

"That's Entertainment!"
SERCIA's 23rd Annual Meeting Overview
(7-9 September 2017)
Fátima Chinita¹



SERCIA - Société d'Études et de Recherches sur le Cinéma Anglophone – is “an organization established in France in 1993 to encourage teaching and research in English-speaking cinema” (as indicated on its website: <http://sercia.net/>). The association is open to members of all nationalities who have this goal in mind. In the first fortnight of September, the association holds an annual meeting that lasts for two and a half, or three days, depending on the host institution, which changes every year, gathering active researchers in the field of cinema and television, retired colleagues, as well as promising MA and PhD candidates. Every other year, the annual meeting is held in a non-French academic institution, but organized by a SERCIA member belonging to that faculty staff. This way, SERCIA truly diversifies the venues and builds important ties with different academic and cultural communities. The longevity of the enterprise, now in its 23rd edition, proves the success of this strategy as well as the liveliness of the association. The compilation, in one or two thematic books per year, of most of the research presented during the previous conferences attests to the nature of the work done by SERCIA members.

Venue and theme

In 2017 the event took place, from 7 to 9 September, at the Università di Bologna, Dipartimento delle Arti, in Italy. The theme was entertainment, and the full title was “*That's Entertainment!*”: *Spectacle, Amusement, Audience and the Culture of Recreation in the Audiovisual Context of English Speaking-Countries*. The conference was organized by Sara Pesce and Michele Fadda, faculty members of

¹ Lisbon Polytechnic Institute – Theatre and Film School, 2700-571 Amadora, Portugal.

the Università di Bologna, with the invaluable logistic help of Constanza Salvi. The event was held in collaboration with La Sofitta – Centro di promozione teatrale, which organizes events in the field of cinema (as well as theatre, dance and music), and Cineteca Bologna, situated next door to the conference venue at the Piazzetta Pier Paolo Pasolini.



Image 1: Materials provided by the organizers
© Maziar Razaghi Chantoiseau

Keynotes

The two keynote speakers were Professor Richard Dyer, from the University of Saint Andrews and King's College London, author of such seminal work in the area of popular entertainment as *Stars* (1979, BFI Publishing) and *Only Entertainment* (2002, Routledge), among many other books; and Krin Gabbard, Professor of Jazz Studies at Columbia University and a jazz specialist, with several books on the subject to his name. As usual in conferences held in Italy, the keynote speeches had a respondent each, both from the Università di Bologna. Giacomo Manzoli acted as discussant towards Professor Dyer, and Franco Minganti, who is also an assumed jazz lover, engaged Professor Gabbard in conversation.



Image 2: Richard Dyer (left) presenting his keynote speech
© Maziar Razaghi Chantoiseau

Professor Dyer's presentation, entitled "The Space of Entertainment", started out by focusing on the so-called tension between entertainment as something that is intended to provide pleasure, as he put it, and art, as a category of objects endowed with formal qualities and the mission of representing the world. He not only proceeded to demystify this opposition, but he connoted affect with non-intellectual experiences in general. According to his view, space is physical (one can be *in* space) as well as emotional (one has a *sense* of space). Using the films *On the Town* (1949, Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly) and *Shaft* (1971, Gordon Parks) as key examples, he explained how the characters' movement through space could have ideological implications of imperialist expansion or, on the contrary, reveal that minorities may occupy space naturally, almost claiming its ownership. Thus, the seemingly natural right of Caucasian people to occupy the world, allegorically rendered in the musical number staged in the Natural History Museum in New York city in *On the Town*, was posited against the opening scene of *Shaft*, where an African-American protagonist detective crosses the city, on foot, starting in the Caucasian-friendly downtown. Entertainment and the motif of spatial expansion become a way of engaging with gender and racial matters.

Professor Gabbard's presentation was entitled "*La La Land* is a Hit. But Is It Good for Jazz?" and concerned the "naturalness" aesthetically contained in the film and its ideological implications. Although set in the tradition of the American musical film in its integrated variety, whereupon real people go from ordinary movement to singing and dancing, and being heavily influenced by Jacques Demy's all-singing films, such as *Les parapluies de Cherbourg* (1964) and *Les Demoiselles de Rochefort* (1967), *La La Land* has two lead actors who are not polished performers and whose musical numbers are presented in real time and without continuity cuts. Despite the intention underlying this choice, the film is, in Gabbard's opinion, contentious for having a Caucasian protagonist appointing himself as the saviour of jazz, an African-American cultural phenomenon par excellence. Thus, the unlikely narrative event was contrasted with the overall aesthetic naturalness of the film. Professor Gabbard observed that the controversy was to be expected since all fictions about jazz usually run into complex issues of race. Still, he was apologetic towards the director's Damien Chazelle casting choice, claiming that he could not have obtained funding for the film without Caucasian stars in the lead roles.

The Seminars

Although the quotation "That's Entertainment!" inevitably points to the musical genre, since it is the title of one of the songs contained in Vincente Minnelli's *The Band Wagon* (1953) as well as that of a

nostalgic three-part documentary by MGM (the first instalment was released in 1974), the organizers deliberately kept the field open. Many of the speakers followed suit, interpreting “entertainment” and “recreation” in an altogether different manner. There were less normative presentations on new media, television, social networks, infomercials and infotainment, the digital age, propaganda, horror and zombies, pornography, realism and politics, cinephilia, celebrity, stardom, nostalgia, reception, production systems, and a relationship with other art forms/genres (such as animation, magic shows, the circus, and the theatre). A considerable number of presentations was extremely visual in nature and the content of the papers itself included a lot of close-reading of films or television series. Twenty minutes of presentation time is hard to reconcile with the showing of clips, and some of the presentations that depended more heavily on them suffered as a result. All in all, however, the speakers kept the audience interested and lively debates ensued on multiple topics.

More politically-oriented presentations included, among many others, Celestino Deleyto’s “Land of Wolves: The Spectacle of the Border / The Border as Entertainment in *Sicario*”, on the border (of Mexico) as a contested space of globalization turned into male chauvinist spectacle of female rejection; Hervé Mayer’s “Debating the War on Terror in Entertainment Cinema: The Politics of Spectacle in *Batman vs. Superman* (2016)”, about criticism on United States politics after the terrorist attack of 9/11, which the showcased film allegorically represents; Jean-François Baillon’s “The World Is a Stage: Entertainment, Spectacle and Mike Leigh’s Discourse of Class”, engaging in Leigh’s theatricality in *High Hopes* (1988) and *Secrets & Lies* (1996) as a means of deriding the *nouveau riche* ladies of the house in order to prove that something is wrong in the idyllic standards of the British middle class; and Isabelle Le Corff’s “British Nonsense in *We Are Four Lions* (Chris Morris, 2010)” which explained a Monthly Python-like humour, based on burlesque and low comedy, was used to approach the very serious matter of “Britishness” in relation to the Other (in this case a dysfunctional group of Pakistani-born terrorists who fail miserably in their violent intents).

Needless to say, all the presentations were on English-speaking cinema and television, but the objects themselves varied greatly, from popular mainstream culture (superhero films, horror movies, Bollywood and post-Bollywood productions) to art-house/auteur cinema of very different filiations (Mike Leigh, Ken Loach, Robert Altman, Wes Anderson, and Woody Allen, to provide just a few examples). Bologna’s SERCIA annual meeting was, as always in SERCIA’s conferences year after year, the opportunity to showcase the current state of some on-going research within the fields of inquiry preferred by SERCIA members. Unlike other conferences, in SERCIA’s annual meeting the theme is meant to bind

very different research sensibilities and to bring together, at least once a year, all members of SERCIA that wish to attend. This event is an important landmark in the life of the association.



Image 3: From left A. Chiarini, P. Starfield, L. Spaziante, C. Murillo
© Maziar Razaghi Chantoiseau

Conference structure

The conference was organized in time slots of 90 minutes, with two panels running simultaneously, except for the first morning. The panels were organized according to affinities in specific subject matter, but were not given a particular subtitle. Room #1 was the large Auditorium, where the keynote speeches took place after lunch on each day, and Room #2 was the *Teatro*, that is, a smaller auditorium located in the same building, not far from the main room. The technical support staff did a magnificent job in both rooms and should be highly commended for it. Technical issues can destroy a presentation into which researchers usually pour a lot of work and effort and, when repeated over a whole day, may delay the proceedings and generate stress and fatigue among conference participants. The duo of technicians assigned to each room not only assisted with cable connections, but also dimmed the lights of the auditoria directly from a portable work station whenever clips were shown (and there were many per presentation). Technology was also an asset in providing a live-stream from both auditoria, which enabled interested parties to watch the event from afar, as advertised in the booklets of the conference. Because of the good wi-fi connection both auditoria could be accessed from inside the conference venue as well as from outside.



Image 4: Greetings and introductory session in the Auditorium, day 1
© Maziar Razaghi Chantoiseau

Other events

Every year, SERCIA's annual meeting includes at least one cultural event, usually pertaining to the conference theme. In 2017, at Bologna, La Cineteca purposely scheduled several films for the three nights covered by the conference. *Sherlock Jnr.* (Buster Keaton, 1924) and *One Week* (Buster Keaton, 1920) were projected on Thursday, both in prints restored in 2015 by Cineteca di Bologna with the Coen Film Collection, and with music composed and directed by Timothy Brock, recorded during the 2015 edition of Cinema Ritrovato. *Limelight* (Charlie Chaplin, 1952) was projected on Friday and *The Band Wagon* (Vincente Minnelli, 1953) on Saturday. All films were shown at 22:15 at Cinema Lumière – Sala Officinema /Mastroianni.

The conference closed with the General Assembly, where the most important decisions of the association's life are taken every year, usually after being put to a vote. All SERCIA members can attend, which is to say all speakers, because no one can take part in the conference without becoming a SERCIA member, at least for the duration of that year. The theme for the forthcoming 24th SERCIA annual meeting and the host institution were disclosed at the end of the General Assembly: the event will be hosted by Linnaeus University, campus Växjö, in Sweden; the conference will be titled: "Symbiotic Cinema: Confluences between Cinema and Other Media" and will have François Jost (Professor Emeritus at Sorbonne Nouvelle, France), Lúcia Nagib (University of Reading, UK) and Miriam De Rosa (Coventry University, UK) as keynote speakers.

Financially supported by FCT, under the Post-Doctoral fellowship programme SFRH/BDP/113196/2015.