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Conference report: 23rd SERCIA Conference: “That's Entertainment!” Spectacle, Amusement, Audience and the Culture of Recreation in the Audiovisual Contexts of English-speaking countries

Università di Bologna, Bologna, Italy, September 7-9, 2017 / Conference
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Conference report: 23rd SERCIA Conference: "That's Entertainment!" Spectacle, Amusement, Audience and the Culture of Recreation in the Audiovisual Contexts of English- speaking countries

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- 1 SERCIA (Société d'Études et de Recherche sur le Cinéma Anglophone), a society founded in 1993 to gather researchers in the field of English-speaking cinema, held its 23rd conference in September 2017 at Università di Bologna, Italy. It was organized by Michele Fadda and Sara Pesce (Università di Bologna), in collaboration with Centro La Soffitta (Department of the Arts) and Cineteca di Bologna. The title of the conference was "That's Entertainment! Spectacle, Amusement, Audience and the Culture of Recreation in the Audiovisual Contexts of English-speaking countries". The conference lasted three days and included 13 panels of 3-4 speakers, as well as two keynote speakers: Richard Dyer (University of St. Andrews) and Krin Gabbard (Columbia University).
- 2 Entertainment has for long been identified as the source of the pleasure taken from the consumption of media productions throughout the 20th century. However, it has frequently been undervalued by academic analysis. Sometimes the mere synonym of "popular culture," it is often set against "art" in a context of opposition between high and low culture. Entertainment has seldom been questioned, a notable exception being

Richard Dyer's seminal 1977 essay. The 23rd SERCIA conference acknowledged the importance of understanding the entertainment dimension of cinema and television. It offered the possibility to rewrite a historiography of the audiovisual production of English-speaking countries from the point of view of entertainment, beyond the patterns imposed by the auteur theory and of value judgments. The conference aimed at opening up for discussion a broad range of topics, including the relations between popular entertainment and official culture, the role played by technology and the corporeal aspect of entertainment. Above all, it questioned, to a certain degree, the main modes of entertainment that dominated the last century and its ongoing development in the era of new media and the Internet.

- 3 Richard Dyer's inaugural keynote aimed at highlighting the importance of the sense of space in entertainment, considered as an affective notion. Dyer opened his talk by reminding the audience of two pairs of opposite terms generally involved in any discussion about entertainment. First, "entertainment vs. art"—the former seeking to give pleasure and the latter being more concerned with formal achievement. Second, "representation and affect." Dyer explained that no matter how abusive those oppositions were, they remained useful to study entertainment. Two case studies followed in which Dyer examined how the spectator's engagement into the fictional world was linked to the way space was constructed combining high level of formal achievement and entertainment. The first sequence studied was the "Prehistoric Man" musical number from *On the Town* (Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen, 1949). Dyer explained how the idea of expansion was conveyed through the number, by camera movement, editing and choreography. Dyer stressed the feminist dimension of the number – (Miller being the leader of the group), but also that objectification was still involved through suggestive costumes and dance moves. Dyer also underlined the problematic nature of the racial stereotype: not only the dancers are performing with objects stolen by imperialism, but the possibility of expansion is coded as white. Dyer's second case study was the opening scene from *Shaft* (Gordon Parks, 1971). He analyzed how the music and cinematography builds up the black character, who is confidently occupying space, walking from Midtown to Harlem; the use of music coded as black signifies Black possession of the streets.
- 4 In the first panel, speakers examined how entertainment is reconfigured in today's entertainment industry. Enrico Mendudi (Università degli Studi Roma 3) pointed out how entertainment should not be regarded as a mere genre of media production, but as a continuum of activities. Activities that are tied to spectatorship on the one hand (watching a movie or a TV show), and other participatory experience of the self (such as tourism, gaming, physical activity) on the other, fuel one another by exchanging themes, contents and social habits. Antonella Maschio and Piergiorgio Degli Esposti (Università di Bologna) examined how new TV entertainment environment challenges the relationship between texts and audiences; viewing practices having changed, series are now the source of a double level of entertainment: not only from the production itself, but also from a more connective form of entertainment on social media platforms. Gianluca Sergi's (University of Nottingham) paper offered an insight into the principal ways in which Hollywood operates today as a complex nexus of people and organizations; he focused on the role of key institutions such as the Academy, professional organizations and leading production companies, unveiling how all of

these groups define the terms of excellence for the next generations of filmmakers while determining what film is.

- 5 Nostalgia in films was the pivotal topic of discussions in the second panel. Louis Bayman (University of Southampton) focused on the passage of time in the film *Pride* (Matthew Warchus, 2014). The importance of time is considered as an aesthetic motif that brings together heritage and retro. Two modes, though distinct in nature, constantly overlap and create a shift in categories: the unexpected encounter between mineworkers on strike and London-based gay activists. On the other hand, *Pride* epitomizes the changes undertaken by the British cinema over the 20th century. Ilaria de Pascalus (Università degli Studi Roma Tre) covered the topic of nostalgia in *Feud—Bette and Joan* (FX, 2017) where artificially reconstructed shots of the 1960's are signs of nostalgic enjoyment of the past and of the popular narratives. Lorenzo Marmo (Università di Napoli 'L'Orientale') examined Wes Anderson's *Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014) around the idea of miniaturization, obsessive attention to detail, and emphasis in framing of images modeled on silent cinema; the fascination for toys, doll houses, miniature trains display the constructive mechanisms of the camera and the filmmaking process.
- 6 On the third panel, both Adriano D'Aloia (Università Uninettuno Roma) and David Lipson's (Université Paris Sud) presentations focused on entertainment at stakes in non-fiction productions. D'Aloia showed how infomercial, usually dismissed as a trash genre, follows a strict structure, with recurring protagonists aimed at capturing and entertaining the viewer's attention. Infomercials entertain because they blend technical and magical appeal. The spectators' satisfaction comes from watching people doing (and thus, internally doing), but also from the magical dimension of an obviousness not explicable by nature. Lipson's paper questioned the relevance of the notion of "infotainment" in today's media landscape where the lines between hard and soft news are increasingly blurred; after exploring the history and inception of "infotainment" TV and documentary, he examined the development, the decline and the legacy of the terms. Through the example of *Supernatural*'s (TheWB / TheCW, 2005-) fandom, Olimpia Calì (Università di Messina) discussed the emotional meaning that joining a fandom may have for a person; Calì introduced an approach to fandom studies that implies the analysis of cognitive response to fiction and fans fictional products.
- 7 In panel 4, spectatorship and entertainment were examined both in the space of the circus which is, by essence seen as a promise of entertainment, and in the cinema. Raphaëlle Costa de Beauregard (Université Toulouse Jean Jaurès) presented the case of two silent clowns *He Who Gets slapped* (Victor Sjöström, 1924) and *The Laughing Man* (Paul Leni, 1928); entertainment is studied according to a dual structure, i.e. attraction and narration; the clowns trigger laughter among the public through the repetition of gags, and at the same time the dramatization of their persona reveal both their public and private lives. Pierre Floquet (INP, Université de Bordeaux) discussed movement in animated films by focusing on web clips, frames from Italian Toccafondo's, American Plympton's and British Greaves' and Quinn's, films. Gilles Menegaldo (Université de Poitiers) analyzed the different strategies of entertainment deployed by Woody Allen in his films. The latter playfully stages different means of media that arguably cancel the boundaries of genres; his history as a stand-up comedian, and his recognized admiration of directors like Federico Fellini and Jean Renoir offer the audience a multi-layered reflection on the limit between fiction and reality. Isabelle Schmitt-Pitiot

(University of Burgundy) explored magic shows in Woody Allen's *Don't Drink the Water* (1966), *Stardust Memories* (1980), *Magic in the Moonlight* (2014), *Oedipus Wrecks* (1989), *Shadows and Fog* (1991) and *The Curse of The Jade Scorpion* (2001); she pointed out how the clumsiness of the magician figures always fail to trick the audience, a paradoxical pattern which questions the veracity of a magic show in Allen's art of fiction.

- 8 Stars and stardom were studied in the fifth panel. Star persona was developed in Jean-Baptiste Chantoiseau's talk (Université Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris 3) on *A Star Is Born* (1937, 1954, 1976). The successive remakes of the film gave way to a certain number of transformations, e.g., the 1954 version added a musical dimension, hysteria in the 1976 version created a form of violence in relation to idols, etc.; the myth of Pygmalion, being at the center of the three films, draws attention to the image of the three female figures by means of a double-mirroring effect which inherently echoes the changes in Hollywood star system. Xavier Daverat (Université de Bordeaux) dealt with *Showgirls* (Paul Verhoeven, 1995), which was originally a variation of *All About Eve* (Joseph Mankiewicz, 1950) and *A Star Is Born*. The film offers both a violent critique of the concept of entertainment and a phenomenology of erotic dance, continuously showing women's bodies and playing on porno conventions and the hyperrealism of Las Vegas; the film flirts with melodrama only for the merchandizing of the female bodies who ended up looking alike. In her analysis of *Inside Daisy Clover* (Robert Mulligan, 1954), Zeenat Saleh (Université de Franche-Comté) reflected on stardom in Hollywood, as well as on the fabrication of a star for marketing purposes.
- 9 The second keynote speaker, Krin Gabbard (Columbia University) opened his talk on *La La Land* (Damien Chazelle, 2016) by qualifying it as profoundly engaged in the culture of cinephilia. The crucial influence of the film is *Umbrellas of Cherbourg's* (Jacques Demy, 1964) use of bold colors and emotional charged ending where lovers are not united; and color coding his characters in the fashion of *The Young Girls of Rochefort* (Demy, 1967). Gabbard's main thesis was that any fiction about jazz runs into complex racial issues. Keith, the one African American character in the film, is seen by Sebastian (Ryan Gosling) as a musical "sellout" because of his inclination to stray away from the very roots of jazz. On the other hand, Keith tries to talk Sebastian out of jazz purism by pointing out that Sebastian's adhesion to the purity of jazz is perilous and counter-productive as it goes against the "out of boundary" spirit of jazz itself. Nevertheless, the film's ironical twist is that Sebastian, a white man, declares himself to be the savior of jazz, even though he admits that he does not want to reach out to young people. As the film ensued a backlash from its detractors who saw it as an affirmation of white-male dominated discourse, Désirée Garcia, Chazelle's old colleague, explained that the latter could not get funding without (white) stars. In *La La Land* neither Sebastian nor Keith is a villain; rather, the film is a multicultural groundwork that refuses to pick sides and allows the audience to have it both ways.
- 10 In panel 6, engaging the viewer in the film spectacle by reinterpreting the very notion of limits and boundaries and their articulation into the cinematic space, was one of the highlights discussed by Hervé Mayer (Université Paris Nanterre) in *Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice* (Zack Snyder, 2016) and Celestino Deleyto (Universidad de Zaragoza) in *Sicario* (Denis Villeneuve, 2015). At this point, a redefinition of spatiality as a cosmopolitan motif implies a reconfiguration of the discursive positioning, as well as the political dynamics of entertainment cinema. David Roche (Université Toulouse Jean Jaurès) analyzed the metadiscourse on the transformation of politics into

entertainment in *Black Mirror 1.1* (Channel 4, 2011) and *I, Daniel Blake* (Ken Loach, 2016); both the show and the film evince an awareness of their own limitations as works of fiction—a necessary condition for political fiction to be truly political, according to philosopher Jacques Rancière—one that looks back on a political activist's entire œuvre, the other that frames the limitations of the episodes to come.

- 11 Panel 7 focused on contemporary American cinema. Julie Assouly (Université d'Artois) analyzed how Wes Anderson's passion for theatre surfaces in the narratives and aesthetics of many of his films, foregrounding entertainment while delivering moral or poetic messages; she discussed the elements of theatricality in Anderson's cinema in the staging (notably through costume and scenery), as well as in film narrative. Anne-Marie Paquet-Deyris (Université Paris Nanterre) analyzed Danny Boyle's thriller-drama-adventure film *The Beach* (2000) as a telling story of young people's postmodern, fragmented experience of time and space; she explored how the beach represents unadulterated entertainment and an ideal stage for inventing and consuming entertainment content, before turning into a violent dystopia where the representation of meeting "natural" authenticity is challenged. Chloé Monasterolo (Université Toulouse Jean Jaurès)'s paper was about Atom Egoyan's *Adoration* (2008), in which a teenager engages in a performance, that quickly goes viral, for which he pretends to be the child from the 1986 Hindawi affair; Monasterolo focused on the place of spectacle and intermedial experimentation in the character's quest for his identity, with particular attention to how the repeated motif of creating avatars is used as a means of self-exploring.
- 12 In Panel 8, Costanza Salvi (Università di Bologna) dealt with the ambiguity of voice by focusing on two case studies: the urban and jazz-inflected style of crooner Rudy Vallée and the rural cowboy stars Gene Autry and Tex Ritter, who brought a modern style to old-fashioned Midwestern and Southern regions. However, Silvia Vacirca (Sapienza University & Richmond University) explored the role of make-up in 1930s Hollywood, and in particular Max Factor who played at styling the face of the Hollywood female film stars, giving the illusion of sculptural concreteness and influencing contemporary beauty trends. Zachary Baqué (Université Toulouse Jean Jaurès) evaluated how entertainment in the documentary *Films of Merit* (Lorentz, 1935) became a key strategy in the making of film propaganda; entertaining their audience has always been a central aim of documentary filmmakers.
- 13 Panel 9 focused on classic and contemporary Hollywood musicals. Dominique Sipière (Université Paris Nanterre) sought to determine the nature of the spectator's satisfaction when watching a musical, especially the relationship between the outside world and the various diegetic systems offered by these fictions; focusing on a backstage corpus, he identified the different levels of diegesis possible, from curtain rise to dream ballet, and its effect on narrative suspension. Fatima Chinita (Instituto Politécnico de Lisboa) proposed to re-consider the cinematic entertainment in Baz Luhrmann's postmodern musical film *Moulin Rouge!* (2001), notably through the Benjaminian concept of "aura." She showed how the film defied the traditional conventions of the musical film while reinforcing to the extreme the hyperbolic entertainment value of spectacle. Fanny Beuré (Université Paris Diderot) presented the audience surveys conveyed by Hollywood studios on a sample of musicals in the 1940s and 1950s; through a study of the comments, Beuré detailed the ingredients praised by audience an entertainment film, such as comedy, energy and variety; she also

underlined the thematic specificity of classic musical films—in which entertainment is tied to family and patriotic values—and proved that the audience's ability to maintain a critical distance from the messages didn't prevent them from thoroughly enjoying it. Finally, Yola Le Caïne (Université de Rennes 2) studied how *La La Land* (2016) constructs a new science of entertainment that reflects the double economic and patrimonial logic of American cinema; she particularly questioned how the reproducibility of entertainment makes it possible to rationalize it, though at the risk of impoverishment.

- 14 During the tenth panel, the "incredibly Strange Culture" was studied by Alessandra Chiarini (Università di Bologna); a trend which was considered as a complex universe of meaning able to accompany many underground tendencies from the fifties to today, e.g., music bands like The Cramps have incorporated their parents subculture into a punk attitude. Lucio Spaziante (Università di Bologna) illustrated the role and function of cinema and television in spreading and contributing to defining and constructing the identities of historic pop celebrities, in particular, the Beatles. Penny Starfield (Université de Caen Normandie) discussed Robert Altman's *Buffalo Bill and the Indians, or Sitting Bull History Lesson* (1976); she proposed to examine the way film fictionalizes and transforms, by distortion, historical fact. Céline Murillo (Université Paris 13) explored Glen O'Brien's *TV Party* (2005), and *No Wave* films such as *Underground USA* (Eric Mitchell, 1980) and *The Foreigners* (Amos Poe, 1978). She tried to decipher the key component of entertainment for performers, spectators' involvement, and political contestation in a corpus of films and TV shows made in downtown New York in the late seventies and the eighties.
- 15 In Panel 11, Elizabeth Mullen (Université de Bretagne Occidentale) tackled the rise in zombie-based entertainment across the media spectrum (film, television, comics, video games, web series, fan-based media, or programs like *The Walking Dead* [AMC, 2010]) and the aesthetic elements as well as the cultural contexts in which they are framed. Isabelle Labrouillère (Ecole Supérieure d'Audio Visuel) pointed out the entropic universe in David Cronenberg's *Maps to the Stars* (2014) where representation invades the scene through the multiplication of screens, mirrors and duplicates, bringing about the fall of idealized models.
- 16 Panel 12 focused on contemporary British cinema. Jean-François Baillon (Université Bordeaux Montaigne) studied Mike Leigh's films *High Hopes* (1988) and *Secrets and Lies* (1996) to argue that Leigh's critical discourse on class is wrongly accused of excessive theatricality; what is often mistaken for caricature is actually the result of a reflexivity process in which the upper classes make a spectacle of themselves in order to deny the emptiness and boredom of their own lives. Isabelle Le Corff (Université de Bretagne Occidentale) studied Chris Morris' *We Are Four Lions* (2010) to show to what extent it belongs to an artistic movement deeply rooted in the British culture of nonsense; like Monty Python's earlier film productions, it transgresses boundaries while negotiating the distance between fiction and fact, politics and spectacle.
- 17 Panel 13 focused on TV entertainment, both in the form of fiction and non-fiction. Gender studies infused Anaïs Le Fèvre-Berthelot (Université de Rennes 2) and Marianne Kac-Vergne (Université de Picardie Jules Verne)'s papers. Le Fèvre-Berthelot pointed out how the musical TV show *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (The CW, 2015-) echoes a renewed interest in musical forms on American TV, but also departs from the existing models by deconstructing the codes of musical theater and romantic comedy. She showed how

this incorporates a critical and feminist twist, as the show constantly negotiates a response to mainstream gender representations, often exposing the contradictions faced by young women. In her presentation on *Terminator: the Sarah Connor Chronicles* (Fox, 2008-2009), Kac-Vergne examined why the show turned away from Schwarzenegger's performance of hypermasculinity to resort to female combatants whose female bodily performance—notably combat—are the main source of entertainment in the show, in the context of postfeminism and the rise of "girl power." Finally, Anna Bisogno (Università degli Studi Roma 3) presented the Italian TV show *Portobello* (Rai 2, 1977-1983, 1987) and explained how this type of TV entertainment—as well as the introduction of color—has been a major break in the Italian Public Service Broadcaster.

- 18 The 23rd SERCIA conference embraced the complex subject of entertainment through a wide range of objects and methodologies. The investigation of the question of entertainment called for the need to examine, whenever possible, the key concept of spectatorship and the way film genres cater for a specific spectator type. Some corpuses appeared specifically rich entertainment-wise: for example, musicals, action films and series, as well as filmmakers such as Woody Allen and Wes Anderson who drew a lot of attention. However, the conference highlighted that entertainment was also to be found in a broad spectrum of works, from early silent films to contemporary TV news. It also helped to deepen our understanding of what entertainment is by underlining its economic, psychological and sociological dimensions. Entertainment remains, thus, more relevant than ever in our research studies of cinema and television productions.

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