

Examiner's Comments

Grant Venner – Aller Voir (Go and See): Jacques Cousteau and the French Cultural Imagination 1953-1964 – 85%

This is a thrilling piece of work. There is a strong sense of inquiry and it is extremely well-researched. It is beautifully written and imaginatively structured, with a lovely use of framing quotes, a remarkable ability to merge different types of analysis - visual and textual, historical and theoretical, material and poetic – and a strong sense of methodological rigour and purpose. Its merging of cultural history with the study of everyday life is exemplary, and in this respect it supercedes much work in the field by doing both well. As a result, this dissertation represents an original contribution to the field not just in terms of its account of how Cousteau relates to shifts in the French imaginary at a particular moment in postwar modernity, alongside the persistence of more archaic motifs and mentalités – which paradox is admirably embodied in the three chapter topics - but in terms of its virtuoso performance within an academic field. It's also very attentive to the reading the particularities of these features in their context (the aim to avoid 'present-mindedness' is adhered to well) and to the ironies arising from viewing these from the present. One of its most striking features is its almost choreographic style, rather than the more ponderous approaches to dotting its academic 'i's – and so it generates an intellectual energy in its analysis and observations which corresponds to the intellectual engagement shown with its object. It's one of the best MA dissertations I've ever read.

Second Marker's Comments

This is a wonderful combination of extensive empirical research (carried out in a number of archives), matched with theoretical and methodological sophistication, and an inventive interpretative approach that really catches hold of some fascinating connections. The dissertation clearly knows what it is doing and manages to hold all the threads together – it paints a picture of Cousteau as simultaneously symptomatic of French culture and a decisive and resistant (allegorical) commentary on it. Really this seems to me to be exemplary of the values that the MA has been wanting to instill: it is historically grounded, it is persistently involved in some great 'close reading', it is inventive in its range of materials it looks at, and it builds up an archive that interrelates the closely read object with a range of other cultural material to make the object resonate with the larger culture. This then should be awarded a distinction.