijnders, 2009; Rojek & Urry, 1997; Steeves, 2008; Tzanelli, 2007). Often this relationship leads to a sense of "pilgrimage" on the part of those drawn to such places (Aden, 1999; Adler, 1992), a dimension of tourism that emphasizes the special, ritualized, perhaps even sacred nature of such destinations.

"Media rituals" is a phrase employed to describe the boundaries that emerge when a place is re-created as something special via mediation and the ways those boundaries are reified through visitors' embodied practice. Couldry has found such practices in his investigation of audience encounters with film location sites (2003, p. 84), locations connected to news (2000, pp. 123–124), and media production studios (2000), suggesting in the process that "one way to research the media's social impacts [is] to look at how media institutions and media people are thought about" (2005, p. 50). Broadly, according to Couldry's work, such institutions and people are considered special and "central" in a way that connotes a power position vis-à-vis the ordinariness of nonmediated spaces and people. Building on Couldry's work, my previous research (2011a, 2010, 2009, 2007) has interrogated the categories of special and ordinary as manifested in the *Lord of the Rings* film location site of "Hobbiton." Although this earlier fieldwork finally suggested that power operates in such situations, my analysis also allowed for negotiation by engaging with Michel de Certeau's (1984) discussion of consumer "enunciation," a useful term in engaging festival practices that evokes a series of relationships between production and consumption.

Fandom, Production, and Consumption

"Fans" are a population crucial to the success of any festival event. Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) adapt previous taxonomies of fans (Fiske, 1992; Jenkins, 1992) to suggest a continuum between consumer and producer—fans, "cultists," and "enthusiasts." Key in this analysis is the observation that those in the latter category wield the most cultural capital within a given fan community, despite being somewhat less prevalent than those in the former two.

More recently, Jenkins (2006) has attempted to account for fan productivity in the Internet age, suggesting that

media consumers [are not] either totally autonomous from or totally vulnerable to the culture industries. It would be naïve to assume that powerful conglomerates will not protect their own interests as they enter this new media marketplace, but at the same time, audiences are gaining great power and autonomy as they enter into the new knowledge culture. The interactive audience is more than a marketing concept and less than a semiotic democracy. (p. 136)

Pearson (2010), however, takes a more strident tone, asking, "Might the supposedly interactive nature of many authorized websites . . . provide a 'false' sense of personal agency, permitting fans to make their own meanings but only within the tightly constrained limits offered up by the producers?" (p. 92). Herman, Coombes, and Kaye (2006) largely agree, engaging the context of video game modification (modding) and *Second Life*-style virtual economies. Remarking upon *Second Life*'s End User Licensing Agreement (UELA), which allows creators of in-game commodities to retain intellectual property ownership, the authors suggest that "the representation of forms of personalized computing and game consumption as expressions of creativity in the new constitution of *Second Life* ultimately serves to more fully extend the principles of neoliberal market economy into the game space" (p. 201).

One could take up far more space than is available here discussing the theoretical precedents of this argument, which is essentially about structure and agency and thus encompasses the bulk of social theory. De Certeau (1984), however, frames the binary most usefully for our purposes, suggesting that even though so-called consumers certainly operate within a framework of power that demands proscribed action in most cases, those actions are never finally reducible to such proscriptions. Pauwels and Hellreigel (2009) recently relied upon de Certeau's thesis in their analysis of YouTube as a site of audience agency, suggesting that its structure "call(s) into question the notion of user empowerment and autonomy, highlighting the subtle struggle between owners and users as well as pointing at possible effects of cultural mainstreaming or ideological reproduction" (p. 67). For the authors, this foregrounds the rather expedient nature of the discourse surrounding Web 2.0, which tends to celebrate the rise of the so-called "prosumer" (Toffler, 1980) or "monitorial citizen" (Jones, 2007) even as corporations like Google and Facebook steadily line their own pockets. In a related discussion on "produsage," Axel Bruns (2008) points out that in the creative attention economy, where nonindustrial players are increasingly dismissive of copyright law, unauthorized content sharing can often benefit industrial producers rather than subvert their interests (p. 251). These competing and evolving narratives of (semi)professional authorship are

often deployed in the festival environment, increasingly at the behest of traditional producers who see the value of activating fan networks or connecting with (and eventually exploiting) emergent talent.

New Media Networks, the Festival, and the "Biz"

Discussions of the relative dominance of producers and consumers online are problematized during investigations of the role of networks in the information economy (Barabási & Bonabeau, 2003; Castells, 2002; Latour, 1993). Again, arguments on both sides abound regarding the possibilities afforded those working in the fragmented, decentralized economy, with the revolutionary salvos of Hardt and Negri's (2005) "multitude" on one side and commentators such as Fuchs on the other. Fuchs (2010) suggests that "the category of the producer commodity does not signify a democratization of the media towards participatory systems, but the total commodification of human creativity" (p. 149).

Festivals devoted to various forms of media are increasingly imbricated in such networks through the various appeals organizers make to the "situated creativity" (Potts, Hartley, et al., 2008) of knowledge workers like bloggers and to users of social media, which highlights, as De Valck (2007) has suggested, "concerns about the interconnections between the multiplicity of technologies, institutions and markets in the contemporary global media culture" (p. 30). De Valck relies heavily upon Latour's (1993) particular concern with actor-network theory (ANT) in her analysis of the film festival, suggesting that such events bear the hallmarks of the network. Also, according to de Valck, actor-network theory allows the film festival to be studied in terms of "relational interdependence"—"there is no hierarchical opposition between the actor and the network" (2007, p. 34)—and to focus on "processes as *circulating entities*, on movements and interactions between various entities that are produced within these relations" (ibid., emphasis in original). Finally, ANT requires no disqualification of nonhuman actors, so "press facilities and accreditation systems" can be analyzed as actors in terms of their impact on "flows" within the network. Building on previous theoretical analyses of film festivals (Dayan, 2000; Elsaesser, 2005; Turan 2002), de Valck finally comes down on the side of festivals as "successful" in achieving a kind of stability (rather than the instability suggested in Latour's summation of ANT) through their openness and adaptability. She also suggests that festivals operate as "sites of passage" (combining the ANT notion of "obligatory points of passage" within a network and the description of "rites of passage" in van Gennep, 1909/1961), a configuration that highlights festivals' "most consistent and successful method of preservation—cultural legitimization" (p. 37)—as well as their spatiality.

While de Valck thus emphasizes the importance of manipulations and maintenance of spaces in considering the networked festival environment, festivals are also inherently and intimately about time. Harbord (2009) characterizes the festival schedule as an "obfuscation that time, our time, is a limited resource. It is the fleeting spectre of the festival as event that positions itself as the scarce resource" (p. 41). In what she calls the "contingency" of the festival "time-event," Harbord suggests that

[T]he twin forces of planning and chance are made evident: whatever is planned may become undone. The appeal of the event is not evident simply in the ritual practice of viewing a showcase of films. . . . It is also evident in the fact that the event may be

interrupted, that its liveness may spill over into the unexpected, a performance witnessed but not reproducible. (p. 44)

Harbord see the ephemerality and unruliness of the festival atmosphere as one of the essential offerings of such events:

the accidental secures the time of the festival event. And there is a further reversal if one considers the standard reportage of the 'glamour' brought by actors and directors to the event. Their inability to 'perform reliably' (or their reliable unreliability) would appear to be their service to the festival as guarantors of the contingent (p. 43).

Harbord's consideration of this "reportage" is important. The fixing of the festival event has been an important dimension of ensuring the legend of such "once in a lifetime" opportunities, even as they become, in the Burning Man/Lollapalooza era, annual. On a spectrum from the professionalized opinion journalism of the critic to the fan-driven "zine" and audio-taping cultures, festivals of one kind or another have a history of being embalmed (in the spirit of Bazin's use of the term) by those who are "lucky" enough to be there. In the context of "digitized production" (Gripsrud, 2010), however, the unprofessional reporter and critic, increasingly pseudo-professionalized as a "blogger" (in the sense of blogging being a sustainable career, complete with press credentials, etc.), ends up creating or sharing accounts of event attendance. Moreover, these actors in the festival network—along with others such as volunteers and attendees who use social media—may find themselves straddling the line between front-stage and backstage "regions" (Goffman, 1959; Peaslee, 2011b). Clearly there is a substantive difference between the "liveness" of event attendance and the rather different quality of the "virtual" experience, though the nature of this difference remains elusive (Wall & Dubber, 2010, p. 160). Rather than being cheapened by "ordinary" people's greater (virtual) access to such events, however, festivals are enhanced by their greater circulation as (potentially, partially) accessible, bounded spaces (Miles, 2010). Event and attendee benefit from this communication, but so does the value of the mediation that allows the festival structure to emerge.

Research Questions

Much of any festival's *raison d'être* involves activation of the professional critics and journalists in attendance, with hopes of creating positive coverage for both the event and the talent whose work is on display. In the era of network cultures, however—where information taxonomies are surpassed by information "folksonomies" (Bruns, 2008) produced by the activity of both paid and unpaid labor (Andrejevic, 2009; Banks & Deuze, 2009; Terranova, 2004; Wall & Dubber, 2010, p. 162)—the festival evolves from its status as merely an aesthetic showcase or a pseudo-event (Boorstin, 1987). While these functions certainly remain, my interest is in how the festival environment represents a kind of rift through which a normally hidden or out-of-reach area of meaningful activity becomes visible to those not already connected to the event.

Hence, my primary interest in festivals concerns their bounded nature, in terms of both space and time, which leads to a series of questions that remain largely unanswered in the heterogeneous

literature reviewed above. How might a focused attention on the attitudes and practices of various stakeholders who inhabit festival chronotopes (Bakhtin, 1981) lead to greater understanding of differentials of access (and vice versa)? Can a longitudinal approach to particular stakeholders' experiences produce greater understanding of the events toward which their energies are focused, or perhaps of the structure of the festival event generally? How do festivals of different size or prominence establish boundaries of time and space? How are discourses of the "mediated centre" (Couldry, 2003) used and spread during events that interrupt the normally disembodied and asynchronous relationship between producer and consumer?

Media Anthropology as Method

The questions guiding this study emerged from my own previous research as well as my continuing discussion with the above-outlined theoretical developments regarding media, place, and practice. This article, meanwhile, resulted from a series of ethnographic engagements with the festival environment and the organizers, volunteers, journalists, talent, and audiences who populate it. As a product of ongoing research, this study represents work in progress based on nine festival experiences and a battery of in-depth interviews ($n = 21$). Since I participate in these events in various ways (in hopes of experiencing them from various angles), my approach to this work is unavoidably interpretive and autoethnographic. I rely on participant observation for my understanding of event contexts, an understanding enhanced by repeated visits wherever possible. Moreover, I triangulate these interpretations with the responses of stakeholders (Derrett, 2008) positioned variably throughout the festival network. While the literature reviewed above certainly equipped me with some sensitizing concepts (Patton, 2002), the conclusions I draw below are, in the spirit of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and constructivist approaches to media anthropology (Clark, 2004; Peaslee, 2009), derived through close examination of the data and constant reexamination of research questions in the context of new information.

Profiles in Media Conduction

The last section of this article, in which I profile a series of interviewees in the context of the events that facilitated our conversations, represents an initial attempt to form theoretical coherence out of a focused triangulation of data. All names, unless otherwise noted, are pseudonyms.

Aspirational Volunteerism: Peter Stone

I first met Peter when we both served as volunteers for the Small City Film Festival (SCFF) in 2009. This local event was Peter's very first film festival experience, and there was no presence of what any reasonable person would call Hollywood star power. Peter was new to town and interested in learning more about the local film community. My interest in movies and my position as a "film person" in the community sparked his interest, and we chatted throughout our time together. Peter helped judge the shorts competition and spent the remainder of the weekend providing a variety of event management services. He also attended the closing night party and created relationships with a handful of out-of-town filmmakers whose films had been selected.

I interviewed Peter shortly after this initial exposure to the film industry, and the following excerpt is representative of his experience:

One thing I found at the film festival is you don't really get respect there until you actually have a film or are doing film stuff. I tried to talk with as many people as I could, but one thing I found [was that] I could talk to most people no problem, but some of the people—the directors of like the [State] Film Commission or the director of AFI in [City]—they really didn't care to talk with me. . . . So I definitely want to go to more film festivals in the future, but I hope I actually have some of my own [work] there . . . it'd be a totally different experience than just going as a participant just seeing the films.

What did Peter envision as the future “experience” he would have as an invited filmmaker? He was clearly disappointed, if realistic, about the level of disinterest shown him by those at a higher level of access (commissioners, directors, etc.), but he simultaneously created a reason for that disinterest: he was too inexperienced, an outsider still to the industry he aspires to be part of. He sought access to the topmost levels of stature afforded by this particular festival and was rebuffed. But the blow was softened: he later collected contact information from documentary and narrative writers, directors, and talent living in major metropolitan areas, some of whom offered to read his work and critique it. Peter became “Facebook buddies” with several of these individuals, each of whom offered avenues for acquiring what he needed to realize his future festival experience as a filmmaker rather than “as a participant *just seeing* the films” (emphasis added).

A few months later, Peter called me to ask for some feedback on a script. Over the coming months, still energized by his experience at the festival, Peter learned on the fly by directing his first short film, surrounding himself with local talent, and producing a piece that was shown on opening night of the SCFF the following year. In one year, that is, Peter realized his ambition of attending a festival as a content producer. Shortly thereafter, he left the area to pursue filmmaking full-time in New York City with plans to apply to film school.

In 2012, I quite unexpectedly ran into Peter again at Fantastic Fest (profiled below). Standing in line at the Alamo Drafthouse in Austin, collecting my passes for the opening night slate of films, I caught his eye through the lobby glass. I quickly made my way out to talk with him, immediately noticing his “Industry” badge. Peter was in attendance as Second Unit Director of a film that would be a hit at the festival and ultimately benefit from a wide, national release. After a few minutes of catching up, we were interrupted by one of Peter's colleagues on the film, who scooped him up to “go meet some people.”

Looking at Peter's journey schematically, in terms of the media conduction I suggested above, one sees a process by which Peter sought access to cultural and social capital via the event of the SCFF, failed to attain a high level of that access, and nonetheless emerged from the event newly connected and empowered to engage in the beginning levels of media production. The festival provided Peter with the network through which to access (in Couldrian terms) the “mediated centre,” even as it ensured the glamour of that access by denying it to him as “just” a participant. As Peter becomes more successful as a producer (if he does), he will presumably lend his increasingly auratic presence to consequent festival

environments, thereby providing these events with some level of legitimacy and attracting other aspirants to whom he may either grant or deny forms of access (handshakes, conversations, or perhaps even a Facebook "add").

I argue that it is the nature of the boundaries surrounding the access points to remain constant amidst the fluctuation of any one event's or person's conductive power. On one side are those people, processes, or products that are in some way connected to mediation. On the other are those who seek contact with the other side. But to suggest that these moments of contact are simply fleeting and liminal (although surely they are, for many participants) ignores the residues of conduction left behind: Peter emerged with increased ambition empowered by a tangible network, creators emerged with greater notoriety, the event increased its visibility as a "site of passage" (de Valck, 2007), and the host community likely incorporated the event into its brand identity. Peter, for his part, now appears to be increasingly imbricated within the industry network, a process that was enabled and is clearly still enhanced by the festival structure. Peter's "aura" is increasing with his accumulation of cultural and social capital. This is an overt function of the festival space, but what is implicitly aggrandized is the importance of contact with mediated forms and practices.

Off the Beaten Path: Walt Levine and the SCFF

After its second year, the Small City Film Festival 2003 fell under the purview of a single employee of the Small City Arts Center, Walt Levine, whose responsibility to program and manage the festival competed with several other imperatives. While his singular efforts moved the SCFF forward in ways that the previous committee had not, the realities of this individual's employment meant that the festival could only receive his full attention on a seasonal basis. He remained attached as a programmer, competition judge, and de facto festival host.

These roles gave Walt a particularly discerning angle on one of the SCFF's central difficulties: the relationship between its identity, its quality, and its audience:

What's happened the past couple of years [is that the] the festival has shown local films that nobody dug . . . [films] that were crap . . . pure and simple. But because it's a local filmmaker . . . the [festival] director felt like "Well, the [SCFF] supports local filmmaking and we need to show local filmmakers." And I understand that and I do agree with it, but one has to be aware too that in some cases it's a detriment to the festival . . . so how do you balance that? I don't have an answer.

The difficulty Walt explored here is particularly pronounced for the SCFF, but it is not unique to this festival. Some negotiation between the requirements of an event's identity, the expectations of its audience and sponsors, and the taste of its programmer(s) is always in play. Since the SCFF is situated in a small city with negligible tourist draw and is not part of the current "film festival circuit" on either an international or domestic U.S. basis, Walt and his co-organizers seldom field calls from distributors or agents anxious to get products or clients onto their program. But clearly, for the SCFF audience, one measure of "quality" in a film is the degree to which people of some degree of notoriety are attached, and

one potential downside of the emphasis on "short film" and the "local" angle is that both of these terms suggest a dearth of famous people.

As a result, the main draw for the SCFF's core audience is films with local connections, and the most well-attended short and feature screenings are those where local talent have invited their friends or family to join them in the audience. The boundaries of this festival for the general audience, then, are quite porous. Whereas the aspiring filmmaker Peter was quite conscious of those boundaries, as shown above, most SCFF attendees do not have occasion to feel the particular brand of emotion that comes with spotting a celebrity giving a red-carpet interview or being in the audience when a famous actor or director participates in a post-screening Q&A session. They move through the space of the SCFF chronotope with little or no sense of incursion into something normally unapproachable. But to point this out is not to simultaneously diminish the power conducted through the circuit of the festival, since even those "friends of" the filmmaker who attend the SCFF in the spirit of camaraderie are invited to reify the centrality of mediation through their attention to the film's screening, their congratulations (as though by having a film screened at a festival, the filmmaker or actor has crossed a threshold akin to graduation or marriage), and their subsequent communicative activity concerning their "famous" friend or relative.

Creating Community and Cultivating Conduction: Paul Black

I interviewed Paul Black within a few months of the Small City Comic Con's (SCCC) first iteration as a stand-alone event after having been attached to the city's arts fair for the past two years.¹ Paul, who is also a professional sequential artist, served as SCCC co-coordinator. His description of the typical journey from rank convention beginner to industry insider is compelling enough to include in its lengthy entirety:

. . . you go through these phases as a convention attendee. The first ten or fifteen conventions you go to, you're just starstruck. You walk in the door, and you're like, "Oh my God, that's, that's Spiderman!" . . . or, "Oh my god, that's Adam West!" you know? Everything's *amazing!* [laughing]. But after you've gone to ten or fifteen conventions, you're like, "Oh, hey Adam West, how's it going?" . . . and you start to take it for granted, and so you start looking for something else. . . . As a creator, I was more interested in going to the panels, where you've got, like, five of your very favorite comic book creatorsAnd I took notes—I've still got sketch books full of notes from all these conventions. And then, it's weird, after maybe 25 or 30 conventions, you're like, "I'm not learning anything new on this. It's all repeating. I need to draw now. I need to produce. I need to apply that knowledge I've been gathering all this time." And so you either draw pages and show them to these comic book artists and get feedback from them, or actually make a comic book and sell it at a table. . . . Then you need to do portfolios, and you need to network and make friends with artists and editors and see

¹ The SCCC had, by the time of this writing, been reconstituted within that larger local arts festival. It remains successful in terms of attendance, despite its relative lack of prominence on anything more than a local level.

them on a regular basis, so they start to remember you . . . [and eventually] it's not about, "Hey, you're gettin' there, you're gettin' there." Now it's about, "You're there, let me see if I can get you work."

Paul had been producing his own Web comic for some time when we met, and he had undertaken in the meantime to develop a local group of illustrators who met on a weekly basis to draw and compare notes. This Small City Drawing Circle, an organization with approximately seventy members, provided the core audience for the SCCC and came out in force to engage with the roughly forty creators and vendors in attendance, dress in costume, and attend panel discussions with creators. Although few if any attendees would be likely to be called famous, even within the comic community, the event met with great success. Says Paul:

Our biggest guest . . . was a guy dressed in a Batman suit [laughing], and we had 3,000 people show up to our second convention. So, yeah, I knew it wasn't about the guests. If you have a convention, [having high profile guests will] bring people in from a long distance, but you really need a core audience that's gonna show up no matter what, or no matter who's there, and you have to start with that first. If you don't do that, then you're just blowing money.

Does this, then, indicate that attendees at the SCCC perceive a value in attendance that argues against the notion of festivals as access points to normally inaccessible realms? I would say no. Although the SCCC is certainly an event different in kind from its much larger predecessors in cities like San Diego and New York, much of the activity onsite remains suggestive of my central thesis: Costumed figures roaming the festival in the likenesses of George Lucas' *Star Wars* characters are a constant source of fascination, mirroring those Small City residents who "dress up" for the event and highlighting the liminal, carnivalesque atmosphere provided by its space and time. Panels populated by creators are well attended, and autographs are sought. Attendees wait awkwardly but patiently to get face time with creators at their respective tables. And of course the point, finally, of a comic convention is the distribution of material that collectors assume will increase in value (monetary, sentimental, or both). The event offers direct access to people and practices with conductive potential while also providing a distribution outlet to content creators. Finally, as Paul's commentary suggests, the SCCC aids the cultivation of future professionals in the field.

Both the SCFF and the SCCC demonstrate the importance of considering structure when approaching the festival environment. While any event is constituted by the coalescing practices of individuals, those practices over time and across examples calcify into repeating structures. So although both the SCFF and the SCCC suffer a relative distance from the "mediated centre" (in the sense that neither attracts celebrities recognizable to the general public or promotes behaviors that tend to accrue around such people), each nonetheless has a center of its own. Thus the same structure observable in a major festival such as the Sundance Film Festival repeats in these Small City events. The difference is simply one of degree.

"Fucking Bill Murray": Fantastic Fest and Programmed Liminality

Fantastic Fest is significantly closer to the "centre" than the Small City events. An annual gathering of "genre film" practitioners, fans, and critics, Fantastic Fest has established itself on the film industry map in only seven years. Cofounders Harry Knowles and Tim League bring a particular brand of credentials to bear upon their event, the former as the creator of the film industry spy website *Ain't It Cool News* (Murray, 2004; Pullen, 2006, p. 178) and so-called Head Geek, and the latter as owner and operator of Austin's Alamo Drafthouse Cinemas (which many of my interviewees referred to as a "church" for film lovers).

Both of these individuals are, by any reasonable account, true connoisseurs of genre film. Both attend several of the screenings and events on the Fantastic Fest schedule, defying other attendees to outperform them. Moreover, they are arbiters of taste within their communities, a role that is pronounced in the era of networked communication. People like Knowles and League are often described as lead users (von Hippel, 2005), opinion leaders (Flynn, Goldsmith, & Eastman, 1996), or Big Name Fans (Heddy, 2006; Hope, 2004). Although there are important differences between these appellations, each describes a particularly impactful "cultural citizen" (Uricchio, 2004) and an especially influential node or "hub" in a "scale-free network" (Barabási & Bonabeau, 2003).

Knowles, for example, is a prolific user of Twitter (people "follow" him), a tool he has used during previous festivals to increase the visibility of films showing at Fantastic Fest (and, by extension, the visibility of Fantastic Fest itself). Regarding the 2009 screening of *Paranormal Activity*, Knowles stated:

We did 15 screenings around the country timed with the screening that took place at Fantastic Fest. . . . I had a video introduction at all 15 theaters that told people, you know, 'The second this movie is over, hop on your phones and start tweeting it, be sure to use the whole name '*Paranormal Activity*.' And that was the first time that *Paranormal Activity* hit the top of the tweet charts. And that essentially started, like, everything that Paramount did with that film. I had talked to their marketing campaign about how do you launch a small film that has nothing you can really show in a trailer, you know? One of the things that we do is, we help the studios on their films that they don't necessarily know how to [market] themselves yet, and we are very strong in trying to help them to understand the sorts of films that we want to have play at Fantastic Fest.

□

Here new media technologies allow for the extension of the festival experience (the liminal chronotope) into geographical space and networked simultaneity. The auratic presence of Knowles and his directives provides the leverage necessary to canalize consumptive behavior, not only onsite at Fantastic Fest but in several other far-flung locations, while the audiences in these locations (and in Austin) revel in the value they presumably ascribe to being among the first to see the film, thereby taking some slice of the ephemerality of festival contingency and accruing the attendant cultural capital within their individual, networked taste communities.

This contingency of the time-space of the festival is something Knowles and League exhibit great awareness of, having between them programmed several events that relied intimately on the exceptional quality of a particular viewing experience. This sense of showmanship undergirds Fantastic Fest. Said Knowles:

There's a point in Fantastic Fest programming where we begin to look at the films that we have and we start talking about ludicrously stupid ideas about what we can do to the audience—either in the introduction, or in the post-film, or maybe even interrupting the film—that would just make it *epic*, you know? Just the sort of thing where people will write, and they'll write from a standpoint of "it was *legendary*," you know? And "I just can't believe what happened," you know? And that's why we do it. Because when those things *work*—I mean when all of a sudden we have Bill Murray partying in a cave with a group of people . . . it's *fucking Bill Murray!* [laughing]. He's in a cave with a bunch of crazy hipsters that we recruited off of Sixth Street and a bunch of film freaks all doing glow-stick, glow teeth, glow glasses, glow this, glow that, glow everything . . . all for a *children's* film.

This last bit about Bill Murray shows the crucial importance of not only having guests in attendance, but also having them accessible to attendees in some way that defies expectations. Also of particular importance in the Knowles quote above is his emphasis on the likelihood that people will *write* about the "epic" event in question. A writer himself, and indeed one who made his own name outside the boundaries of the mediated centre,² Knowles retains a strong sense of the importance of the people traversing the boundaries of his own event (and of the productive potential of those boundary travelers).

Provocation by Way of Conclusion

This is only a provisional summation; much remains to be done. But my fieldwork thus far suggests a particular flavor of exceptionality in these events and the people and practices associated with them. In each case, the festival event creates a structure of social space within which, I suggest, three distinct publics operate. Occupying the most rarefied position—recalling Shils (1961) and Couldry (2003), the inner circle of the mediated center—are what I call *media publics* (talent, organizers, officials, sponsors), who both operate within, and thereby advertise the glamour of, proximity to what is most extraordinary about the event. Media publics are at the highest level of access to the mediated centre, a collection of practices and discourses that has no proper "place" or location, as it were, but rather emerges in locations where such practices and discourses unfold. As I have stated (Peaslee, 2011a) with reference to the Hobbiton film location site, any one festival "is not *the* centre, it is an example of the kind of place where the centre is made manifest" (p. 50, emphasis in original). Not everyone who falls into the

² Knowles' relationship with the film industry would certainly at one time have been described as oppositional (see Murray, 2004 for a succinct history, as well as an analysis of Knowles' evolution vis-à-vis corporate production centers).

category of “media public” has the same level of access, nor is that access of consistent nature for all individuals.³

Secondly, what I would call *attending publics* (journalists, bloggers, badge-holders, and single-ticket buyers) hold an intermediary position, partaking in a variety of activities, largely but not totally driven by networked media, that provide the event with a constant source of circulation, capitalization, and valorization. Shils (1961) is particularly useful here in his discussion of “secondary values”:

The central value system thus comprises secondary as well as primary values. It legitimates the existing distribution of roles and rewards to persons possessing the appropriate qualities which in various ways symbolize degrees of proximity to authority. It legitimates these distributions by praising the properties of those who occupy authoritative roles in the society, by stressing the legitimacy of their incumbency of those roles, and the appropriateness of the rewards they receive. By implication, and explicitly as well, it legitimates the smaller rewards received by those who live at various distances from the circles in which authority is exercised. (p. 120)

Although the access—the “rewards,” in Shils’ language—afforded the different groups that compose attending publics is highly variable and unstable, as a starting point it is useful to see them as a sort of engine upon which the success of the festival depends. After all, their relationship and communication with the third group, what I call *absent publics*, is a significant driver of future festival attendance. Absent publics, who do not achieve the spatial and temporal access to the festival event through the practice of actual attendance, but rather experience the event either synchronously or asynchronously via mediation, constitute a ready reserve of future attendees who, like Peter, are likely to negotiate (or at least attempt negotiation of) greater levels of access to the mediated center.

Media conduction as a theory is intimately connected to previous, largely structural understandings of social organization. Economists like Yochai Benkler (2006) and Paul Ormerod (2000) have provided sympathetic studies of market structures in the era of Web 2.0 (O’Reilly, 2005), attempting to account for the changing relationship between producers and consumers. Potts, Cunningham, Hartley, and Ormerod (2008) put a finer point on the analysis with their development of “social network markets,” a construct that attempts to rearticulate the contemporary character and function of the creative industries. Of course, Latour’s (1993, 2005) ANT remains influential in theorizing the festival as a node imbricated within a larger circuit and, as de Valck (2009) suggests, in understanding the constitutive role of individual human and nonhuman “actions” that occur in festival environments.

But media conduction aims for more than a structural analysis. Eric Rothenbuhler, one of the reviewers for an earlier draft of this article, explained how to accomplish this end:

³ Shils (1961) might term these individuals “*élites*,” and would agree that as a group they exhibit a “differentiated structure” (p. 125, footnote).

A key issue is to think through the differences and relations amongst things like flows of information or influence, the search for opportunity, limits on access, and contact with the sacred. When are we observing and reporting on essentially economic things, or at least things that can be explained by practical reasoning? When are we observing things that go beyond that, that appear to require explanation by reference to the mythic, the magical, or the ritual?

Well said. As I imagine it, a theory of media conduction uses the structural emphasis of network theory and ANT to more fully recognize the formal consistencies between different festival events (i.e., those things that can be explained by "practical reasoning"). But this recognition is only part of the contribution, because media conduction, in its focus on the ritualized *nature* of the boundaries that constitute these consistent structures, helps one think not only about flows of information or influence, but also about what mediation *means* to actors in the network, and how that meaning works to ensure the survival or success of the structure. My largely ethnographic approach to media conduction points to this focus.

I would also argue that media conduction is a preferable framework for approaching the changing relationship between production and consumption because it sees that relationship as defined by processes. *Conduction* describes a set of practices increasingly formalized in festival and festival-like event structures, whereas terms like "prosumer" (Toffler, 1980) or "monitorial citizen" (Jones, 2007) describe, objectify, or make abstractions of individual users. To be fair, these authors do ultimately relate these individuals to the practices they engage in, but nonetheless the reliance upon a new kind of user as an analytic betrays the academic preoccupation with overestimating user empowerment in Web 2.0 and perhaps a touch of technological determinism.

Here I have attempted to provide a working model for understanding the ritual importance of mediated people, products, processes, and practices. The overarching questions that guide this work are big: Why do people have an emotional reaction when they see a celebrity or find themselves in a place they recognize from a film or a television show? How does mediation affect notions of a person's value, and why does that effect occur? What are media to individuals today?

There is far too little space here to approach any of this with any degree of justice, and even this particular focus on a sample of festival environments faces several limitations. For example, all the festivals I have encountered so far took place in the United States, and the selection was heavily weighted toward the film industry at the expense of others such as music, gaming, or publishing. However, my goal here has been to suggest only the outlines and contours of a vast topography of further investigation. In proposing the term media conduction as a way of understanding the production and maintenance of power relationships relative to media, I hope to begin rather than end a conversation and offer a new avenue of exploration to scholars engaged in theorizing media power, networks, space, and place.

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