

**ECREA 2012, 4th European Communication Conference, Film Studies Section
Istanbul, 25–27 October 2012**

A Conference Report by Gertjan Willems, Ghent University

ECREA 2012, the 4th European Communication Conference (ECC), organised by the European Communication Research and Education Association, took place from October 25 to 27, 2012, in Istanbul and was cohosted by the Turkish Communication Association (ILAD). The ECREA conference is primarily seen as an opportunity for a wide range of communications and media scholars to present their academic work to the broader field within which they are working. This led to many a headache for the conference organisers who did their best to cluster the various presentations and to find appropriate titles for the often inevitably eclectic panels. With six panels and twenty-six scheduled presentations, the film studies section was among the smaller sections of the conference (along with such sections as philosophy of communication and radio research), but succeeded as well as any other section to excel in diversity. In an attempt to capture its essential features, this report will offer a day-by-day review of the papers presented within the section.

Day 1: New Cinema History and (Non)Representation

The section had a promising start with the strong and particularly coherent panel “(New) Cinema History: Concepts and Case Studies”. The presentations dealt with the geography of cinemas, cinema programming and cinemagoing practices. Much of the historical research in this panel was based upon original archival research, with Robert Allen (University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill) in particular making a plea for more use of the richness of cinema archives. At the same time, he showed how this kind of research is often suitable for validation and display to a broad audience by means of a website.¹ While Allen focused on particular towns in the region of North Carolina, José-Carlos Lozano (Texas A&M International University, coauthors Philippe Meers, Daniël Biltreyst, Lorena Frankenberg and Lucila Hinojosa) presented a longitudinal study (1922–1962) on film exhibition and programming practices in Monterrey (Mexico). Drawing upon an impressive amount of collected research material, Lozano discussed the development of the cinema infrastructure and the success of both Hollywood and national films in the Mexican city, while also reflecting on the cultural and social complexities of diverse programming strategies. Lozano’s study on Monterrey is a revised and expanded duplicate of a Belgian study by Philippe Meers (University of Antwerp) and Daniël Biltreyst (Ghent University). The latter was also part of the panel and gave a presentation on one particular cinema in the Belgian town of Ghent showing sexploitation films. Biltreyst concentrated on the special place that this provocative cinema occupied both in the cinema landscape of Ghent and in the collective memories of cinemagoers. Åsa Jernudd (Örebro University) reflected further on film exhibition practices by confronting the social experience of cinemagoing with individual

forms of consumption. The scope of this panel was broadened by Martin Loiperdinger (Trier University), who explained how cinema historiography can also contribute to the understanding of the rise and establishment of the star system and actors' film careers. This was demonstrated with the fascinating case of the Danish-German actress Asta Nielsen, according to Loiperdinger "the first film star of European cinema". This first panel was followed by a film studies section business meeting in which a new management team was elected.²

The afternoon panel of the first day was broadly titled "Film and Representation", but ironically stood out because of its lack of representation, since two of the four speakers were absent without notification—highlighting a recurrent problem at conferences. (The poster exhibition of the film studies section experienced the same problem that none of the announced posters were present). However, this did facilitate an extended audience discussion. In the first presentation, Rahoul Masrani (London School of Economics) connected Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power to the representation of urban glamour zones by focusing on three particular films: *Bridget Jones's Diary* (Sharon Maguire, 2001); *Closer* (Mike Nichols, 2004); *Match Point* (Woody Allen, 2005). Masrani showed how these films rely on heteronormative stereotypes and cultural or ethnic homogeneity, how its "ideal users" are upper-middle class and how iconic spaces in London are represented in these films. Inês Gil (Lusofona University) focused on Lech Majewski's intriguing *The Mill and the Cross* (2011), an adaptation of Michael Francis Gibson's book of the same name and heavily inspired by Bruegel's 1564 painting *Procession to Calvary*. While emphasizing the atmospheres of the film, Gil explained how *The Mill and the Cross* redefines the relationship between film and painting and how the film reflects on the concept of time through the inventive use of both still and moving representations in the same image.

Day 2: Methodological Eclecticism and Documentary Practices

The first panel of the second day, called "Film Culture: Contextual and Reception Analysis", commenced with a demonstration of the continuing importance (and even dominance) of the film star within celebrity culture. Focusing on the celebrity interview in several fashion magazines, Helle Kannik Haastrup (Roskilde University) approached the film star interview as one particular platform of the "master narrative of celebrity culture", which consists of multifunctional stories about success and transformation. Mon Ya-Feng (Goldsmiths University of London), drawing on results from interviews and focus groups, gave a reflection on the actual experience of film spectatorship and the notion of the spectator's "physical enactment". Ya-Feng did so by focusing on the Taiwanese film *Blue Gate Crossing* (Chih-yen Yee, 2002) and introducing the concept of "bodily fantasy", which refers to experiences of sensual ambiguity when the cinematic encounter facilitates cinematic fantasy as tangible reality via the spectator's body. Meike Uhrig and Hannah Birr (Tübingen University) started their presentation with a short historical overview of the representation of vampires in films and television fiction. Their argument, perhaps a bit oversimplified, proposed that vampires evolved from one-dimensional, flat monster characters to more complex characters that leave more space for different kinds of emotional engagements. Through a "hermeneutic film analysis" on contemporary television series, a survey on vampire films and television series from 1922 until today and an analysis of "fan fiction" (videos and writings by vampire fans), the authors questioned the changing dynamics of the relationship between the spectator and the modern film and television vampire. Uhrig and Birr concluded that the "classic horror elements" (mainly centred on the concept of fear) are

no longer the main attraction point for viewers and that both the films and the fan fictions have taken on a much more female perspective. Lastly, Helena Bilandzic (Augsburg University, coauthors Matthias Hastall and Rick Busselle) explained how she studied the effects of topic-specific and genre-specific prior knowledge on narrative engagement. Through the use of MediaLab, the authors set up a viewing experiment in which topic-specific knowledge was stimulated. Bilandzic concluded that genre exposure improves narrative engagement, while inconsistent knowledge on the topic increases false-noting and decreases narrative engagement. This panel was a good illustration of the eclecticism of the panels in the film studies section, facilitating a challenging exchange of ideas. The variety of topics and especially of methods gave rise to a lively discussion in which the panel was described by its chair Philippe Meers as “a typical film studies panel; it looks like a battle of paradigms, but actually it’s a discussion between paradigms”.

Sergio Villanueva Baselga (University of Barcelona, coauthors Carlos Aguilar and Lydia Sánchez) opened the panel “Contemporary Documentary Practices” with an overview of Bill Nichols’s categorization of six modes of representation within documentary practices, after which he introduced a seventh category: the participatory documentary. In order to explore the defining characteristics of this category, Baselga applied contextual (consisting mainly of interviews), textual and interpretative film analysis to six documentaries. Baselga’s research bore several similarities to Firat Erdoğan’s (Bahçeşehir University) study on the YouTube film *Life in a Day* (Kevin Macdonald, 2011). This film consists of a series of video clips made by “ordinary people”, all shot on the same day and submitted to the film’s producers via YouTube. Erdoğan provided some interesting reflections on the possibilities and implications of this new kind of film production, but a few more critical notes would have been welcome. The same can be said about Çigdem Erdal’s (Marmara University) presentation on the various issues connected to the practice of digital preservation. Erdal first described the rise of digital libraries (from Infromedia to the ECHO digital library), after which she introduced the ongoing Arşivist project, Turkey’s first digital documentary film library. In the last presentation of the day, Nicos Synnos and Yiannis Christidis (Cyprus University of Technology) referred to the “prollage” work of the Czech artist Jiří Kolář as an inspiration for their experimental video in which the image forms a collage of two different kinds of footage. The soundscape also plays a remarkable role in this video. The added value of interviewing people who accidentally watched the video in the streets remained a bit unclear, but the video work itself definitely provided ground for challenging aesthetic and ontological questions.

Day 3: Textual and Contextual Approaches

The morning panel of the third and final day of the conference, “Recent Film Text Readings”, displayed a variety of textual approaches to the film medium. While Deniz Gürgen (Bahçeşehir University) gave a theoretical reflection on the sensual experience and “historiographical performance” of mainstream historical films in general, two other presentations of this panel focused on one specific film. Brenda Austin-Smith (University of Manitoba) provided an appealing exploration of the concepts of pleasure and guilt in Marleen Gorris’s 1984 film *A Question of Silence*. While emphasizing the patriarchal resistance of the women portrayed, Austin-Smith focused on the “trivialisation” of both the murder of a shopkeeper and the women’s pleasures after the commitment of the crime, such as shopping and sex. Raquel Crisostomo and Aurora Oiva (International University of Catalonia, coauthor Ivan Lacasa) took Brian De Palma’s *Redacted* (2007) as a case study to examine how the

concept of mediatisation can also be applied to the textual level of films. The presentation illustrated how the variety of screens that surround us in today's information society is integrated in the film as a narrative aspect. These three textual studies were complemented with a presentation by Gunhild Agger (Aalborg University) on the transnational transformation of recent Danish national film culture. Alongside general transnational funding and distribution trends, Agger distinguished three strategies of transnationalisation in Danish cinema. Exemplified by Lars von Trier, the first strategy is the art-film strategy, characterised by the use of English language, a mixed cast and international film festivals. Second, there is Susanne Bier's mainstream film strategy, which is mainly defined by its crosscultural appeal and its potential for remakes. The last strategy was described by Agger as "embracing a foreign film culture by producing in it", taking director Lone Scherfig as an example.

The final film studies panel of the conference was entitled "Contemporary Film Industries: Mainstream and Margin" and comprised two presentations on film production policy and two on film exhibition. Focusing on the latter, Karina Aveyard (University of East Anglia) provided a fascinating exploration of the recent trend of grassroots cinema in Australia. These are not-for-profit film screenings organised by individuals or small collectives of film-loving volunteers, thereby bringing something of the glamour of cinema to their (often rural) town. A completely different aspect of film exhibition was addressed in Julia Knight's (University of Sunderland) presentation. As the leader of the "Film & Video Distribution Database", Knight proved to be the right person to tackle the issue of online film collections.³ Through a reflection on the various problems she encountered when creating this database, Knight provided some insights into the implications of the selection process of audiovisual materials. In the film policy part of the panel, the author of this report, Gertjan Willems (Ghent University) used original archive material to reflect on the role of Flemish ideological and political concerns in the history and development of Flemish film production policy. Finally, Daniele Canedo (Federal University of Bahia and Free University of Brussels, coauthors Elizabeth Loiola and Heritiana Ranaivoson) provided a welcome world cinema contribution by giving an introduction to the MERCOSUR film industry, a film production agreement between several South American countries that is based on the model used by the European Union. One of the conclusions that Canedo drew from a social network analysis was that many of the film production companies that are part of MERCOSUR remain mainly national because the network is essentially divided into four different national production industries.

The central theme of the ECREA conference, "Social Media and Global Voices", was addressed in some excellent keynote speeches, such as the ones by Clemencia Rodríguez (University of Oklahoma) and Slavko Splichal (University of Ljubljana). However, in the numerous presentations of the various sections, as is usual with such large-scale conferences, it often proved to be rather hard to identify the overarching theme; as can be noted from this report, this was also true for the film studies section, which offered an overwhelmingly rich diversity of topics, methods and paradigms. This confirmed one of the section's central aims: to be an open, inclusive and interdisciplinary academic organisation that provides a platform for a great variety of fruitful and thought-provoking international exchanges. In conclusion, the organisers, presenters and audience can look back upon an excellent conference that distinguished itself through its encouraging exposure of fascinating research projects being conducted in Europe and beyond.

Notes

¹ See <http://docsouth.unc.edu/gtts/>.

² Philippe Meers (University of Antwerp) gave over his function as a section chair to former vice chair Helle Kannik Haastrup (Roskilde University), who will be accompanied by two new vice chairs: Anders Marklund (Lund University) and Laura Rascaroli (University College Cork).

³ See <http://fvdistribution-database.ac.uk>.

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Gertjan Willems is a PhD fellow of the FWO (Research Foundation – Flanders) at the Centre for Cinema and Media Studies (CIMS) at the Department of Communication Studies at Ghent University (Faculty of Political and Social Sciences). His research focuses on the relationship between film, nation and state, primarily in the Flemish-Belgian context.