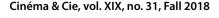# Format Matters. Theories, Histories, Practices

Organisers: Alexandra Schneider, Marek Jancovic & Nicole Braida
Johannes Gutenberg Universität, Mainz (December 7-12, 2017)

Three months after the conference *Vom Medium zum Format* held at the Ruhr-Universität Bochum, the Johannes Gutenberg Universität of Mainz made with its conference *Format Matters. Theories, Histories, Practices*, a renewed and extensive contribution to the interdisciplinary formation of a format theory.

The opening talk by Ramon Lobato on web advertising formalization left the audience nostalgic of the 1990s and early 2000s Internet, exploring banner-adds of all shapes, colours and sizes, alongside with pop-ups and auto-playing audios/videos. The proliferation of these elements, which were part of the everyday-experience of the web-surfer, was symptomatic of a 'fragmented and unregulated' media industry. Lobato showed how the actions of the Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB), whose mission is to 'clean up the adds', standardized the formats of the digital advertising, and made intrusive and invasive practices illegal. Here, the term 'format' mostly echoes procedures of 'standardization' and 'normalization' and is tied to institutional regulation and economic strategies. Taking up Sterne's invitation to study 'larger registers' of formats 'like infrastructures, international corporate consortia and whole technical systems',[1] Monika Dommann's talk tackled the emergence and the standardization of the global market in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, focusing on very specific agents of this process. One of her case studies was the freight bill. Analysing the format of the document, the format of the paper (its size and colour), the way it was folded and filled in (handwritten, printed or stamped), the way it framed the relation between the sender, the receiver and the carrier, Dommann showed to what extend the freight bill functioned as a format in itself, and how it contributed to the normalization and the regulation of transport operations and flows of goods. She demonstrated how the re-formation of the document accompanied the acceleration of goods and information exchanges. This idea echoes the argument made by Axel Volmar in his talk, that formats are not only the framing of information or the structuring of information (the appearance of media content), but also the (re)scaling of in-formation. The latter has to

---

[1] Jonathan Sterne, *MP3: The Meaning of a Format*, *Sign, Storage, Transmission* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), p. 11.

be understood as the growth or expansion, from media process to industry, of different media technologies and practices. It 'embodies the labour practices and workflows', and this is precisely what led Volmar to define format as 'media of cooperation'. Lori Emerson was interested in the structure of this 'cooperation', so to say. She understands format as the industrial or governmental production of standardized forms for media distribution and consumption. She used this rubric to include both hegemonic network such as the Internet and historically/materially alternative networks or infrastructure, such as Media Labs. Here, formats echo the protocols that rule standardized networks and infrastructures.

The notion of protocol brings us back to a more classical definition of format as 'what specifies the protocols by which a medium will operate'.[2] Protocols related to communication, computational and digital media refer to processes of data en/decoding, transmission and compression. Wanda Strauven traced back and forth a genealogy of the GIF (Graphic Interchange Format), purposely wrongly pronounced with a hard G instead of 'jif' thus cutting short the huge internet debate and saving the audience from any misunderstanding with peanut-butters and cream-cleaners. Her main interest was the technological characteristic of the GIF as a lossless data compression format, and particularly its properties of loop and transparency, which were broadly used and distorted by net-artists. Referring to the work — among others — of Olia Lialina and especially her Dancing Girl GIF (1998), Strauven suggested that a format exceeds its own properties. Quoting Jonathan Sterne, 'format denotes a whole range of decisions that affect the look, feel, experience and workings of a medium.'[3] The GIF study proposed by Strauven showed how a bitmap image format introduced more than thirty years ago challenges our understanding of format, container and medium.

Johannes Gfeller looked at early forms of electro-chemical transmission of moving images, starting with the Nipkow Disk system, which was patented by Paul Nipkow in 1884. The Nipkow system was based on a rotating 'scanning disk', which had a spiral of holes organised in circular lines. Behind the disk was photo-sensitive material, which reacted to the light passing through the disk. The light was converted to an electric signal and transmitted to a distant receiver, where the incoming information was decoded to reform the picture. Gfeller of course saw this technology as belonging to the genealogy of television, another key medium in the histories and theories of format, which had its own panel with Florian Hoof and Markus Stauff. While Hoof's presentation dealt with live broadcasting formats of sporting events, considering format as a relational concept to infrastructure, Stauff looked at the sports' highlight not only as a televisual form or genre, but as a cross-media format that structures the diffusion processes in specific ways. Sports highlights are the result of both the formatting of sports practices and the formatting of their modes of observation.

Moving to the medium of film, Oliver Fahle and Elisa Linseisen took up the

2 Ivi, p. 8.
3 Ivi, p. 7.

concept of format, and its definition by David Joselit as 'dynamic mechanism for aggregating content',[4] as a chance to re-think film historiography. Building on the case of the 2011 8K restored version of *Ben-Hur* (William Wyler, 1959), which integrates the material specificities of the original 65mm print, its scratches and fuzziness, Fahle and Linseisen identified a paradox. Format-specifications make it hard to understand cinema as a solid entity, but at the same time it is possible to identify cinema through its format varieties. 'The more film destabilizes itself as a medium through redefinition and flexibility in terms of format, the more it stabilizes itself.' This paradox leads them to elaborate on two contrary tendencies in film historiography. On the one hand, the need for film of historical persistence, and on the other the historical resistance of the format. These reflexions are linked to an ongoing research project initiated back in 2013 by Antonio Somaini and Francesco Casetti with their article 'The conflict between high definition and low definition in contemporary cinema',[5] and the international conference they organized the same year *High and Low Definition: Images, Sounds, Scenes, Media*. The forthcoming issue of the journal NECSUS on 'Resolutions' (also edited by Somaini and Casetti) will also expand the discussion about this 'double contrasting tendency: on the one hand a drive towards higher and higher degrees of definition and resolution of digital images, cameras and screens, and on the other the wide circulation of images in low definition and resolution, images that are blurred, grainy, pixelated and degraded in different ways'.[6]

The last panel with Jennifer Horne and Kalani Michell concluded the conference with reflexive and introspective discussions on formats within Universities and academic institutions and practices. Horne tackled the University Library (at least in the American context of academia) and argued for a radical rethinking and reformatting of these 'agents of modern university'. In the context of the digital turn, she fears that the library 'no longer sees legacies formats as part its future', while access to all formats for teaching and researching is central to 'our collective critical freedom'. Kalani Michell closed the conference with a presentation on the monthly podcast Aca-Media, sponsored by *Cinema Journal*, the official journal of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS). The podcast was a response to the desire of expanding *Cinema Journal*, of opening it up to new formats. This transition from one medial form to another is also symptomatic of a discipline in transition (not to say in crisis). Recently SCMS members were invited to discuss about changing the name of the organisation's journal. Even though the name has indeed been changed for *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* (JCMS), in January 2018, at the time of the conference in December 2017 the discussion

[4] David Joselit, *After Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), p. 55.
[5] Francesco Casetti and Antonio Somaini, 'The Conflict between High Definition and Low Definition in Contemporary Cinema', *Convergence*, 19, 4 (November 1, 2013), pp. 415–22.
[6] Antonio Somaini and Francesco Casetti, 'NECSUS Spring 2018 #Resolution', [Call for Contributions], *NECSUS*, (2017) <https://necsus-ejms.org/necsus-spring-2018_resolution/> [accessed 4 July 2017].

did not reach any consensus and was actually, Michell argued, overwhelmed by a certain frustration — the one of a disconnection 'between the organization, its journal, the efforts to expand its publication and its diverse body of members'.

As pointed out by Marek Jancovic in the introduction of the conference, looking at media culture through media formats open up an almost infinite number of 'engaging, provocative and fruitful questions with both historical value and contemporary urgency'. Hopefully, these questions will expand to the one of academia formats, and generate a discussion and rethinking of the way humanities build, formalize, display, transmit knowledge.

[Antoine Prévost-Balga, Goethe Universität Frankfurt-am-Main]