Conference Report: 25th SERCIA Conference: "Trouble on Screen"

Université de Bretagne Occidentale, Brest, France, September 4-6 2019 -
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1   SERCIA (Société d'Etudes et de Recherche sur le Cinéma Anglophone), a society founded in 1993 to gather researchers in the field of English-speaking cinema, held its 25th conference in September 2019 at Université de Bretagne Occidentale in Brest, France. Remarkably organized by Elizabeth Mullen, Associate Professor at Université de Bretagne Occidentale, the conference, which lasted for three days from September 4th to 6th, included 18 panels with 3-4 speakers working on cinema and television and reflected SERCIA's vast research interests; the works of art studied ranked from mainstream to avant-garde, through silent, classical or contemporary, and came from the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and multiple other geographical locations. This conference was punctuated by two impressive keynotes given by Timothy Corrigan (University of Pennsylvania) and Janet Staiger (University of Texas at Austin).

2   This year, the conference revolved around the theme "Trouble on Screen / Trouble(s) à l'écran," and more generally on the capacity of cinema and television to be, on the one hand, a source of entertainment, comfort and escape from our troublesome daily lives and, on the other, a source of destabilization and trouble, leading us to question our representation of normality. Whether this trouble is narrative, visual and/or aural, or situated on the level of production or reception, it deals with the ability of cinema and television to encapsulate the complexities of human societies. One of the questions addressed by this year's discussions was that of the notion of trouble on screen as a means to depict a complex reality or to depart from realism. At stake was the question of the reliability of filmic representations. Films could be seen as a way to document the complex realities of the world, the depths of human psychology and the authenticity of human nature. On the contrary, the screen could also become a place of estrangement from everyday realism, film and television being media that cast a

distorted and disturbing reflection of the world. The conference was devised to investigate to what extent the notion of trouble on screen could question and deconstruct moral lines of conduct, cinematographic and televisual norms, and codes of production and reception and, paradoxically, become a source of creation of new aesthetic norms, thereby inviting viewers to discover the invisible patterns and the subtle power plays at stake in the entertainment industry. The participants were invited to analyze the aesthetics of destabilization through unclear or blurred images, obscurity or unsettling soundtrack, and dwell upon surprising and troubling forms of pleasure and excitement. Focusing on trouble on screen led speakers to address broader perspectives such as the question of audience reception, as well as phenomenological and psychoanalytic perspectives, and thus to reflect upon the evolution of film and television studies and their reception.

3   David Roche (President of SERCIA, Université Paul Valéry Montpellier 3) opened the first panel with a discussion of Lynne Ramsay's four feature films, all of which center on troubled characters. He proposed an in-depth study of the way formal devices are used to express these characters' subjectivities. To proceed, he particularly focused on narrative disruptions, point of view and texture. Ramsay's films allow a reconciliation of objective and expressive realism, both traditions aiming at capturing human experiences, even though these two traditions were initially opposed by David Bordwell. Martin Berny (Université Paris-Est) then analyzed *The Master* (Anderson, 2012). He showed how the movie troubles the status of images. Through its editing and narrative structure, *The Master* becomes the emanation of Joaquin Phoenix's character's psychological process. Céline Murillo (Université Paris 13) focused on the movie *Unmade Beds* (Poe, 1976), more precisely on spatial and generic troubles. Set between Paris and New York City, Murillo argued that Poe's movie troubles the separation between reality and fantasy. Finally, Hadrien Fontenaud (Université Paul Valéry Montpellier) talked about *The Passionate Friends* (Lean, 1949) and *Madeleine* (Lean, 1950), which both follow in *Brief Encounter*'s (Lean, 1946) footsteps. Far from only being variations of the theme of thwarted desire, *Passionate Friends* and *Madeleine* are based on a more complex melodramatic scheme. In these movies, Lean implemented specific narrative strategies, which are at the core of both an ambiguous poetics and the troubled and troubling subjectivities shown on screen.

4   In panel 3, participants were invited to study the theme of trouble in the representations of detectives and gangsters. Sophie Le Hiress (Université de Bretagne Occidentale) analyzed the detectives' diagnosed mental troubles in three series: *Perception* (TNT, 2012-2015), *Hannibal* (NBC, 2013-2015), and *Sherlock* (BBC, 2010-2017). Far from being simple elements, the symptoms associated with these detectives' disabilities have narrative and formal consequences, as they trouble the series' aesthetics and the spectators' reception of the series. Xavier Daverat (Université de Bordeaux) studied the *femme fatale*'s first onscreen appearance in various *films noirs*, from *I Wake Up Screaming* (Humberstone, 1941) to *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (Garnett, 1947) and *The Big Sleep* (Hawks, 1947). These "micro-ectasies," a term he used to describe these moments, show the immediate seduction of the male protagonist. They present these women as feminine figures who are ready to be consumed, and trouble the narrative, which pauses in moments of contemplation. Argyrios Keleris (Université Paris 8) then delved into the gangster genre, the specificity of which lies between standardization and differentiation. Because this genre was one of transgressions, it was particularly targeted and troubled by the Hays Code in 1934. This

resulted in the emergence of new genres: the hardboiled detective film, the gangster-as-cop film, the Cain-and-Abel film, the Syndicate film, the City-exposé film, and *film noir*. In the end, though, the crime film is imbued with ideological ambivalence, and its trouble lies in its depiction of the American dream. Finally, Dominique Sipière (Université Paris Nanterre) studied the factual, spectatorial and genre troubles in *The People v. O.J. Simpson: American Crime Story* (FX, 2016) and *O.J: Made in America* (ESPN Films, 2016). Twenty years after Simpson's trial, both series presupposed his guilt even though he was acquitted. They both revolve around what Sipière called "le long calvaire de la crédibilité" which, in turn, induces narrative and genre troubles.

5   Timothy Corrigan's keynote explored the troubling relation between film and the real to the real through the analysis of two autobiographical documentaries: *The Missing Picture* (Phan, 2013), a Cambodian-French documentary film on the Khmer Rouge, and *Stories We Tell* (Polley, 2012), a documentary film exploring Sarah Polley's family's secrets. Since 1895, films have attempted to shape reality as a philosophical concept, an aesthetic strategy and a personal vision. All of these dimensions offer different versions of the real. Corrigan focused on the resistance of the real to be represented in the autobiographical documentaries under study. In the digital era, when documentaries, fake news and TV reality shows depict the real as self-evident, the two documentaries at stake attempt to de-create and re-create the real by focusing on its complexity, resistance and multiplicity. The real provides unstable evidence that should be considered as something that is simultaneously there and not there. Corrigan emphasized that films are a way to represent reality as a certain variation of the real, which should be always redefined, debated and considered as unrepresentable, as is the case in both films under study. In *The Missing Picture*, the theme of the missing image and the use of clay characters become strategies to tackle the erasure of the genocide, the violence of Cambodian massacres and the difficulty to represent a lost reality. The recreation of the real reveals the emptiness of the truth. Hence, Corrigan believes the representation of a lost reality can also be accomplished by gesturing towards it, and the real can only be represented as "cinematic stoppage." *The Missing Picture* is both a deconstruction of the biographical adaptation and of cinema itself. *Stories We Tell* is a mix of personal footage, interviews and reenactments. It reflexively engages and undermines both narratives used to interrogate memory, and the objectivity of any perspective. Thus, it tackles the concept of recreating a real that has values, an ethical real. These kinds of reenactments situate the real as a phantom, the most important task of documentaries today being an educational and political one.

6   Panel 4 opened with Marie-Pierre Burquier (Université Paris Diderot), who focused on the role played by found-footage in the queer rereading of Hollywood's classical imagery. She analyzed how existing images can be reused, reassembled and reinterpreted in order to bring to light their hidden meaning. Burquier based her presentation on the analysis of three films, *Remembrance* (Tartaglia, 1990), *Rock Hudson's Home Movies* (Rappaport, 1992) and *Meeting Two Queens* (Barriga, 1991). She underlined the importance of the troubled aesthetics of reassembling in the queer reinterpretation of Hollywood mythical figures such as Bette Davis, Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich, thus subverting the usual and traditional identification process. She further explained how images from classical Hollywood films were merged with images from home footage movies, thus blurring the line between fiction and reality, and troubling the original, ideological framework of these images. This subversion ultimately leads to a reinvention and a rewriting of Hollywood's history. Georges-Claude Guilbert

(Université Le Havre Normandie) analyzed Steve Antin's 2010 musical *Burlesque* and its troubled aesthetics. He explained the reasons for the perceived failure of the film, which all have to do with the movie's handling of taste. He underlined the fact that many elements of the musical belonged to kitsch aesthetics and alluded to gay icons and culture, making it all the more puzzling for people who do not possess these references. Iconic figures of gay culture, including Cher, Madonna or even Kristen Bell, as well as diegetic and nondiegetic songs and musical performances, contribute to the creation of a troubling aesthetics inherent to the musical genre, the burlesque. Finally, Jeremy Cornec (Université Bretagne Occidentale) studied the representation of physical and identity trouble in the portrayal of the Belters in the series *The Expanse* (SyFy, 2015-). He analyzed how the construction of a collective identity relied on the palimpsest and revealed a form of unbalanced ethnic representation and oppression.

7   In panel 6, the troubles initiated by white masculinity in cinema and the troubles in the representation of that form of masculinity were investigated. Christelle Ringuet (Université Paris 8) analyzed whiteness in *Lemon* (Bravo, 2017). When the film was first released, Bravo, an African-American woman director, encountered problems in credibility because she was only screening whiteness. She was badly criticized for that movie, which portrays a troubling form of white masculinity, the deranged white male differing from the more traditional white hero. Next, Delphine Letort, (Université du Mans) tackled the representation of the Ku Klux Klan in *The Burning Cross* (Colmes, 1947). Her analysis focused on the portrayal of the Klan as a criminal organization which manipulates its members and makes the protagonist believe his economic plight was caused by immigrant labor. Unlike its notorious predecessor *Birth of a Nation* (Griffith, 1915), *The Burning Cross* troubles stereotypical images of minorities through its portrayal of social progress in these groups. Finally, Lucas Barrières (Université Paul Valéry Montpellier 3) examined the generic and formal troubles employed by Refn to evoke Ryan Gosling's character's masculinity troubles in *Drive* (2011) and compared the depiction of forms of manhood to Refn's next film *Only God Forgives* (2013). The intertextuality between both films has led Refn to redefine an aesthetic of the notion of trouble in the representation of masculinity.

8   In panel 8, Nicolas Lahaye (Université de Versailles Saint Quentin) worked on the impact of the Z-movie *The Room* (Wiseau, 2003) and how its aesthetics, production and reception troubled the filmmaking industry and led to the creation of a myth about its maker, Tommy Wiseau. The reception of the film also induced a reassessment of the definition of what a cult movie is, thus demonstrating how this film followed the lead of cult films, such as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Sharman, 1975), and created a polymorphous entity. Raphaëlle Costa de Beauregard (Université Toulouse Jean-Jaurès) then tackled the subject of cinema and intoxication in three films, *One A.M.* (Chaplin, 1916), *Wings* (Wellman and D'Abbadie D'Arrast, 1927) and *Major Dundee* (Peckinpah, 1965). She showed how these three films dealt with the conflict between order and disorder brought on screen, the dramatization of disorder and how the screen can represent the body as a site of trouble in the protagonist's mind. She suggested that these films represent a blurring of our apprehension of the real, which becomes a vehicle for an illusionary escape from our frustrating everyday lives. Finally, Oliver Kenny (Université Lille 1) addressed the impact of Britishness on the censorship of sexually explicit films in the UK. He first tackled the difference between erotica and porn and how this difference played an important role in the reception of films such as *The Principles of Lust* (Woolcock, 2004) and *9 Songs* (Winterbottom, 2004) and their

relationships to censorship politics. He then underlined the fact that the concept of foreignness could play an important role in the distinction between what could be considered as quality erotic films and porn. Foreign films such as *Le Mépris* (Godard, 1963), *La Dolce Vita* (Fellini, 1960), *Les Valseuses* (Blier, 1974) or *Emmanuelle* (Jaeckin, 1974), were praised for their quality and benefitted from a certain flexibility from the censors because of their foreign dimension. The question of the lower number of viewers for a foreign film could also be seen as a form of explanation for this flexibility.

9   In panel 7, Pablo Gómez Muñoz (Universidad de Zaragoza) and Marimar Azcona (Universidad de Zaragoza) offered two complementary discussions of the movie *Downsizing* (Payne, 2017) from a cosmopolitan perspective. Before analyzing space in the movie, Gómez Muñoz explained the centrality of low-cost staging. Matt Damon's character's family has decided to downsize both because of their financial problems and the effects of consumerism on the environment. Leisureland, the downsized metropolis, brings consumption dreams closer to people with a lesser environmental impact, yet it also reproduces inequalities. For instance, the film singles out the Latino neighborhood, which is separated from Leisureland by a wall, while a bus enters a tunnel into Leisureland, thus shedding light on the importance of the notions of border and spatial fixes in this study. Azcona then drew on the ambivalence of Leisureland's advertised cosmopolitanism, marketed on the basis of capitalism and consumerism. Her approach shed light on how the movie's politics do not offer any real cosmopolitan transformation of the world whatsoever.

10   The second keynote speaker, Janet Staiger, focused on the link between representation on screen and the practices of film reception. She analyzed the role played by criticism that read Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) as a psychedelic film. At a time when violent hate crimes and massacres continue to shake American society to its core, the link between trouble on screen and trouble in the audience is more than ever under scrutiny. Can an audience be under the direct influence of representations of violence on screen? Staiger expressed her disbelief that representations could lead to pure mimicry. This study of the reception of *2001* is revealing of the complexities and sophistication of the link between trouble on screen and trouble in the audience. Staiger underlined the importance of pre-existing knowledge as well as social context, which are possible factors that may influence what audience retains from representations. Early critics of the film may have influenced, the perception that the film was the "ultimate trip". However, in the late 1960s, many youths would have watched any film stoned without needing prior encouragement. Moreover, the role played by the film's aesthetics must be taken into account. The soundtrack, the slow pace, the silence and the minimalist dialogues would have reinforced the comparison of the film to a trip, hence the importance of aesthetics in the reception, not so much in the sense that aesthetics create effects, but that audiences might make use of them in a particular way. The early reviews and the psychedelic terminology they used may have played an important role in the reading of the film, although the importance of the influence of reviews can be relative. People advertised *2001* as Rated S, for Stoned Audiences, and the film went on to become a cult film and a smashing success. Several lessons are to be drawn from this story. *2001* became a cult film much in the same way as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Sharman, 1975) did, with an underground audience who would return to watch the same movie and create trouble in the audience. Finally, Staiger concluded that, beyond social context, aesthetics also mattered since part of

what produced the psychedelic audience was probably the non-standard, non-classical aesthetics, which was more aligned with European art cinema.

11 Panel 11 revolved around racial issues in the U.S.A. First, Mikaël Toulza (Université Toulouse Jean Jaurès) unraveled the intersectional politics of voodoo in *Angel Heart* (Parker, 1987) in relation to the movie's troubling racial and generic hybridity. The private eye's white male gaze, through which the narrative unfolds, perceives voodoo as a diabolical and abject religion. This results in an association between voodoo and Satanism which troubles the film's aesthetics. Toulza's study of the black voodoo priestess's experience—from Angel observing and fetishizing her during the voodoo ceremony to him raping and murdering her—stressed the movie's destabilization of this untrustworthy white male gaze. Ultimately, *Angel Heart*'s voodoo troubles racial and generic boundaries, even though it is still used as a sensationalistic means of entertaining the audience. Claire Dutriaux (Université Paris Sorbonne) examined the term "professional southerners," which has been used by film scholars and historians to refer to several agents in Hollywood who acted as mediators between Hollywood and the South in the Production Code era. Dutriaux contended that their presence was necessary to avoid making movies that would be troubling or troublesome to the South's audiences. During and after WWII, Hollywood was negotiating what it perceived as the pressures of the civil rights movement. These professional southerners played an important role to help filmmakers navigate between advocating for the South and its identity on the one hand, and condemning this region's violent past on the other. Yann Roblou (Université Polytechnique Hauts de France) closed the panel with an analysis of the horror movie *Us* (Peele, 2019) which is, at least structurally, a classical tragedy. The movie's reliance on the motif of the double is paralleled by the narrative's symmetry and repetition and the camera's confrontation of the characters' stare to the mirror. *Us* is heavily intertextual and manages to merge the Fantastic with Horror.

12 In Panel 13, Chris Horn (University of Leicester) questioned Friedkin's goals with films from the 1980s such as *Rampage* (1987) and *Cruising* (1980) and whether or not they should be considered as a form of provocation towards Reaganite cinema. According to Horn, the reactions to both films said more about the context and the morality of the time than about the films themselves. Both films, which dealt with controversial themes—homosexuality in *Cruising* and the death penalty in *Rampage*—played on the cathartic effects films can have when dealing with troublesome material. Gary Edgerton (Butler University) gave a talk on the series *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007-2017) and analyzed its politics in a new era of accountability. He underlined the fact that the show tackled a form of violence through its depictions of sex and engagement with politics. According to him, *Mad Men* could be considered to reflect both the Zeitgeist of the time but also of today. The critical nostalgia that the show displays not only tackles the gendered and political power plays of the 1950s and 1960s, but could also be said to foreshadow current movements like #MeToo, especially if we consider Weiner's own personal life (he was accused of sexual harassment by one the female writers of the show). Anaïs Le Fevre-Berthelot (Université Rennes 2) focused on two shows, *Ally McBeal* (Fox, 1997-2002) and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (Bloom, The CW, 2015-), in order to analyze the link between the portrayal of female characters and the representation of mental illness on screen and its evolution. The depiction of mental illness on screen is linked to troubling concepts such as representation, norms and identity. For Le Fevre-Berthelot, however, this theme has been underrepresented for a long time in the media. Characters suffering from mental illness were very often secondary characters.

The post-network era led to a change, and series such as *Ally McBeal* and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* stand out for several reasons. Their depiction of mental illness is not limited to secondary characters. Furthermore, her analysis of gender bias in such representations demonstrated to what extent the representation of trouble through the portrayal of female characters suffering from mental illness can lead to question unrealistic expectations of liberal feminism.

13 Panel 15 started with Sébastien Lefait's (Université Paris 8) exploration of intermedial troubles in the series *The Handmaid's Tale* (Hulu, 2017-) and *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013-2019) as examples. In both series, intermediality relies on blurred areas between media forms, troubling the reception notably in terms of the political and social implications which drew a lot of attention from the audience. Lefait's talk emphasized the growing importance of popular series in displaying their political content, thus gradually affecting US politics. Julie Assouly (Université d'Artois) then tackled the representations of working-class Pennsylvanians in *The Deer Hunter* (Cimino, 1978) and *Out of the Furnace* (Cooper, 2013). Set in "photogenically depressed" industrial landscapes, with a mill serving as multi-faceted signifier of the Rust Belt, Assouly argued that both films explore the troubles associated with working-class WASP masculinity.

14 In one of the final panels (18) Julia Echeverria (Universidad de Zaragoza) put into perspective *Orange Is the New Black* (Netflix, 2013-2019) and the Spanish women-in-prison series *Vis a vis* (2015-2019, Antena 3 & Fox Spain). Jenji Kohan, *Orange*'s showrunner, says the series is a Trojan horse to tell story about black and Latina woman, which also applies to its Spanish counterpart. And indeed, both series create visibility for the experiences of multiple forms of femininity. The difference between them lies, according to Echeverria, in the fact that *Orange* is set in a highly segregated place while *Vis a Vis*'s prison acts, ironically enough, as liberating space. Anne Sweet (Université Sorbonne Nouvelle-Paris 3) examined the trouble with female power by analyzing the representation of witchcraft, sexuality and magic in the series *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (Netflix, 2018-). She explored the link between female power and agency on screen and the depiction of witches on television and its evolution from the 1960s until now. Sophie Chadelle (Université Toulouse Jean Jaurès) closed the last panel with a study of the use of slang by female characters in *Sex and the City* (HBO, 1998-2004) and *Grey's Anatomy* (ABC, 2005-) and its impact on the representation of female empowerment. She then analyzed the translation of both series and demonstrated how the French dubbing and subtitling altered the work on slang and vulgarity thus undermining the feminist discourse of both series and the female characterization process.

15 The 25th SERCIA conference offered a wealth of case studies, theoretical and methodological proposals, and was an opportunity to explore the diverse understandings of the notion of trouble on screen. The multifaceted dimension of the notion of trouble on screen was brilliantly tackled throughout this conference, which also testified to the wide variety of approaches in film and television studies. The creative dimension of the concept of trouble on screen was central. Whether it is conveyed through the aesthetics of films or series, the narrative and characterization strategies or the soundtrack, among others, trouble on screen can often lead to the destabilization and explosion of traditional frameworks and the renewal of our beliefs and expectations. Cinematic and television works could thus be seen as profoundly

human experiences, as organic and living elements, which grow, die and are reborn in a perpetual, creative and artistic movement that troubles us, forcing us to feel and think at the same time, while stepping out of our comfort zone in order to make sense of our very troubling world.

INDEX

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