On #Method: A roundtable with the NECSUS editorial board

Abstract

In October 2020 the editorial board of *NECSUS* held an online roundtable discussion to address the special section topic #Method. The initial prompt came from an editorial written by board member Toni Pape. What follows is an edited transcript of the recording of the online roundtable on this topic.

In October 2020 the editorial board of *NECSUS* held an online roundtable discussion to address the special section topic #Method. The initial prompt came from an editorial written by board member Toni Pape, published here as an introduction to the special section, and which raised a number of provocative points that the rest of the board wanted to explore in a deeper fashion. Given the prevailing working methods in the pandemic era, in which a multitude of meetings and public programs are organised in the form of interactive video conferences, the board thought to make use of this means for the ultimate purposes of recording and then adapting into written text a freeform dissection of the topic #Method.

It should be noted that this recording was made after the special section call for papers was disseminated but before the special section lineup had been finalised and the articles delivered. As such, in many ways, this discussion is a snapshot of thoughts in motion in the editorial process of constituting this special section. Many questions are raised in this discussion, and the articles assembled in this special section sometimes offer answers and other times raise even more considerations. Method, and a full accounting of its

aesthetics and politics, is a moving target, certainly in the heterogenous discipline of media studies. The following is an edited transcript of the recording of our online roundtable on this topic.

Francesco Pitassio: Method certainly refers to a way of moulding and making sense of our experience. Or, to put it differently, by creating chains of operations, method extracts abstract patterns out of the fluid matter. In fact, if methods are ways of doing (or ways of seeing), they do so by coining new ways of making meaning and ordering reality. Methodologies are recipes for replicating these patterns into operations, and accordingly undergo the risk of reifying experience itself, or referring to the same objects time and again, for certain chains of operations work only within the field of the same question, which method founded and explored. But is it really so? Or, is it always so? I believe we are facing here an aporia, which we recurrently meet within the humanities. I would therefore like to address it through an example, and deal afterwards with alternative, positive examples of the fruitfulness of methodology, provided that they do not depend on method, but are open to transformation.

At a conference memorialising Roland Barthes, which took place in Reggio Emilia, Italy, Umberto Eco opposed the two key figures of semiotics back then, i.e. Barthes himself and Algirdas Julien Greimas. To make a long story short, Eco played Barthes as the champion of idiosyncrasy, stressing the individual experience of texts and pulling out of said experience taxonomies and categories, which, alas, very often could not be replicated on a large scale. Barthes epitomised the outstanding reader, who could not be imitated, but just at a less perspicuous level. Greimas, conversely, was the founder of methodology, the scholar who, by building on the rigorous corpus of semantics, conceived of an all-encompassing way of explaining the narrative scheme underlying every symbolic operation. However, the risk of Greimas was to generate series of epigons, scholars who simply applied the same scheme to everything, while doing away with the crucial issue: can we think of alternative modes of doing, or find objects which resist this methodology and require entirely new ones?

Within humanities at large there are practices which originate in specific objects and call for no less particular methodologies. To briefly name two, philology and archival studies demand chains of operations, but also replicable protocols safeguarding the objects and enabling their interpretation and transmission to the ensuing generations. Both philology and archival studies

have been incorporated into media studies, with the purpose of reconstructing the chains of creation of texts, within one medium or across more media; or of preserving and restoring media heritage. They require recipes to attend to their tasks, but within a media and cultural ecology which is ever-shifting, because of technological, economic, cultural, and media developments. I believe these approaches might prospectively grant the balance between method and methodology, both in teaching and in research, and build a robust bridge between academia and the world of cultural production, by protecting our heritage, transferring knowledge, and establishing a media ecology partly without the chain of value.

Toni Pape: I actually studied philology as well, up to my MA degree. Many of us seem to come out of very traditional humanities programs and I like that. There is something really important in the work that 'old school' humanities does. What I have seen happen to the humanities and particularly from the perspective of media studies, as I shifted over to that from literature, is a real shift also towards a different kind of thinking with a tendency toward positivist knowledge production. While I am always interested in new perspectives, I can also tell that certain kinds of research are less valued in what has really become a research market. I guess that is what is hard for me. How do you believe in the work that you do, in the kind of thinking that you want to do, when all around you the signs indicate that precisely that kind of work is of little value to the institution?

Francesco Pitassio: To very briefly follow up on what Toni said, because in my view there are a number of funding bodies aimed at the humanities. Just to name one, the ERC considers creating new ways of looking which I think are pathbreaking but very often do away with traditional ways of looking at things and relying on, say, verifiable chains of operations, which might be innovative but nonetheless are for the time being quite consistent and tested. I was wondering if in media studies – this does not refer for instance to other fields of studies within the humanities – we somehow have within our DNA the idea of always being at the boundaries of the humanities and to push the field forward, but with the risk of forgetting a corpus of knowledge which make our work reliable in terms of objects and methods.

Belén Vidal: Just to say that in thinking of Barthes as quoted in your response, Francesco, it brought to mind the deeply bewildering experience that is for any student to approach *S/Z* for the first time. When you are placing Barthes into this revolution of semiotics, he becomes a kind of tool that in a way is impossible to use and at the same time opens up a series of possibilities

that seem endless. The deep ambiguity of method in Barthes, which has persisted over decades (meaning that his work has been read through everything from scientific method to a range of poetic readings) kind of confirms that we are in open waters when we talk about method and methodology. But it also makes me think about Toni's text, which is again very philosophical, it is utopian even. What lies in the margins of it, because of the way we are falling on the side of one particular method or another? I mean, we want to believe method cannot be dictated by the object, by the problem we are approaching, but more often than not method is dictated by the context in which we connect something in that object.

My response to Toni's text was about the need of thinking about film and media objects more specifically as well, and about the politics of methods. My own response to this has to do with the politics of locating film within disciplinary confines and its designated spaces in academia, because if we are thinking about methodological maps we find a different map if we think about the history of film and media in Anglo-American academia and the histories of film and media in an academic context in Europe. It is a reductive binary but these are the contexts I know best. I am thinking about a question that is also raised by you, Francesco: how are film and media used in studying art history, history, social sciences, and the humanities? The particular claims and the stakes in the objects, which are often substantiated throughout what Toni's text discusses, is the immanence of method. Also thinking about the way the problems have shifted today, namely pushing film and media towards philosophy, the digital humanities, even the cognitive sciences, with the problems of specialism this push raises. Where do you start your research on film and media from the perspective of the cognitive sciences if you are not versed in that set of tools of particular methods that build up towards advanced research – if you actually come from the humanities but are interested in those kinds of problems? Basically within the philosophy of method we find between the lines the problems of the politics of method.

Martine Beugnet: I wonder if the discussion should be more closely related to what *NECSUS* as a journal of media studies is doing. The examples that Toni brought up in discussing method and methodologies were taken primarily from textual and reading methods. So I would like to try and reframe some of the arguments in relation to our field more specifically, which brings up two issues for me: one has to do with history and historicism, and the other with the upholding or not of the distance and the distinction between the method and its object.

In relation, for instance, with the history of the arts, I think media studies has had, and still has, a chip on its shoulder because it is a relatively new field. Hence the temptation to borrow or adopt theoretical and methodological models elsewhere: literature, psychoanalysis, philosophy, anthropology, etc. We have all studied texts from the 1980s for instance, that closely tailor their method to a psychoanalytical model. In the 1990s, it appeared important to reconnect the method with the object. Hence, the rise of film phenomenology, for instance, or, more generally, the refocus on the principle that we can think with or in images and sounds, a principle we appeared to have kind of lost for a while, or so it seemed. At the same time, as Francesco observed, methods should allow us to go from the particular object to something that we can reiterate to other objects. In the case of film and media studies, what does it mean with regards to close analysis, or to the video essay for instance? It brings back to mind recent discussions that we have had around the video essay as a method or as a methodology, and the idea that there could be such a thing as an academic versus a non-academic approach to the audiovisual essay section in *NECSUS*.

But to conclude on a slightly different point and to go back to what Belén was saying, I do wonder about the question of rules and counter-rules. Your reference to archives at the beginning, Toni, is thought-provoking, though reading the brief dialogue you cited, I am mindful of its father-daughter structure which is very traditional. I am wondering, bringing it back to our field, what happens, as we see it happening today, when museums for instance start adopting the strategies of galleries – where temporary exhibitions become the main thing and the permanent exhibitions are fading into nothingness. Simply put, if we disregard the original narrative or method, and I am not saying that I know the response, can we create alternative methods? I think we need to keep in mind that methods and methodologies have a history. In order to advance we may need a foil, something to bounce against. Anyway, I think that, without establishing binaries, the conversation about the historicity of methods and methodologies needs to happen as well.

Malte Hagener: Starting off from Toni's piece and relating it to the distinction that Francesco borrowed from Umberto Eco, I would see you more rearing towards the Barthes side in what you were proposing. I completely understand that and there are a lot of important aspects to that, and I see myself in this tradition as well. But, for the sake of argument, I want to ask the question: what happens if we go too strongly towards that side? In a way I want to argue for a kind of middle ground. One thing I believe is that, and

this is what Barthes was doing in his later work, there is a method, but a method that is maybe more implicit than explicit. I would say one of the dangers of the implicitness of method is that it also can become a tool of power and hegemony, by who is able to use language in a certain way, who is able to play deconstructive games with terms, who has that cultural knowledge and so on. Toni, I am neither thinking that you nor Roland Barthes is doing that, but I also feel that sometimes there is a certain power to the position of saying, 'Oh, I do not need a method, I am beyond that.' You have to be able to talk from a specific position to be able to claim that for yourself. There would be two arguments implied in that, one would be that you cannot be without method, basically whatever you are doing. You can try to invent new methods all the time but even then there has to be some logic to what you are doing, otherwise it would be non-communicable. There is always a method to any kind of madness. The other argument would be, and that is of course the problematic side of method, that it is always tainted with power, with hegemony. Who can decide what is a proper method? What is not a proper method? This judgement speaks from a position of power.

In a way I think we have to go in both directions at once, so we have to, on the one hand, take up the challenge that the digital throws us with more data, more algorithmic potentiality and using that. At the same time we also have to go against it and think about the dangers. If we only follow one path we always fall in a trap. So if we say, 'Let's just do whatever', without thinking about what we are doing, we are becoming very positivist, and this is against what our discipline stands for. In a way, even though middle ground normally sounds quite boring and ordinary, there can also be a radicality in trying to be on both sides at the same time.

Skadi Loist: I would like to start by saying that I come to this conversation informed by the debate on method as it is unfolding currently within German media studies and specifically in the *Zeitschrift für Medienwissenschaft*. I will draw on a few references there, because Toni's piece also mentioned this in passing, with reference to Erhardt Schüttpelz.[1] This brings me to the first point and one that is maybe a reframing – or using different keywords than what Malte has already said – about situatedness and positionality, which I think are important. We need to think of how to situate ourselves and our research. I read Toni's piece as a text that speaks of humanities at large and drawing on arguments coming specifically from philosophy. It does not seem situated within the work of media studies or speaking of concrete meth-

ods. We are speaking about method all the time, but which particular methods are we actually talking about? Toni'spiece speaks of institutional coercion, imposition, suspicion, and I agree that this might be a result of neoliberalisation and funding issues. However, I do not see why being asked to explicate one's method, i.e. how we do things or one's way of doing, is taking away either freedom or creativity. In my mind, it does not mean a cause for standardisation or an adherence to one specific method. One example is that you speak of reading as a method, and I tried to follow this analogy. We noted in the beginning that you come from philology, and I do too. As part of my American studies training, I have been trained in linguistics as well. Two questions about that: is that a method or is that an operation? Is this not a basic trait of all science? What is the difference between reading in humanities and in media studies? I guess there is one, but we have to explicate what that difference is. What are the denotations, connotations, what is interpretation? I don't want to rehearse the whole cultural studies debate about reading, but what kind of reading are we then invoking? Alternate reading, dominant reading, queer reading? There we can talk about methods, I think.

Another point you mention is how to frame arguments. Again, I totally agree with the larger point, but how do we do this practically? What kind of arguments? How are they constructed? I think that would be a method that we can explicate, but you have not done that, at least not explicitly. Instead I read 'the fear of similarity' and suspect that here, secretly, method seems to mean empirical quantitative method. This is a typical debate familiar from the German discussion which traditionally delineates communication studies and social sciences-based methods from humanities. That seems to be the ghost we are fighting without naming. Instead, and that is exactly what Malte says, it seems to unwittingly speak from a position of assumed privilege, where we do not need to explain. It is rendering the context invisible, the relationship of subject and object, lessons that we have learned long ago from feminist, queer, and decolonial studies and theory. Following on from this, I'd like to issue a call for interdisciplinarity, to use different vantage points and different expertise. We do not all need to have the same method and the same point of view.

I would like to urge you to come to the discussion of concrete methods and ways of doing and what that is in film and media studies, and from what object and what perspective.

Francesco Pitassio: I want to briefly clarify one point: philology and archival studies, they were two possible examples obviously among the many,

but they are not exclusively or mainly reading-based methodologies or methods, they are much more related to the material life of media. They have to do with transferring texts and devices as materials more than as interpretations. Interpretations should come after. But first you have to relate to the material life of the devices and of the text that these devices generate. And for this very reason they are not confined within the boundaries of academic studies but offer a chance to cooperate with areas that are outside of academia. So for this very reason I think they create an object, but the object itself shifts, as Malte said, and therefore methodologies are evolving themselves in as much as the method and the object do change across time. In this respect the interdisciplinarity that Skadi has advocated is also a good starting point. Interdisciplinarity means to put methods in dialogue and therefore to innovate with them, but it means also to confront with fields that are without our specific area of expertise. Just to conclude, I think Martine really hits the nail on the head when saying media studies do not have a proper history as much as art history or literature. This is what I wanted to stress beforehand when saying that in some ways we are destined to create permanently new methods because our objects are ever-changing under our own eyes. At the same time, we should not forget that we also have a history behind us.

Toni Pape: I agree, Francesco. It also reminds me of what Malte says about hegemony in the sense that yes, not explicating your method can be a hegemonic move. Then again, making explicit the method and continuously making explicit new methods is also a hegemonic move that organises research funding. So I completely agree that there we have to have a balance and I think that I'm taking a middle ground in the piece I wrote. Skadi, I don't consider the problem to be empirical and quantitative methods as such, although I do observe a shift toward the quantitative methods. But even in the broad field of cultural studies, there are so many papers that analyse an 'object' to confirm the theoretical framework posited at the beginning. Think of the paper abstracts we receive that, in our view, present 'foregone conclusions', where it's already clear what the research outcome will be because the research design makes it clear that the main purpose of studying a given research object is to confirm the theoretical approach chosen to study that object. So my concern regarding the unproductive reproduction of methods is more general.

Greg de Cuir Jr: I would love to discuss more this idea of power, which I think is the consequential topic of the current moment, also because a lot of us I imagine would consider ourselves anti-hegemonic. The way knowledge

is produced, and even knowledge itself, or certain types of knowledge coming from certain domains, is currently under assault. And these assaults are coming from all sides of the political spectrum. Perhaps there can be some latent radicality worth harvesting in the middle ground, as Malte proposed. But also, in these charged times we inhabit, the middle ground takes a lot of crossfire. It does not seem a particularly safe space to stand.

Belén Vidal: Yes, and I am interested in the whole question of the middle ground, Malte. Can we define this a little bit more? I was struck by what you said about the implicitness of method as a tool of power and hegemony. It seems like a throwback to the grand theory-moment, when theory and deconstruction philosophies emerged precisely in order to counteract hegemony. Undoing hegemony, in a way, installed a new hegemony of sorts. When you mention the middle ground I could not help being reminded of David Bordwell's advocacy of research programs invested in the materiality and aesthetics of the object.[2] But such ground-up programs of research need to marshall very large resources, if they are to be applied consistently. The idea is: our method should be dictated by the material specificity of the object, but this kind of 'middle ground' also may become very politicised.

Malte Hagener: Bordwell used the term 'mid-level research'. He basically suggested that we should not just look at individual films and we should also not just ask about power and society, but we should talk about groups of films. Leaving this debate aside, I think we are in a different scenario here. I would see my call for a middle ground differently; this is why I added 'radical' to middle ground, because it is trying to move in both directions at once. So we need to address the big questions. We still need to ask about power and hegemony, how our culture is bound up with certain images and narratives and aesthetics. We need that, but at the same time we need to take the data deluge into account because so much data is so easily available these days, that has changed from that moment around 1990, when that debate happened. The way we employ this data should be reflexive and critical. If we do not deal with the possibilities opened up by data, and this is an argument at the same time very pragmatic and political, somebody else will do it and will make a terrible job out of it. But a lot of people might listen to them. That is why I feel we also have the obligation to take on the challenges that the digital offers to us by pushing so much data our way. At the same time, there is this shift towards market orientation which often implicitly attaches itself to such digital projects. That is very problematic. Referring to the same debate from the German journal of media studies that Skadi mentioned, I want to quote Birgit

Schneider, who referred to the humanities as a 'question department', not an answer department.[3] It is very important that our job is not to provide answers to any question you can ask but rather provide questions that people did not even ask before. For that we also need to engage with the new situation and the data, but without the fantasy of solving many questions algorithmically.

Martine Beugnet: One of the things we noticed in the department when we looked at who manages to get funding, through an ERC for instance, and who does not, is that in our field, visual studies, the trend is towards adopting scientific methods, data-based or material-based methods, in order to get the funding. What they are looking for, because such institutions are distributing money and they want exploitable returns, are projects that have an objective, the method that goes with it, and that demonstrate they will fulfill the objective.

If you research an archive, the method is, as we were reminded before, material as well as intellectual. You can say: 'There is this archive. I am going to go through the files and in the end I will be able to tell you what is in it and give you tools to navigate and exploit it.' Projects that are not based on archival or sociological methods are normally rejected because the objectives cannot be demonstrated as finite and the 'impact' may not be fully identifiable. So the question is what the method is for or in what way in the humanities, and most particularly film and media studies, a corresponding objective can be defined. Of course we can say that we just do not apply to the ERC or other funding programs of the kind because it is not suited for us. But the problem at the moment, politically, is that we are increasingly asked to get our funding there, and therefore to tailor our methods and our objectives accordingly.

Belén Vidal: This brings back to mind the question of the meta. Just to say the problem is what happens when you have a project that is not discovering anything new in the archive. The archive has been taxonomically catalogued, it has been described. What I want to criticise is the reading that has been produced out of that archive and that in a way this is the knowledge that you are going to extract. The problem is, is the knowledge transferable? Is the knowledge teachable? Is the knowledge applicable? We are always going in circles about how to perform the functions that we think are precisely the most valuable in our discipline, but to defend them in the broader ecosystem of funding where all disciplines are expected to compete in a way through an equality of methods.

Skadi Loist: What Martine just said, and one thing that has been set up in Toni's piece, is this discussion about funding structures and the kind of logic with which methods are evaluated. I agree with that, but I am not sure that should or can be held against method, right? To me that is a different argument. It is about institutions, about funding, about a certain type of economic value so to speak, which I also dislike. At the same time it is a reality. But on a somewhat, if not completely different, level to me the key discussion is what method is and should do for us. For instance, my German colleagues constantly question whether I do media or film studies, when I work with gender and queer studies, or ethnographic methods or interviews, so many times I hear: 'Oh, that is very sociological!', or 'Is this film studies?' A couple of years ago, I was awarded a grant within a scheme for 'small disciplines',[4] of which film studies is considered one, researching the circulation of films on the international film festival network,[5] a topic that given its positioning at the cross-section of film festival research, media industries studies, and digital humanities methods would be considered marginal within film and media studies a few years ago. But to me that was a bit of a victory to be able to say yes, this is also film studies.

Another topic that I would like to come back to again is positionality. Really, the relationship between object and subject of what we are researching. Also, what kind of access do we have, what kind of proximity is there, what kind of relationship to the object is there? That fundamentally impacts what we can learn about it. Coming from film festival studies there are so many ways to access that.[6] We have been talking about the archive: what is inside and especially what is not? We have been talking about data. Malte said there is an abundance of data that we should use. When I look at my digital humanities project I deal with data that is *not* there or available, that I need to create. Another thing is, what kind of access you have when you do industry research. Are you a participant observer, or an insider? Do you know the people? That fundamentally changes what kind of questions you can ask and what kind of answers you will get. Those issues are important to me, and I think that when we know how to deal with these methodological questions it can also be explained to funders. Maybe that is too pragmatic but that is my hope in a way.

Martine Beugnet: I totally agree with you. Still, the problem in funding is that we are asked to align methods with objectives. My point was that not only do different methods arrive at different objectives but that certain

methods are open-ended. They will not yield a quantifiable, a-priori objective. But I agree with you that positionality, where we are and what the distance is with the object, those are key aspects of how we will discuss method.

Toni Pape: I appreciate how you connect the idea of positionality to the question about subjects and objects. In my research, I always try to be in the object, so to speak. I want to explore how a film, a television series, or a video game thinks and what kind of thinking that affords me. For me, this is also a way of positioning research. In such research, method is perhaps not always explicitly positioned, but it is thoroughly situated. To briefly link this to Martine's suggestion that the video essay is the method that we have to move forward on, that made me think of *What is philosophy?* by Deleuze and Guattari and how that book distinguishes between different modes of thought: the sciences think in terms of functions, the arts think in terms of percepts, and philosophy thinks in terms of concepts. Personally, I appreciate that distinction because it helps me clarify that I'm indeed primarily invested in conceptual thinking. Of course, my concepts want to engage with the percepts of media art. I want concepts and percepts to encounter one another to see what new ideas those encounters can generate. That is also a way of situating thought and knowledge.

Greg de Cuir Jr: We talked a lot about funding bodies and this pressure for grants. What does method mean to people who do not know anything about our methods, maybe even anything about our field, right? That seems to be the major concern. In terms of journal publishing and journal editing, we are all editors and obviously journals are an important part of this funding chain. What do you do with the research after it is completed? I wonder if we can talk about method in relationship to journals, particularly ours? Certainly the audiovisual essay will play a role in this. How do we feel about method when we are looking at and evaluating abstract submissions and first drafts and final drafts? Toni, I am thinking specifically of a wonderful point that you wrote in your essay. You cited a colleague, or maybe it was a professor of yours, who mentioned to you: 'I am not interested in whether I agree with the paper or not. I am interested in whether the author agrees with him or herself.' I loved that. Maybe now we can talk about our work as journal editors. Are we stewards of some sort of method?

Malte Hagener: But we have not really talked about how we understand method so far. Toni compared method to cooking, an analogy I like. I sometimes feel that those who are arguing against method take method as a sort of algorithm. There is a very prescribed series of steps that you have to follow

to arrive at a certain result. Then of course method is a hugely problematic thing for us if there is no variation in a way in engaging with your object. I would agree with Toni that the object also influences the method, and in a way talks back to you. But I think method is rather an overarching set of rules that do not have to be applied in a very strict sense but that are more loose sets of directions. It is not like a written set of rules. That is important.

Francesco Pitassio: I think the issue which Toni first and then Greg again raised is crucial and it has to do with consistency, which has to do with a chain of operations. Therefore, in terms of writing, what is crucial is how you line up concepts that do resonate with one another and enable the writer and the reader to achieve a certain understanding; whereas when these concepts are not properly lined up, thinking and knowledge collapse. Another thing which is quite specific to a certain European intellectual tradition and maybe not so much to the English-based way of producing knowledge and conceptualising is how much the way of writing creates percepts. In this respect, 'What is Philosophy?' by Deleuze & Guattari in my opinion hiddenly hints at a very specific thing: the way you mold the concepts is the way you create them perceptually, how they perform the reader. The style of writing is something that we very often tend to downplay. That is something which is getting lost in this aping of hard sciences. Journal and book writing aims at a certain functionality of writing, which unfortunately has no place when you are writing in the humanities.

Toni Pape: I really like that. The same editor or mentor who said that authors have to agree with themselves [see 'Method Unchained'] also spoke in terms of being a secondary or primary writer. One of the trends one can also observe in recent years is that we make ourselves secondary writers. We explain a primary object, a film or a director. To stick with the Deleuze example for a moment, in his *Cinema* books, he really engaged with film to develop his own thinking about it. It is a primary work. It is not just explaining films, it is creating this framework for thinking about cinema as a whole. There are many other thinkers who also do that, of course. And I will just bravely say that I want to be a primary writer and that I want to publish more primary writers who do not only explain to me what this and that film meant or which importance it has but who develop their own way of thinking. This is what I am looking for as an editor and it does require a very different way of writing which is also aesthetic, which has *style*. So Francesco's point is well taken: one cannot so easily distinguish between percept and concept as I did earlier.

As I say in 'Method Unchained', I consider that developing a sound method requires building a consistent theoretical framework, analysing complex phenomena, and building a cogent argument around that analysis. As an editor, I look for these things and whether they are done in a way that is consistent within themselves, in a way that makes them consistent with each other. That for me would be the imminent aspect of method that I am looking for in a general way.

Francesco Pitassio: Your essay is a very good meeting point between a certain way of unpacking or deconstructing an aesthetic object and recreating it through a series of concepts that nevertheless have a perceptual value.

Belén Vidal: I wanted to respond, Toni, to what you just said about us being primary or secondary writers. At the moment, I am trying to manage a very large project in which on the one hand I feel like I am drowning in contextualisation and on the other I think this is necessary in order to move on to the stage of more primary writing of a different kind. This tension, which is maybe shared by others, also makes me think about what objects require that kind of legitimacy which allows them to become central objects within that kind of primary writing. What objects in our discipline seem to have been pushed to a peripheral position that always requires explaining, translating, contextualising before you can even progress to that level.

The Deleuze cinema project is a good example. One of the things it has been criticised for is its canonical nature. How do you create this other alternative film history? Thinking about the video essay, recently there was a wonderful online event with Laura Mulvey presenting her latest book (*Afterimages: On Cinema, Women and Changing Times*). The first part of the discussion included a video essay by Catherine Grant on *Vertigo*.[7] *Vertigo* is an object that does not need any more explanation or secondary writing, it kind of allows one to launch into this kind of original primary thinking about method because it is so much the center. What happens if you have another object that is not shared by the audience and therefore is put in this position of having to explain itself . Going back to the question of hegemony and the politics of method, this is something that worries me deeply.

Skadi Loist: I completely agree, and I would add that this does not only relate to the object of research but also the subject doing the research and the writing. Who has the position to say I want to be a primary author and then be read as one?

Belén Vidal: Yes, exactly.

Toni Pape: I think we all should have the right to do that and claim that space. That is what I want to do with my essay, and for the community. This is a matter of whiteness and of course also male privilege. But we have to open up those spaces and we have to mean it. To me, the problem is precisely that, when we consider media that are not canonical or non-Western, we expect that they be explained to us before we can acknowledge them as works of art that think in their own right. Of course, films by African directors can be encountered in the same way in which we are prepared to encounter European auteurs. So we may want to question that step of additional mediation which is a scholarly way of expecting explanation before a real intellectual and aesthetic encounter is possible.

Belén Vidal: Yes, and just being relegated as a subject of that research to a position of native informant somehow, if you are also moving between cultures and between epistemologies.

Greg de Cuir Jr: I appreciate the way the conversation is going, since we raised the prospect of decolonial aesthetics and concerns, and also since we raised the continent Africa. I wonder if I can throw out a quotation to provoke you all. It is something that I wanted to include in the original call for papers for the special section but I was not able to fit it in there: Frantz Fanon, who wrote that at a certain point methods devour themselves. How do we all feel about that?

Malte Hagener: I would like to bring up again the notion of consistency, that I think Francesco mentioned, and the relation of theory and method, that Toni also wrote about in his piece. In a certain way I think that is at least one important question I would ask as an editor of a text – if it is conscious of how it translates theory into method and back again. It is a back and forth between theory and method, there is no method without theory and vice versa. In a way what Greg was saying in the Fanon quote is that at a certain point theories and methods become kind of repetitive and tend to bring out the same thing over and over again. They devour themselves. I am thinking of these big analyses of the 1970s which I really love, for example the *Cahiers du cinema* discussion of *Young Mr. Lincoln*,[8] but at a certain point they just went crazy and it got longer and longer, but it was not really making a point anymore because the point that was so important in the beginning had already been made. I would say that novelty can be problematic, because it is a very capitalistic notion of having to always invent new things. At the same time, if you want to gain new perspectives you have to think about new theories and new methods too. In a way, if we just remain where we are and use

the same methods on different objects it also becomes very stale. So again I would say we have to go down both lanes at the same time probably. Maybe there are other ways of understanding Fanon, too.

Belén Vidal: Malte, your citing of the *Cahiers du cinema*-ideology critique reminds me of the experience which I have faced teaching 'Cinema / ideology / criticism'[9] to first-year students. I was saying, 'Look, it is very clear about its methods. Setting up these categories, setting up these kinds of binaries. Let's play with that!' And I used to grow desperate in the classroom because it is self-evident but still ungraspable to students new to this language of criticism, and then everything is thrown into question and you realise the necessity of reconstructing the historical context of that pure moment of theory for them to understand the positionality of the intervention and engage with it.

Malte Hagener: Just very briefly. For them I would say it is so historically distant that it is new again and radical again. Whereas in the early 1980s it was tried so many times over.

Belén Vidal: Now it is such an exotic object. It is new and radical but at the same time completely baffling.

Malte Hagener: In the first year lecture I usually talk about *Bringing up Baby*, and I do it very traditionally, but in the end I normally take off and talk about the (missing) bone and the boner, the phallus, and the different animals in such a poststructuralist fashion. When I stop they are probably thinking, 'Oh my God! What is this all about?' But I think you need these kinds of provocations sometimes.

Francesco Pitassio: You do that as well? Because I am always teaching *Bringing up Baby*! I had it in my syllabus this year. So we have a method here.

Martine Beugnet: I would like to go back to what Toni was saying about primary and secondary writing. I wonder if there is such a definite divide and if in the end the 'secondary' writing is not constantly filling the primary writing. I am thinking in terms of my experience of 'big', founding texts. Big names, usually philosophers, who have not started from film studies but who come with 'big' concepts about what cinema or media is. You read the text, the concept is wonderful, the idea is really thought-provoking, and that is where 'primary' research and writing is really precious. At the same time, you get into the detail and you think, 'But you don't know what a shot/counter-shot is, do you? You have not really understood what an eyeline match is. You are basing your whole discussion on this, but you have misunderstood how the cut works, and how it was shot, and the fact that shots are sutured but

these two people might have been filmed on different days, and so on.' I have in mind a classic text by Derrida, but it could be a number of other texts. I think the secondary reading constantly needs to feed into those primary texts as well, problematising them. Otherwise that gap in method widens.

Greg de Cuir Jr: That is a very important point that Martine brings up in terms of the primary-secondary divide. When we get to these big philosophers, these big primary people, to follow you, Toni, who are normally a certain type of person coming from a certain type of place, they often feel the liberty to take film or the object as either a method or a route to their method in a way that maybe film studies scholars or media studies scholars cannot necessarily take other disciplines and objects. So I guess we are back to the issue of power, also to follow Malte. That is also intriguing, this idea that film is after all only film, that everybody can understand it, everybody can use it. That this is not really a rigorous field of inquiry, this is a sub-discipline or a young discipline, and it can be treated as such. This is something that we come up against and have to account for when we talk about method – the way we see ourselves and our methods versus the way other scholars from other fields see things.

Toni Pape: Yes, I agree. Those big names are usually white men. But media are out there, they are popular culture. Let everyone study it and let's see what they can come up with. Of course, every research project has limitations. That is also really important to me, that we realise every project of research is incomplete. There always needs to be more study, not necessarily to enhance or improve what came before, but to add to it and perhaps give it new direction. Accordingly, in 'Method Unchained', I try to weave different minds together to make clear we are all generators of ideas. I think of the history of research as this huge flow of ideas that connect to each other. And I say: let's make new connections all the time. Let the philosopher write something that may seem 'undisciplinary' from our perspective.

I am still thinking about Fanon. For some reason, 'methods devouring themselves' makes me think of climate change because of this idea of human productivity eating itself up in the end. I guess we can see the grant system as the overproductive economy of humanity translated into academia. On a side note, I'm convinced that the academic ideology of overwork is part and parcel of our unsustainable Western ways of living. And it's embarrassingly unreflected. But all that would be about the politics of method again, not method as such. Do you think that when Fanon evokes devouring, it is just about methods becoming unproductive and losing their effect, or is there

something more? Is this process of devouring also about digesting and destroying something through method? Or about ingesting and thereby perhaps gestating something new?

Malte Hagener: Yeah, I think in that way you cannot ultimately distinguish the politics of method from the method. It is always bound up with where it comes from, what it was originally used for, how it came about, how it is being employed, who uses it and then how it transforms and eats itself up, and thereby gives birth to something new. If you think about method more in this way of always destroying itself and reconstructing itself, then it might be something very productive, and if you take the process into consideration in the way you use methods on a certain object, the object talks back and becomes at least marginally part of that method. That would maybe be an ideal way of using method.

Skadi Loist: Now in thinking about Greg's last question, what comes to my mind is again the German media studies discussion, particularly in the last 10-15 years with the move from film and television studies to media studies by way of incorporating e.g. games studies, and new media studies (when it was still called new media), and so on. There is a big discussion about mediality. What is the media specificity? And then I think it goes back to your question, Greg, when people from outside our discipline talk about certain media like film, what is their point of view and what is ours, if there is an 'our'? What is the specificity of a medium or media? That is at least one of the discussions that comes up, and also scaling that up to the humanities, which I also see in the digital humanities discussion. While everybody keeps talking about datafication and quantitative methods, positivity, and so on. It is exactly the same question. Where do we stand and what is our critical work, our reflexive point of view, from the humanities or from media studies? What is our core belief or theory, our position, that we can then bring into something else?

Toni Pape: But I think traditionally trying to do that through the definition of what a medium is has been quite difficult, no?

Skadi Loist: Absolutely!

Toni Pape: The object is missing.

Malte Hagener: That is why, at least in Germany, there is a lot of talk about mediality and not about media anymore because the traditional mass media of the twentieth century now appears to us like just little entr'actes in history, where the cinema as an institution would generate their objects from beginning to end, from idea to all stages of consumption and monetisation.

With the shift to the platform economy, there is a wider question at stake about what media studies is all about. People who come from film studies tend to believe that they still have some method, at least in terms of film analysis and so on. There is a certain concern that Martine was talking about, namely that people who do not really understand editing should not make certain claims. A larger segment of media theory that has been used is also slightly in danger of not only losing its methods but also losing its object. Then the question becomes why not do sociology or 'Kulturwissenschaft', whatever that would be in English. Culture studies, not cultural studies in the Birmingham sense, but rather there is a German *Kulturwissenschaft* which sees itself quite differently. Then the question is if you need a separate discipline for media. If everything is mediated like language is and literature is and art is, then there is no more need for a specific discipline potentially.

Skadi Loist: Which I think is exactly another point we are sort of skirting along, which is the issue of disciplinarity. Discipline and the whole logic of funding, also discipline as in disciplining. Where are we positioned there? Where do others position us in relation to other disciplines and sets of rules? I think that is another issue right there.

Belén Vidal: And by extension the legitimacy of departments, or just being a unit in a bigger structure. Would you like to have your own autonomy? If in fact you are sharing resources you are sharing knowledge, and it all goes down to budget as well and control of that.

Francesco Pitassio: I would not walk down this line because disciplines and fields and sub-fields are very different from one national academia to another, and so are departments. It might be worth a whole discussion because it affects our disciplines and our research, but I would leave it for another day.

Toni Pape: Maybe one thing that comes up for me is, what do we consider adequate 'research objects'? I find that a really interesting question, because I like to teach crossmedia and transmedia stuff, which is film, video games, television and so forth. But I cannot assign a novel, for instance, because many of my students would just look at me with big eyes and say, 'What? Now I have to read a novel?' Of course within transmedia ecologies, print media play an important role, but in teaching a certain kind of media studies it is hard to actually include them. We leave that to journalism studies and communication studies. So it can be hard to consider media in a comprehensive sense, even though I am at a very large media studies department. So there are certain things that media studies does not want to deal with, and it also

has to do with the fact that there is a department that deals with literature. But then somehow there is a certain kind of sovereignty over certain kinds of objects that bothers me a little.

Martine Beugnet: Yes, I fully agree with that. At the same time, going back to positionality and the issue of looking in from the outside. What happens if we do not name and locate our discipline, and therefore our own methods? For methods as for disciplines, it is fruitful to blur the frontiers, but we need to have them somehow before we can do that. And therefore I am kind of shooting myself in the foot with my previous critique about someone coming from the outside not knowing about the language or the grammar of filmmaking. The argument is still precious. Other disciplines should talk about cinema, despite the fact, or maybe because, filmmaking techniques and the methods of film analysis are not always taken into account by those disciplines.

Belén Vidal: It kind of goes back to the opening point about anarchistic invention. Is that even possible? Can there be invention ex nihilo outside any possible framework of reference? It seems that invention always needs to define itself against a framework of convention. We always seem to be moving within those terms.

Greg de Cuir Jr: Do we have any closing thoughts about method as we are approaching it in this particular special section?

Toni Pape: Well, do we think that there are certain methods or research missing in *NECSUS*? I know that Skadi, you are attentive to film festival pieces when we are selecting. I am looking for work on video games because I think that is something that we do not have very often. I think that is why we are all on this editorial board, to pay attention that broad ranges of fields are covered from various perspectives. But what are we missing?

Belén Vidal: But your comment, Toni, is more about objects. It is like we are nostalgic, or I want that object to be there suddenly. We have a collection which is very strong, but it definitely is about certain kinds of objects and not others.

Malte Hagener: One way to answer would be to say that different objects need different methods. So it always depends on how wide we define a range of objects. One thing in conclusion that is important to me is how methods are always about ways of generating knowledge. In that sense, there is a strong feeling about methods in media studies because they are important in a double-sense, not only in the sense of how we produce our knowledge but about media itself. So methods are also kinds of objects, or protocols, that we use to

generate knowledge and disseminate it. In that sense they are also media, since media have such a generative and dynamic field, especially in the time that we are living in. The rapidity that we are confronted with (and the constantly shifting semantics of a term like 'new media' shows it) also gives us the idea that we constantly have to reinvent our discipline and our methods in a certain way.

Skadi Loist: Since Toni was trying to pin me down on film festivals, I would go for a broader approach and say inclusivity would be very important to me, and that goes for the subdisciplines, for the objects, for the methods and for the people in it. One goal for me would be to try to see and make visible within the journal the broad variety of media *and* cinema studies. What are the other objects? What are the ways of looking at them as in methods? And I would be very happy to see more explicit positioning in terms of method, in terms of who we are, why we look at things.

I would argue strongly against a single version of representation. As if we would stand for one thing and we only look for one thing. And again, it is something we learned very early on from feminist, queer, and decolonial theories.

Toni Pape: But they also teach us that we should stay aware of our blind spots, right? I guess that is what I am trying to say, that I also have blind spots. If you were not on the editorial board, I or we might overlook research on film festivals. It is more in the sense that I asked what are we excluding. If we want to be more inclusive, it can be helpful to think about what we've been excluding. I would love to see more environmental humanities and eco-criticism, because in relation to media that is a very worrying issue. I think of media distribution for instance, and the work of Laura Marks in recent years. What are media doing to the environment? Also, you mentioned inclusiveness. Quite concretely, NECS is a network of European cinema and media studies and I would appreciate more submissions that rework our understanding of what Europe is. I'm thinking of recent Indigenous film production in Scandinavia, like Amanda Kernell's *Sami Blood*. Or recently I was at a photo exhibition of artists self-identifying as 'Afropeans' at foam in Amsterdam that fundamentally reframes questions of (territorial) belonging. I think we can make more space for that in the future. I am wondering, who am I not reading? Who and what is not on my radar? By implication our radar. Those are some big questions, for me at least.

Francesco Pitassio: This is the kind of question I am afraid to ask myself. Who am I not reading? I would never answer it and it would leave no time for reading!

Malte Hagener: The known unknown. What is not on our radar. It's what we don't know, but we somehow know it is there. And the unknown unknown.

Skadi Loist: But again, maybe there, I think it is about contextualisation. Just like being pinned down for film festival studies, why is that film festival studies? What does that mean? Why is it not media industries studies, why is it not looking at queer cinema, at film culture, at eventisation, at communities, all those things? It has a certain label, and in my experience that means that only certain people will read it if they think they are interested in film festivals. Well, they might learn a lot of other things from that. That is also my point of inclusivity and contextualisation. Building bridges and being open. And of course, point taken, we cannot know everything, but I would also ask why would we? That is again my point from earlier, for interdisciplinarity and for collaboration with other people who understand that and who can add their different perspective and methodology. It is about building bridges so then you can actually work together and connect in that way without having to know everything yourself.

Belén Vidal: I completely agree. If I understand you correctly I would add that we tend to think that the object will generate its method, ask for its method, and sometimes we are oblivious of the power of method to bring a particular object into view, to make that communicability evident. In a way a journal is a space for bringing in objects, not only bringing in perspectives but also why you – meaning you, the reader – should care about this. This is a piece of advice that I got from my supervisor very early on in my doctoral research. It was key. Whatever object you choose, it is the 'why should *you* care about this?' that matters. That is what method does as well at its best and in practice, not just in an ivory tower of some theory or devouring itself but actually out there.

Malte Hagener: But I understood Belén in a way that says it is already the implicit assumptions you have that makes you construct an object through the implicit methods in your head, right? So it is not like the object is there and only then you come with your methods, but it is already you seeing something as an object.

Francesco Pitassio: That is the research question. That is what showcases the object.

Belén Vidal: Yes, it brings it into view and then it can access the space of communication.

Greg de Cuir Jr: I think Toni deals with this also in his piece, with this notion that, if I cite it correctly, 'method is out there coming from the future, and methodology is in the past'. This also really fascinated me, the idea of being in search of a method that we do not yet know, the process of finding methods somehow.

Well, I really appreciate that we are keeping the politics of method close to mind, and that this is maybe where our blind spots are as a community, as journal editors, as a board. I think a concern with the politics of methods is something that is going to sustain us and confront us long beyond this particular special section and this particular issue. That is my most important takeaway from this dialogue. It has been great. Thank you all.

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Notes

[1]   Schüttpelz 2019.

[2]   See, for example, Bordwell 2005.

[3]   Schneider 2019.

[4]   https://www.bmbf.de/de/kleine-faecher-grosse-potentiale-3261.html

[5]   http://www.filmcirculation.net/

[6]   See a more thorough discussion of this in Loist 2020.

[7]   A recording of the event can be watched here: https://dochouse.org/online/video/filmed-qna/presenting-afterimages-cinema-women-and-changing-times-laura-mulvey. Grant's MADELEINE/JUDY is available here: https://vimeo.com/463455966 .

[8]   'John Ford's Young Mr. Lincoln: A collective text by the Editors of Cahiers du cinéma', 1972.

[9]   Comolli & Narboni 1976.