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Collaborative futures / Futuros en colaboración

Lavinia Brydon & Victoria Pastor-González

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Collaboration is a generally accepted and expected feature of media practice. Cinema, television, and newer media forms such as digital art typically involve a number of individuals coming together to share different skills, expertise, and ways of thinking and doing. Sergei Eisenstein's vehement words in 1926 on the '*collective efforts*' of filmmaking with its '*union of equally creative individuals*' (original emphasis)[1] are testament to this, as is the decades-long tradition of multi-authored scripts in the US television industry where well-populated writers' rooms are de rigueur regardless of a programme's format and genre. Media studies, however, has a more complicated relationship with collaboration. This is especially true when scholars follow humanistic (as opposed to social scientific) perspectives and methodologies that favour the lone researcher-genius model and work within the pressured confines of the neoliberal university where collaboration sits uneasily with a highly individualised and competitive performance culture.[2]

In a preliminary meeting to discuss a possible focus for our co-authored contribution to this anniversary issue of NECSUS, the rewards and pitfalls of working with others soon emerged as a strong topic. Informed by (separate) prior experiences of collaboration and reflective of recent work published in the journal, not least in the [#Solidarity](#) and [#Method](#) issues, we both entered our meeting ready to embrace the challenge of thinking and writing together. We welcomed the opportunity to extend some of the ideas we have shared over the years on the discipline's trajectory whilst serving as journal section editors and considered ourselves well-matched for the task in terms of scholarly interests and professional capacity. That said, our bi-lingual title acknowledges one notable imbalance in our partnership and points to wider issues regarding the (often invisible) labour inherent in collaborative work.

At its worst, this labour is exhausting, unrewarding, and harmful. It is fuelled by a variety of damaging structural norms, including professional (frequently overlapping with social-cultural) hierarchies that dictate uneven workloads and exploitative practices, as well as the problematic assumption that teamwork is always undertaken willingly and with a shared sense of scholarly receptivity and collegiality. Even when collaborations are designed and developed with care,[3] there is still considerable effort involved in marrying perspectives, integrating authorial voices, and resolving the confusion that results from terms being used differently across national, cultural, and disciplinary boundaries. This is not ‘easy’ work.

In reference to working with Anna Potters and Catherine Johnson on the television markets of the US, UK, and Australia, Amanda Lotz recently tweeted to this effect:

Cross-nation collaborations are hard! A common language but so many inconsistent terms. So much learned in the process and useful for making norms strange.

Lotz’s recognition of the complexities of cross-nation work is especially pertinent to a journal that developed from a European network of scholars (NECS) seeking to foster debate across national borders with a view to deepening the co-operation required for truly comparative work.[4] But Lotz’s tweet also resonates because the emphasis on defamiliarising the familiar is a timely reminder that making progress with such aims does not mean we can stop reflecting on them.

The milestone of a ten-year anniversary indicates NECSUS is now well-recognised – a familiar title – within the field of media studies and, in turn, contributes to the field’s legitimacy in academia and beyond. This legitimacy has been hard fought. In the UK, where we are both based, the field developed haphazardly in the first half of the twentieth century and gained traction in the 1960s and 1970s chiefly via the influential work conducted under the auspices of the Centre for Mass Communication Research at the University of Leicester and the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham. But derisive comments from public figures[5] have cast a long shadow that only seems to have faded in the last decade.[6]

With media studies increasingly seen as a legitimate and, arguably, a more clearly demarcated field of research in the UK, Europe, and across the globe there is the question of how to ensure that the open and freewheeling thinking that marked its early innovations remains intact – lest we become complacent or stale with our ideas. We proffer that a (renewed) commitment to

careful collaborative practice is vital in this regard. It is essential in helping us develop new lines of inquiry and think through new concepts, but also in terms of revisiting our work to re-orientate established perspectives and de-centre conventional narratives.

Indeed, collaboration responds to the recognised need – and informs many recent efforts – to expand media studies methodologies and pathways as well as make the field more globally accessible and representative. Exemplary in this regard is the on-going Screen Worlds project, led by Lindiwe Dovey at SOAS, University of London, which embraces the concept and practice of collaboration as it strives to centre African cinema, ‘the most marginalised regional cinema’, in film and screen studies. Thus far, the project’s activities have included workshops that ‘pair up’ scholars working on different geographical areas with the view that destabilising ingrained biases in comparative studies of ‘global screen worlds’ requires a bottom-up approach. This vital project has also begun to crowd-source materials such as toolkits and syllabi that speak to its decolonising agenda – an urgent and ‘necessarily a collective’ task.[7]

The Screen Worlds project is also notable for its recognition and explicit encouragement of different languages in collaborative research, while accepting the practical need for English translations or subtitles in published outputs. This tallies with our early decision to recognise the two languages that inform our partnership in this moment via a bi-lingual essay title. The approach of Screen Worlds also recalls one the original aims of NECSUS, namely to ‘make research in a variety of languages available to a wider audience’ while acknowledging English as the lingua franca in current academia. To this end, NECSUS has commissioned and published translations – albeit intermittently – over the last ten years, beginning with ‘The gaps of cinema’ by Jacques Rancière (translated by Walter van der Star) in the inaugural issue #Crisis. For our own part, we have included reviews of books written in languages that reflect our European network of scholars, most recently *High Definition* by Elisa Linseisen and *La haute et la basse définition des images* by Francesco Casetti and Antonio Somaini (reviewed by Alena Strohmaier in #Solidarity). We are keen to develop this strand of editorial work, and you are welcome to read this as a call for suggestions.

Of course, making scholarship inclusive and accessible via the collaborative act of translation goes hand-in-hand with the need to make the media – films, television series, music videos, social media threads – we study inclusive and accessible in the same way. Scholarship that engages in such work is

critical here, both in terms of deepening and expanding the existing connection between modern languages, translation studies, and media studies and breaking down lingering barriers of resistance to translated artworks or media outputs.

In this regard, we recognise that crossing linguistic borders has been helped greatly by the digital age via translation applications on websites and SVOD platforms that offer dubbed and/or subtitled options for their global content.[8] However, we also know that these interventions are limited to the mainstream, with commercial interests prioritised over social relevance, cultural worth, and/or aesthetic significance, as well as little concern for the political and ethical implications of translation practices.[9] Projects that challenge this value system and engage in ethically-minded practice – such as Indigenous Cinematics and Subtitling World Cinema – help and, connectively, complicate traditional approaches to concepts such as authorship and address as well as rethink or reroute lines of production, circulation, and reception.

We note that some of these issues were at the forefront of work published in the first issue of NECSUS ten years ago, especially in Thomas Poell and Kaouthar Darmoni's article 'Twitter as a multi-lingual space: The articulation of the Tunisian revolution through #sidibouزيد'. With its careful consideration of the different voices, languages, and accounts of the revolution connecting (and disconnecting) on Twitter, the article offers a more nuanced understanding of the transnational platform's role in the Tunisian revolution than was suggested by the popular press at the time. As Poell and Darmoni detail, the evolving discursive gaps in the layered use of many different languages on Twitter reveals a generative, provocative, and boundless space that refutes the notion of a singular voice even in the midst of collective action.

On a different scale, our work here is also a communication space with more than one contributor (author, reader, editor) influencing its direction and presentation on the page. The very form of this article thus fits the focus of inquiry; it asks to be read as an index of a living evolving dialogue on the collaborative presents and futures of media studies scholarship rather than a definitive statement in one authorial voice. It is a discussion held within and across the pages of this anniversary issue and beyond. And, it is testament to the fact that, at best, collaboration can produce authentic and attentive exchange and generate texts that are reflexive thought spaces. Here, different habits of mind sharpen the terms we use and shift the direction we move in.

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Notes

- [1] Eisenstein 1988, p. 146.
- [2] Verhoeven et al 2020, p. 277.
- [3] Kopitz 2021 and Verhoeven et al 2020, p. 282, 285.
- [4] See the statement of the network's history on the NECS website, which lays out these aims. <https://necs.org/about-necs/history> (accessed 1 November 2021).
- [5] For example, the comments uttered in 2003 by the then Education Minister, Margaret Hodge.
- [6] For a comprehensive overview of the field in the UK, see Golding 2019.
- [7] All quotations can be found on the project's website: <https://screenworlds.org>.
- [8] Netflix UK, for example, has audio options covering 23 languages and subtitle options covering 19 languages.
- [9] On the ethics of translation, see Venutti 1995 and 1998.