

Creative Energies, Creative Industries

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NECS annual conference has reached its 8th edition at Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milan. Representing a progressively more important appointment for the European scientific community in the field of Cinema and Media Studies, the 2014 conference attracted scholars from all over the world.

A look at the numbers of the conference seems to be self-explanatory of the appreciation for the NECS initiative: the 2 pre-conference days and 3 conference days gathered 466 people; the scheduled conference panels were 117, including 421 presentations, 3 workshops, 7 NECS workgroup meetings and 9 HoMER panels. Moreover, after the regular daily program, the local organizers proposed also 4 special events, encompassing round tables and special screenings.

Despite the hyper-dense offer of the overall initiative, the 2014 experience assessed the conference as an important meeting and dialogue occasion, providing the ideal frame for a true exchange among established scholars, young researchers and PhDs. Aside from the numerous parallel sessions and the special events, for the first time workgroup meetings were successfully integrated into the conference daily schedule testifying the strong attention of NECS in becoming an important platform favoring with pragmatism the vitality of common interuniversity research projects within the European Media and Cinema Studies academic community.

Imaginativeness and productiveness were at the heart of the conference whose main theme was *Creative energies, creative industries*. If it is true that the proposed theme was undoubtedly wide, then it is also true that such conceptual width favored a fruitful multifaceted approach to the main idea of creativity. The attendance of the pre-conference activities testified a good interest in the topics at stake in the frame of the 11th Graduates Workshop and of the HoMER workshop, which both took place on 17-18 June.

Entitled *Contemporary Perspectives on the City: Screen Media & Dwelling*, the former was opened by the keynote lecture by Dr. Tatia-

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na Bazzichelli (Leuphana University and independent curator) and gathered PhDs from all over Europe. HoMER workshop focused the issue of digital approaches to moviegoing, exhibition and reception, and featured the keynote lectures by Prof. Francesco Casetti (Yale University) and Dr. Elisa Ravazzoli (EURAC).

The presentations given by delegates also provided a very interesting and rich view of the proposed main topic, ranging from grassroots creativity to institutional strategies and media development programs (i.e. in panels *Participate in Doing Creativity! Do-it-Yourself Media Cultures Now and Then. Creating, and Managing and Working in the Creative Industries*); from local vs. global and national vs. international initiatives conceived with the aim of enhancing screen media productions or promote their distributions (*National Creations, Creative Nations. Practices, Policies, Discourses and Creative Europe: Transnational Patterns of Film and Television Production and Distribution*), to screenwriting and creative industries; from a procedural perspective on creative practices across media (*Mediatized Cultural Memory: New Perspectives on Remediation, Re-Creation: Montage and Collage in Contemporary Media*), to an overview about cinema and visual arts before the challenges of creativity (*Show and Archive. Archive, Re-Use and Exhibition Policies and Film and Video Art Between Creativity and Technology*). Variations in creative energy experiments were also taken into account adopting different points of view (*Creative Imperfections: Dirt, Glitch, Punk and the New Aesthetics* and *Playing With Media: the Challenge of Children's Unproductive Creativity*), as well as questions regarding creative practice in documentary filmmaking. Popularity and performance were also considered in relation to inventiveness in the frame of diverse presentations dealing with film and television studies both in theoretical and practical terms (*Narrative Imagination. Neuroscience, Cognitivism and Storytelling, Inventive Performances. Film Acting and Creativity, and Creativity and Popularity in Contemporary Italian Cinema and Television*). Established workgroups such as the sound studies and the film festival groups confirmed themselves as very active and open structures for the development of research and exchanges, sponsoring various panels.

Such heterogeneous *ensemble* highlighted the co-presence of both classical approaches and new perspectives about the issue of creativity as probably one of the great results achieved during the conference. In this sense, a traditional take on film and media studies coupled with a new and attentive opening towards alternative, more recently-developed approaches, finding good resonances with the challenge that the Department of Communication and performing arts of the 2014 hosting institution has been taking on since its foundation.

A great variety in terms of analytical perspective, research aims and discussed issues characterized the three keynote lectures that accompanied each conference day as well.

The first keynote lecture was delivered by prof. Raymond Bellour (CNRS), who provided a rich theoretical overview of the relationship between cinema and contemporary visual arts in his talk *Cinema and Other Moving Images*. The speech offered a chronological reconstruction of the “passages between the images,” which represents one of the central themes in his curatorial and scholar activity. Highlighting the development of such exchanges between the film and “aside-cinema,” (Rancière 2000), the French author offered a preliminary categorization of these passages between the images that occur in the *entre-image* – notably to be intended as a physical and mental dimension collecting the variations and dispersions of the image (Bellour 1990, 2000). According to the author, when this notion was first presented the specific *dispositif* of presentation of the images “seemed naturally predetermined by the nature of each work”, but at the end of the last century it became hard to maintain clear distinctions between the nature and the mode of reception of different types of works. The suggestion of a possible “death of cinema” arose while the centenary of cinema’s invention was celebrated, and in the period between 1997 and 2001 important exhibiting occasions such as *Documenta X* and the two *Venice Biennales* organized by Harald Szeemann showed that the borders between cinema and visual arts were blurring. According to Bellour this was a clear sign of an incipient “confusion” that made it necessary to reaffirm the “uniqueness of cinematic experience”.

Opposed to this very experience, both a range of diversified screening practices (film on TV, computer screen, mobile phones or even DVD), and a series of theoretical *formulae* (Royoux 2000, Vancheri 2009) or approaches (Michaud 2007, Dubois 2009), questioned the uniqueness of cinema experience. Arguing that these positions superimpose “the moving images of cinema” and those “of contemporary art”, the French scholar categorically refused them, for they seem to define cinema only by the movement of images and not by the *dispositif*. As discussed extensively in his most recent texts (Bellour 2000, 2012), Bellour stated that in the frame of the above mentioned theoretical perspectives the traditional moving images and those displayed in museums tend to be homogenized, while there is a difference in the nature of the experience they produce, based on a “spatialization of time”. Museums basically invite visitors to a mobile viewing experience, and such deambulation valorizes space to the detriment of time, whereas linear time remains one essential element featuring the cinematic *dispositif*.

Put in these terms, the notion of *dispositif* turns out to be cinema’s golden chain: it contributes to the shiny, ritual, excitement of cinematic fascination, but at the same time it imposes a constraint

that seems to exclude any kind of innovation or development of the cinematic experience, if not in terms of “passages of images”. Far from arguing that watching *Gone with the Wind* on a smartphone sitting on a train is a pure filmic experience, it seems that Bellour’s approach leaves aside some interesting aspects of the dialects between persistence and innovation that challenges the very idea of cinema in the contemporary culture. Moreover, despite the fact that it represents the *fil rouge* of the whole lecture, the reflection on the ongoing changes of the cinematic *dispositif* refers several times to the specificity of cinema but it never addressed the question of cinema medium specificity openly, nor the wide Anglo-American literature about this issue was mentioned. The proposed reflection remained therefore anchored to the French theoretical and critical context, although the extensive list of given examples encompassed renowned international artists.

The keynote lecture by prof. Jason Mittell (Middlebury College) interestingly focused on the *Serial Functions of Authorship*. Taking into specific consideration American contemporary prime time series, Jason Mittell offered an extensive and fascinating view of the mechanisms regulating what he refers to as “complex television”² in their relationship towards both media industry and the viewers. If on the one hand the speech exclusively associated the notion of authorship to that of creativity, on the other hand the former was deeply examined in comparison to other modes of creativity and in its specificity in relation to TV.

Mittell approached narrative complexity as a blend of episodic and serial norms referring to textual features that necessarily have to be explored in the context of the shifts of technology in the industry and in the viewer practices that have been occurring over the past 20 years. Such premise winks at a certain concept of complexity that – broadly speaking – refers to the need of considering cultural phenomena according to a plurality of frameworks and, therefore, of opening up the disciplinary boundaries to conceptual exchanges, but it did not directly betray a full adherence to Edgar Morin’s (2008) idea of complex thought as a transdisciplinary model. Setting the literature and cinema model as historical predecessors of the TV one, Mittell suggested a development of the notion of authorship shifting from the idea of origination, to that of responsibility, and finally of management. Authorship in television seriality is thus identified with the figure of the showrunner, who regulates the collective collaboration among writers and serves as manager of the operative process that coordinates the creative effort, harmonizing the single authors’ outputs with a touch of stylistic unity and tonal consistency.

² The lecture was based on the forthcoming book *Complex television: the poetics of contemporary television storytelling* (New York University, 2015).

Such change in the model of authorship is part of the ongoing modifications characterizing non-conventional storytelling techniques that are both challenging the notion of authorship and implying a certain degree of self-consciousness as regards as storytelling mechanics recognized by viewers. He claimed that on the side of the showrunner, as well as from the position of the audience a certain “operational aesthetics” (Harris 1981) intervenes in the processes of creative management of narration and of the storytelling pleasure, being the latter related not only to the TV product, but also to the dynamics behind it. In other words, narration becomes a spectacle and the audience is engaged to a degree of participation to the storytelling. Mittel calls “forensic fandom” this capacity to turn spectators in a sort of amateur narratologists. The American scholar identified three related practices belonging to a unique process: material production, discursive circulation and pragmatic reception of authorship.

Differences between the material production processes and how authorship is viewed represent the first variance in the elaboration of the notion based on the idea of authorship circulated throughout the system in broader culture. In order to consider authorship as discursive product of television storytelling itself, Mittel suggested seeking inspiration in Foucault’s influential notion of author function (Foucault 1998), underscoring the various facets that made it crucial in the American context and relevant in US TV: for example, the author function is valid in terms of attribution, representation, classification, distinction, expectation, and authentication. Social media, interaction with fans, and the production of official authorial paratexts also contribute to the creation of a *personae*, characterized by a certain degree of performativity who is able to fuel the sociocultural discourses about authorship thanks to this very visibility and to his/her exchange with the audience.

Authorship seems therefore to be a component of media perception: this is how Mittel introduced the idea of reception as site of author production. According to the scholar, authorship would be more vital in this perception process as the author becomes active in shaping the viewers’ interpretation, evaluation, comprehension and engagement. A reference to the concept of implied author (Booth 1983) was suggested as a key-passage to understanding how authorship is a driver able to produce an engagement with the series. After providing an insight about how the concept was brought into film studies with references to Seymour B. Chatman’s and David Bordwell’s approach towards this notion³, Mittel made explicit his

³ Chatman, Seymour Benjamin. 1978. *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*. New York: Cornell University Press; Bordwell, David. 1986. *Narration in the Fiction Film*. London: Routledge. According to the former, the implied author is the embodiment of textual intent that functions as a reference point for viewers as they try to articulate their interpretation of the film; on the contrary,

own theoretical proposition: by looking at the reception process we can see the implied author as part of a process of comprehension, for audience indulges in constructing an authorial figure in the process of viewing; to avoid confusion with the pure concept of “implied author” the scholar used the term “inferred author function” to indicate the process of authorship construction which does not take place solely in the context of storytelling, but rather in the broader one of authorship circulation. Such cruciality of the discursive dimension seems to underline a renewed centrality of the contextual element which is now necessarily to be coupled with the text as essential aspect in the construction of authorship – a conceptual shift that reminds of the introduction of the experiential perspective next to the textual one that characterizes some recent debate in cinema theories. In line with this, the inferred author function is to be understood as a viewer’s production of authorial agency responsible for a text’s storytelling, drawing upon both textual cues and contextual discourses. Arguing that complex serial TV embraces an operational aesthetics means that viewers are simultaneously engaged in the storytelling and active in the comprehension and thinking about its narrative construction.

As authorship is structured through discursive circulation – Mittel pointed out – creativity is associated to the inferred author function, and operational aesthetics encourages viewers to think about authorial agency as an entity able to shape the narration and to carry the viewers through the gaps of serial storytelling.

The third and last keynote speech entitled *The Commodification of Creativity: the Case of Disney* was given by prof. Janet Wasko (University of Oregon). The American scholar didn’t take into detailed account the various definitions of the notion of creative industry, nor reviewed some of the critiques associated to this concept, but rather examined the example of the Walt Disney Company, trying to underscore the contradictions surrounding the idea of creativity. If such declared aim finally resulted quite in between the lines, the relationship between the conference main topic and the selected case studies was deeply and clearly analyzed.

Wasko maintained that Disney not only heavily invested in creativity, but also commodifies both the products of creative industries and the very idea of creativity itself. The path of Disney’s commodification of creativity begins where the Company finds its roots: Walt has always been considered a creative genius himself, and this attitude has been mirrored onto the universe he put together throughout its history. Nowadays, the Company is often described as the ultimate creative entertainment company at the point that it has

the latter refuses to use the concept in his model of cinematic narration claiming that the storytelling provide everything which the viewers of the film might need to understand the filmic narration and thus that the text itself is the agent of storytelling.

fully integrated the notion of creativity into its brand. The diversified market segments where the creativity colossus is active (media networks, parks and resorts, studio entertainment, consumer products and interactive) are all characterized by storytelling strategies fostering the “innate” inventiveness of the founder and – by extension – of the Company. In this sense creativity is sold as part of the brand. Such narrative is picked on up by fans, and it is strategically put forth by the company narration according to a model developed by Walt (imagining an idea/ make it happen/ evaluate and refine it). Such scheme represents a real method to enhance creativity and as such, it is sold as the core product of the Disney Institute – where seminars that teach people the Disney style take place. At the center of this training activity is the “D-think”, the Disney approach to corporate problem solving. Connected to best practices in leadership, customer experience and culture, brand loyalty and innovation, creativity seems to be packaged and sold in various ways that, as Wasko pointed out, range from consumer products entailing “creativity” in their name, educational programs training both students and educators, and initiatives for consumers.

Contradictions featuring the Walt Disney Company were also mentioned by the scholar: despite the Company historically turned creativity and innovation into its own flag, a restrictive and controlling attitude towards internal processes and inventive work flow were reported as evidenced by employee relationships, intellectual property enforcement and its relationship with other media/entertainment companies. Leaving on the background a deeper take on the criticalities of her case studies (Wasko 2001, Wasko et.al. 2001), Wasko took a slight distance from her premise; the speech resulted therefore a very convincing observation of the creative industry mechanisms, although the study of this topic could benefit from a more extensive take on the labor aspects it involves, the issue of standardization vs. inventiveness, and the possible critical models of creative thinking. Wasko’s lecture succeeded nonetheless in highlighting the accepted importance of creative industries in the agenda of cinema studies, definitively overcoming the tepid reactions to the first researches dealing with them.

These three different approaches to the issue of creativity underlined the cruciality of this notion to a great deal of theoretical speculation, forms of reception and production practices of the audiovisual and artistic experience. Also, they underlined the great potentiality of NECS as an association able to gather scholars who often share a mutual background even though they are engaged with diverse research projects. Establishing a fruitful networking platform was one of the challenges that the local organizers in Milan tried to deal with, and which they passed on to the colleagues of the University of Lodz, who will host the annual NECS conference in June 2015.

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