

Keynote Lectures: US Icons and Iconicity

Laws, Page

"Astaire and Rogers: Icons of American Screen Romance"

The term "icon" is 'flava of the month' in discussions of American culture, both in and out of academe. This talk briefly explores the current status of the word reviewing its Peircean and other denotations. Most film historians would readily assent to the proposition that Fred and Ginger are now world cultural icons. How else can one explain Frank Gehry's foray into Czech architecture being so swiftly dubbed "Fred and Ginger" by the populace of Prague? If one's iconicity is determined by the number of Ebay items with one's image, Fred and Ginger rate. If icon status requires Fred to dance with a computer-generated Dirt Devil vacuum, poor dead Fred has paid the price. When *homage* films are done by the likes of 'Freddy' Fellini (*Ginger and Fred*), iconicity is afoot. This talk focuses on the curiously powerful erotic charge of Fred and Ginger's romantic *pas de deux* numbers, especially those in *Roberta* (1935), *Follow the Fleet* (1936) and *Swing Time* (1936). How does the skinny, balding first-generation Amer-Austrian from Omaha suddenly become *das Ewig Männliche* dancing with *das Ewig Weibliche*? The secret entails (and en...top hats) Astaire's genius for gender bending and the remarkably reflexive nature of his art. Clips from the films mentioned, plus Herbert Ross' 1982 *Pennies from Heaven* (another *homage*) will be shown and discussed.

Page Laws is Professor of English and Director of the Honors Program at Norfolk State University in Virginia where she has taught since 1987. Named Eminent Scholar for NSU (2002-2003), Page also served as Fulbright Distinguished Chair for Cultural Studies at Karl-Franzens Universität during summer semester of 2001. Laws has had three NEH-funded summer fellowships, and two Fulbrights. An avid film and theater critic, she received her Ph.D. and M.Phil. in Comparative Literature from Yale University.

Merck, Mandy

"Mom's Apple Pie"

Described on its debut in 1999, as this year's 'There's Something About Mary', the teen comedy 'American Pie' combines the Farrelly brother's gross-out aesthetic with the high school male voyeurism of the 1981 'Porky's'. But 'American Pie's graphic representation of sexual practices and bodily fluids is notably combined with a contemporary storyline in which the more thoughtful female characters control their sexual encounters with their inexperienced peers. The

'sensitivity' with which the film treats its teenage girls has provoked extensive comment, along the lines of 'If this isn't feminism exactly, at least it's laddism reconstructed.' Not discussed is the film's title, a peculiar choice given the absence of Don McLean's hit from the soundtrack. So, what is American about 'American Pie'? Certainly its genre, which employs the high school setting, characters and situation which has been formulaic in Hollywood teen films since the 1970s: four high school boys desperately attempt to lose their virginity after the senior prom. When the central character asks a more experienced friend what 'third base' (the vagina) is like, he is told 'like warm apple pie'.... But in a scenario in which the girls are clearly more mature than the boys, the boys themselves fantasise about having sex with their friends' mothers, and -- in a climactic replay of 'The Graduate' -- one does, the pie in question inevitably recalls the US patriotic similes 'as American as Mom's apple pie' and 'as American as Mom, the Flag and Apple Pie'. My paper will pursue the relations between the adolescent male, sexual pleasure, the maternal body and national identity in Hollywood's flagship comedy.

Mandy Merck is Professor of Media Arts at Royal Holloway, University of London. Her recent publications include *In Your Face: Nine Sexual Studies* (New York University Press, 2000) and *The Art of Tracey Emin* (Thames & Hudson, 2002). She is currently researching representations of 'Americanness' in Hollywood films.

Smith, Paul

"Bacardi: The Political Economy of a Sign"

This paper will begin with some general and theoretical discussion of what it might mean to study 'icons' in the context of complex cultural formations and histories. The suggestion will be that 'icons' are ultimately cultural signs whose referent is always a whole nexus of social processes and that these processes are usefully illuminated by concentrating on their political-economic aspect. The paper will attempt to demonstrate this by way of an analysis of the cultural sign of "Bacardi." Bacardi is not, strictly speaking, an American icon: the company's headquarters are in Bermuda. But the company is about to go public in the USA and has in any case (and as the paper will show) had demonstrable effects in not just the American marketplace, but also in the politics of the Americas. The paper analyses some of those effects and the company's practices (e.g. Bacardi's anti-Castro practices, its dealings with US ideologies of temperance, its relation to the world sugar trade, its links with US politicians, its 'trade war' with the EU companies and the WTO, and so on). The attempt will be not just to show the complexity of social and cultural process underpinning the Bacardi product, but equally to suggest methodical ways in which to examine them from a cultural point of view.

Paul Smith has a PhD in American Studies from the University of Kent and is currently Professor of Cultural Studies at George Mason University, Virginia. He has published work in many journals around the world and has edited *Men in Feminism* (1987, with Alice Jardine), *Madonnarama* (1993, with Lisa Frank) and *Boys* (1996). His books are *Pound Revised* (1983), *Discerning the Subject* (1988), *Clint Eastwood* (1993), and *Millennial Dreams* (1997). He is currently working on a book about American political economy and culture, "Primitive America."

