



*XVIII MAGIS International Film and Media Studies Spring School*  
Gorizia (Italy), March 28<sup>th</sup>-31<sup>st</sup> 2020

## **Living in the Material World: Transdisciplinary Approaches to Past and Present Media Ecologies**

Since the late Sixties, the notion of “media ecology” has become a crucial part of the academic debate. Fostered by Neil Postman’s theories, media ecology has configured itself as a meta-theoretical ground on which the media are considered as technological environments, capable of shaping our senses and perception. Throughout the years, several insights on such topic have been developed, involving the interrelationships between technological networks, information, and communication (Altheide 1995; Nardi and O’Day 1999; Tacchi, Slater & Earn, 2003; Hearn & Foth, 2007); the notion of “media practice” within these networks (Mattoni 2017); the role of culture in their evolution (Gencarelli 2006; Strate 2008; Polski 2013); etc. We could say that new branches stemmed out from the methodological framework proposed by Postman, in which McLuhan’s legacy appears to be fundamental. Some of them stress the role of materiality in the construction of *Medienverbund* (Kittler, 1986), media environments and media cultures, others focus on the creation of power/knowledge networks (Parikka 2007, 2010, 2011, 2014): in all of them, every medium is considered as a complex system among other complex systems, with which it develops cultural and practical grids.

The entanglement between the concept of media ecology and the notion of network has become massively relevant for the European debate ever since Félix Guattari’s published his *Les Trois Écologies* (1989), “Postmodern Deadlock and Post-Media Transition” (1986), and “Entering the Post-Media Era” (2009): here, the media “ecologies” (plural!) are the material contexts in which the processes of subjectivity construction take place. This notion has been further elaborated by media theorists such as Matthew Fuller (2005) and Michael Goddard (2018), who stress the role of media assemblages, dispositives, and networks concerning the dynamics of subjectivity construction.

In our CFP we aim to explore the multi-faceted realm of past and present media ecologies in order to develop a transdisciplinary approach to their epistemological ground, which will be fostered by the five sections of our school (Cinema and Contemporary Arts, The Film and Media Heritage, Media Archaeology, Porn Studies, and Post-Cinema).

## **Cinema and Contemporary Arts – On the Edge of a New Dark Age-Media Ecology and Art Strategies**

In the modernist framework of technological enthusiasm and faith in progress, technology had been seen as one of crucial forces for society to evolve as it never had before. More recently, this utopian view has been flipped in its dystopian twin: since the 1990s, technological determinism has been the flipside of the coin of several conceptions of media ecologies and environments (particularly in reference to Marshall McLuhan’s and Neil Postman’s understanding of the term), moving the attention from the advantages to the consequences of technological progress in modernized societies. In this view, the so-called Age of Information could be seen as a paradoxical counterpart of the Age of Enlightenment as made visible by the Internet. Whereas, for a long time, it has been argued that putting

more information in people's hands would have inherently fostered their understanding of public issues and increased their participation in social life, the current technologically advanced societies have largely proved their incapability to provide a large and spread condition of equality, social justice and common good (Marx, Smith 1994).

In this view, the state of confusion which we live in, the increasing lack of political awareness, the concerns for the climate crisis, and the commercial exploitation of public spaces via the use of digital media, can be seen as some of the constitutive aspects underlying the current "technologically driven authoritarianism". As recently suggested by James Bridle's *New Dark Age*, acknowledging that the more we rely on the media-networked environment, the less we know its deep social and political implications calls for a critically aware response: developing a "systemic literacy" is the first step to go beyond the purely functional understanding of technology and "to understand the many ways in which technology itself hides its own agency – through opaque machines and inscrutable codes as well as physical distance and legal constructs" (Bridle 2018: 8). From a different standpoint, many theoretical orientations in humanities, visual culture studies and social sciences have investigated affectivity, focusing on the body and collective experience as oppositional tools to the technology-driven neoliberal modes of performativity. In the wake of the interest of feminist and queer theories for body and emotions, they focused on the "formative power" of affect "cast forward by its open-ended in-between-ness (...) integral to a body's perpetual becoming" (Gregg-Seigworth, 2010).

All of these considerations lead us to put into question how, in the current Information Society, knowledge flow through media and bodies and beyond representation. Instead of being taken for granted, while thinking at automated information as more reliable than our own experience ("automation bias") and progressively losing our ability to imagine a future, digital networks and platforms must be re-assessed and re-appropriated as tools to "rethink the world". In this vein, the Cinema and Contemporary Arts section's call for papers for the XVIII MAGIS Spring School aims at fostering the debate by gathering theoretical and practice-based reflections on how and by which "yardsticks" can we pinpoint new artistic strategies and tactics to reshape our approach to technology and actively redefine our position in the current media environment.

The Cinema and Contemporary Arts section will thus welcome proposals related (but not limited to) the following sub-topics:

- Artists, artworks and art movements concerned with the concept of media-ecology;
- The "new materialist energies" at work within contemporary arts (t.i. how art has critically addressed digital materialism);
- The political ecology of knowledge practices based on body and affectivity (Massoumi, 2002 : 255);
- Feminist and queer strategies at work against the technologies of governmentality; the queer utopian impulse (Muñoz, 2009);
- The strategic and tactical potential of art in de-commodifying time and the moving image;
- The production of urban and domestic space by digital media and how it affects the public sphere;
- Digital colonialism and post-colonialism.

### **The Film and Media Heritage – Historicizing Platforms: Sources and Streams**

Against the background of the increasing success of streaming as an everyday mode of film experience and the new platform economy (Dal Yong Jin, 2015; Marc Steinberg, 2019), the workshop discusses the history of dealing with film sources and materials in the last decades – from 16 and 35 mm copies to VHS, laser disc and DVD/Blu-ray to streaming platforms. The focus is on changes of the supposedly stable entity of "the film" under the influence of shifting technologies and practices. This

includes the materiality and appropriation of cinematic sources as well as the revision and making available of these.

These changes are not only worth considering with regard to coming into contact with films (going to the cinema and travelling to retrospectives compared to inserting a disc and going/staying online), but also to writing about/during films (vague memories from notes written in the dark compared to an analysis frame by frame and to the current applications and algorithms for indexing, annotations, etc.) and for a resulting canon formation. The development from film stock and copies to streaming platforms leads from the establishment of film as a moving image in public spaces and the artefacts of home cinema to – again – moving images (and sounds), which as computer-based streams are no longer bound to fixed screening locations. Hence, the changing mode of “film viewing outside of theatrical precincts” (Barbara Klinger, 2006) changes both: the mode of film experience and the source that makes this experience possible.

### **Media Archaeology – Ecologies of Perception**

Drawing on a media-ecological perspective, the focus of the 2020 edition of the Media Archaeology section will be on “ecologies of perception.” What Luciana Parisi ten years ago described as “technoecologies of sensation,” (2009) today has developed into a new form of rationality, one which is not only concerned with current environmentalist challenges, but that also opens up possibilities for reconsidering processes of “technocapitalist naturalization” (Massumi 2017). Ecology, from this point of view, signifies the need to rethink “the capacities of an environment, defined in terms of a multiplicity of interlayered milieus and localities, to become generative of emergent forms and patterns” (Parisi 2017). Today’s “general ecology,” Erich Hörl writes, “characterises being and thought under the technological condition of a cybernetic state of nature” (2017). Our section picks up on the suggestion that this expanding paradigm calls for new descriptions, including a rigorous historicization of sense-perception and sensation, as well as a reflection on their ethical and aesthetical implications. In a time when media increasingly operate at a micro-temporal scale “without any necessary – let alone any direct – connection to human sense perception and conscious awareness” (Hansen 2015), it opens up a horizon for asking “how to re-think or even reinvent media as a form of earth re-writing” (Starosielski/Walker 2016).

Our aim is to bring together papers on the following three, interrelated, topics:

First, the relation between media and communication technologies and social movements. “The media ecological framework is particularly suited for the study of the social movements/media nexus,” Treré-Mattoni (2015) has observed, “because of its ability to provide fine-tuned explorations of the multiplicity, the interconnections, the dynamic evolution of old and new media forms for social change.” From within this framework, we are keen to hear on investigations of various forms, or dispositifs, of subjectivation in the face of newly emerging social forces or social resistance.

Second, the role of media infrastructures in shaping our ways of perceiving the world. Today, we are increasingly thinking and living under conditions of an effective “programmability of planet earth.” (Gabrys 2016). We thus need to pay attention to the complex consequences of media becoming environmental and environments becoming mediated. From this point of view, action and resistance, as well as dynamic relations between human and non-human entities, need to be framed and shaped on a wider range of scale. Joanna Zylinska, in this context, for example, reclaims a “minimal ethics” for the Anthropocene: “swap the telescope for the microscope,” she writes. “It is a practical and conceptual device that allows us to climb up and down various spatiotemporal dimensions” (2014). We ask: what would a minimal ethics for an ecology of perception entail?

Third, the complex linkages between media as technology and environmental issues in more-than-human worlds, including “the concrete connections that media as technology has to resources [...] and nature” (Parikka 2013; 2016). Special focus will be dedicated to the capitalist “production of the obsolete” (Jucan 2016); “finite media” (Cubitt 2017); the effects or remains of what Parikka called the

“anthroscene”; and the question what a speculative ethics of “slow (media) violence” (Parikka) and “matters of care” (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017) might entail.

The Media Archaeology section welcomes proposals relating (but not limited) to the following sub-topics:

- Ecologies of perception;
- Media archaeological approaches to the concept of media ecology, its materiality and infrastructures;
- The role of media affordances in building a media ecology;
- The role of computational design;
- Critical considerations of (un)sustainable media;
- Obsolescence, and/or the reconstruction of the materiality of past media ecologies;
- The complex relations between media technologies, natural environments, and the multifaceted temporalities they entail;
- The role of dynamic instrumentalisation of nature in biotechnology, nanotechnology, information technology etc.;
- The nexus between media ecologies and social movements: interactions in a liquid production and fruition context;
- Tele-technologies for contemporary social movements (e.g. memes, meme-platforms, meme-generator, flashmobs, Anonymous operations etc.);
- Dispositifs of subjectivation;
- Speculative ethics, and matters of care;
- The “minimal ethics” for “more-than-human worlds”;
- The notion of “slow media violence” and “matters of care”;
- Geologic matter and bio-matter, deep times and deep places of media in mines and rare earth minerals.

### **Postcinema – Vulnerable Media**

The Postcinema Section invites contributions on the topic of Vulnerable Media. This conceptual framework wants to explore how current and emergent media technologies, distribution platforms, formats or artefacts negotiate affects between users and digital interactive interfaces, in particular, how such media hide or show, contain or generate forms of vulnerability.

An expanding infrastructure serves to manage our emotional experience by tracking, quantifying and supervising, or by shaping that experience through its interfaces, as we connect and share in affective spaces of social media. These media which maintain and nurture our “mediated intimacies” (Attwood, Hakim, Winch 2017) are at the same time vulnerable to engendering processes of physical and emotional disconnect. Arguably, these media formats and objects shape contemporary “structures of feeling” (Williams 1961) and relational emotions (Ahmed 2004) and help regulate affect in capitalist societies (Illouz 2007).

Such affective technologies extend beyond individual self-improvement, leading to intimacy as a governing concept in the relation between state and citizens. Vulnerable media here point to security gaps, hacks, and technologies that enable surveillance and manipulation through governments and companies such as Cambridge Analytica on a global scale, as well as socio-cultural issues, such as exploitation in e-sports or gamergate, comicgate etc.

From global tracking and surveillance, data collection scandals to powerful and proprietary algorithms, quasi-monopolist blackboxed platforms, progress on AI and machine learning systems, as well as data

collection lead to subjective feelings of vulnerability. These developments have also renewed discourses on what it means to be human: where does the ‘meatsuit’ end can consciousness be programmed?

In the realm of emergent media the future is tied to issues of instability, change and obsolescence. The race for novelty and technological innovation always entails an unending trajectory towards obsolescence. The speed of change in these practices reflects their inner fear of being “left behind”, paradoxically condemning emerging technologies to a permanent state of ephemerality. Such vulnerability is embodied, for example, by the so-called “impossible archives” (Fanfic archives & the Wayback Machine) which challenge normative understandings of memory and historicity, presenting us with issues of unstable preservation in light of “update or die” logic, “glitches”, “bugs” and “dying” media formats.

The Post-cinema section welcomes proposals on the following topics:

- Who is being made vulnerable: vloggers or creators (Lange 2007); YouTube or TikTok stars, users/viewers (Bridle 2017);
- Where and how is vulnerability manifested or hidden: in industrial features and vulnerable affordances; TikTok and surveillance (Allana 2019); vulnerable aesthetics; video games as “structures of feeling” (Anable 2018);
- The vulnerability of ‘failing’: YouTube-videos with zero views; video games as “the art of failure” (Juul 2013); old and forgotten media; creators managing channels with just a handful of views;
- The politics and ethics of “vulnerability:” cultural discourses and philosophical questions emerging from affect in new/digital: social networking service (SNS) between macrosocial control and microphysical rewriting of the self (Stella 2009); social media affect and democracy; covert media recordings, privacy and consent;
- The affect of vulnerable media: vulnerable ways of seeing, representation and self-representation; the digitization of bodies (see Brodesco and Giordano 2018); cybertypes and inequalities in the digital realm; digital divides; gamergate, comicgate;
- The vulnerability of digital technologies and ecology: media dependence on natural resources; vulnerable humanity and vulnerable earth (Cubitt 2017; Zylinska & Kember 2012); waste and preservation management of data;
- The vulnerable materiality of digital media: data storage and data centers; data infrastructure and exchange; digital carbon footprint energy.

## **Porn Studies – Pornographic subjectivities: Sexuality, Race, Class, Age, Dis/Ability**

The 2020 edition of the Porn Studies section of the MAGIS – International Film Studies Spring School aims to investigate pornography as a dispositive of subjectivation (Foucault 2001), that is as a complex and heterogeneous assemblage of technologies, institutions, discourses, practices, ideologies (Agamben 2009) able to create subjectivity through «a mixed economy of power and knowledge» (Rabinow and Rose 2003). The main goal of the section is therefore to understand what kind of subjects are produced by pornography and how they are constructed, with particular attention to the intersections between sexuality and race, class, age, dis/ability.

Drawing loosely on Jacques Derrida’s philosophical reflections, we could say that pornography-as-dispositive is informed by a carno-phallogocentric logic, that is by «the scheme that governs the production of the subject in Western culture» (1992). According to Derrida, this subject is produced by means of a process of exclusion (of other subjects) and through the construction of a structural Otherness. Pornography has always established complex and contradictory relations with this scheme. On the one hand, pornography (or, a specific kind of pornography) seems to reiterate (and reinforce) the logic of carno-phallogocentrism, in that it seems to create the quintessential «sovereign subject»: white, male, heterosexual, able-bodied, young, and (upper) middle-class. On the other, pornography

(or, another kind of pornography) seems to undermine the carno-phallogocentric scheme from the inside, deconstructing some of the central nodes on which it is based, building instead heterotopic spaces in which subjects seem to develop new and decentralized subject positions.

With this in mind, we invite proposals that explore, but are not restricted to, the following topics:

- Pornographic representations of race, class, age, dis/ability, present and past;
- Pornographic stereotypes about race, class, age, dis/ability and their «changing historical contexts» (Rosello 1998);
- «Marked bodies» (Holmes 2012) in pornography;
- Re-appropriation of representation by decentralized subjects;
- «Oppositional modes of production and perverse viewerships» beyond «the framework of visibility politics organized about the nexus of positive-negative images» (Nguyen 2014);
- Essentialist vs. constructivist readings of race, class, age, dis/ability and naturalization vs. denaturalization of difference in pornography;
- Fetishization of race, class, age, dis/ability in pornographic production;
- Industrial niches (such as, for instance, interracial, “chav porn”, granny porn, disability porn, etc.) and commodification of race, class, age, dis/ability within long-tail economy (Anderson 2004);
- Stars and performers, present and past (for example, Jeannie Pepper, Lexington Steele, Nina Hartley, Long Jeanne Silver, Brandon Lee, Asa Akira, etc.)
- Specialized films, film series, websites, platforms channels and categories on porn aggregators based on race, class, age, dis/ability.

**We invite you to send us proposals for papers or panels. The deadline for their submission is December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2019.**

**Every proposal must be addressed to a specific section of the Spring School.**

**Proposals should not exceed one page in length. Please make sure to attach a short CV (10 lines max). A registration fee (€ 150) will be applied. For more information, please contact us at [goriziafilmforum@gmail.com](mailto:goriziafilmforum@gmail.com).**