

‘Scale’—Conference Review

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The European Society for Literature, Science and the Arts (SLSAeu) held its annual conference between the 15th and 18th of June, 2015, this year at the Grand Hotel Excelsior, Malta.¹ The conference was hosted in collaboration with the University of Malta’s Humanities, Medicine and Sciences Programme, and with the additional support of the university’s Faculty of Arts, Faculty of Science, the Medical School, and the Department of English. It should be stated from the outset that the conference was considered by all to be both extremely well organised and very successful.

With the chosen theme of ‘Scale’, the conference featured six keynote addresses and ten parallel sessions, along with roundtables (led by the British Society for Literature, Science and the Arts, and another by the Critical Posthumanism Network) and special presentations. The decision for the conference to be held in Malta—which the Call for Papers attests is ‘itself a timeless and ongoing experiment in scale’—was an apposite one; as Dr Manuela Rossini, the president and executive manager of SLSAeu, said: in Malta, ‘signs of hospitality abound’. The end of the conference was marked with the Society’s Annual General Meeting, which confirmed that, indeed, the enthusiasm, efforts, and thorough involvement of all participants made investing in next year’s conference seem more than worthwhile. This will be held, in fact, in June 2016, Stockholm.

The conference, which was open to independent researchers, doctoral students, and early-career and established academics, invited presenters to speak about the concept of scale. ‘In the grand scheme of things, Scale is the scheme of things itself’, as was the opening line of the CfP. It is a rich topic which proffers more than meets the eye, and thus participants were encouraged—in line with the ethos of the SLSAeu itself—to analyse scale in a way which circumnavigates disciplinary boundaries. At the very least, the topic necessarily requires more than one perspective; scale recalls to mind a plethora of fields, from music, metrical systems, astrophysics, architecture, photography, dance, and microbiology, to less obvious ideas around childhood, ontologies, virtual games, distortion, metaphysics, the sublime and time. As such, the CfP outlined seven broad threads or streams which ran through and divided the conference panels: the “Politics of Scale”, “Scale and the Literary Imagination”, “Measurement and Systems”, “Quanta and Cosmologies”, “Mapping, Modelling, Imaging”, “Scaling the (In)Conceivable”, and “Scale, between Science and the Arts”.

¹ For more information on the conference, see <<http://www.scale2015.com/>> [accessed 27 August 2015].

It was apt for a conference about scale to be itself large-scale; the attendance was strong, healthy and diverse, hailing from more than sixty universities across three continents. All ten parallel sessions featured four panels with three speakers per panel, totalling to around 120 presentations. The attendees were regularly brought together (not only by the coffee breaks, opening reception, boat trips, or lively lunches and dinners) by the plenary events held in the Ballroom.

The opening keynote address by Tom McCarthy, introduced by Ivan Callus, featured the award-winning author reading from *C* (2010) as well as his most recent novel, *Satin Island* (2015), followed by a question and answer session. The passages were described by McCarthy as 'just the same [...] only a hundred years apart', and dealt with the consciousness of experience, or, in his own words, 'the skeleton laid bare of time and memory itself', along with insightful commentary on contemporary concerns such as the scales of the corporate and the civic, and the nature of capitalism, which 'can recuperate everything, even what might threaten it'.

Bruce Clarke's address, 'Scaling the Microcosm', dealt with 'speculation on speculation', exploring the idea of how thought can be conceived as the result of cell movement. Clarke drew on scientific study of the *Mixotricha paradoxa* and related monographs (most notably, Lewis Thomas's *The Lives of a Cell: Notes of a Biology Watcher*, and several studies by Lynn Margulis) in order to analyse progressive enrichment and complexity through symbiotic theory, which 'scales up the microbial realm for its planetary significance' and 'models nature's good nature'. Similarly, Marcus du Sautoy's lecture, 'To Infinity and Beyond', held at the Valletta Campus (with special collaboration with the Faculty of Science on the occasion of its 100th anniversary) was particularly compelling. The Simonyi Professor for the Public Understanding of Science spoke of the idea of multiple universes, which, in certain ways, questions the theory of an expanding universe, as well as the concepts of randomness and infinity. Furthermore, du Sautoy mathematically analysed Jorge Luis Borges's 'The Library of Babel', evidencing the enriching and rewarding capacities of taking down constructed borders between the scientific and the artistic.

The fourth address, 'Micromégas: the very small, the very large, and the scale of the digital humanities', was delivered by Franco Moretti (although not present, the study was taken on in collaboration with Mark Algee-Hewitt and Ryan Heuser at the Stanford Literary Lab). Moretti's study analysed style at the scale of the sentence and the paragraph, which, rather than stylistics, Moretti terms thematics, which focuses on topic modelling—for instance, the creation of narratorial suspense at different scales and through different means. It is not simply a matter of counting instances of different linguistic elements: 'to count you must define, and to define you must conceptualise', he stated. Furthermore, as Moretti writes in *The Bourgeois: Between History and Literature*, literary form is 'the fossil remains of what had once been a living and problematic present', and thus criticism (and here Moretti etymologically draws on both *kritikos* and *krinein*) remains vital at both the micro- and macro-scales.

Moretti was also present in the fifth keynote address, which consisted of a dialogue between Cary Wolfe and himself, with subsequent audience participation. Moretti and Wolfe initially spoke of the notion of distant reading (as in *Graphs, Maps, Trees*), but then, almost surreptitiously, veered into a discussion of the idea of the crisis in the humanities. While it was strange for two widely-published and established academics to be talking about a crisis in a field from which they still draw admirable success, Moretti's outlook coupled with Wolfe's Marxist and pragmatist background provided interesting points of contention which were then taken up by the floor. The sixth and final keynote address, 'The Daring of Cavani's *Galileo: The Architecture of Power*', was presented by Gaetana Marrone-Puglia, and dealt both directly with the biographical drama as well as with the wider ideas within film theory, historiography, and the use of cinematic devices.

The individual and panel presentations themselves were too multifarious to discuss here (jellyfish, anarchy, and Godzilla were among some of the more unexpected, yet very relevant, topics), but needless to say the range of the conference was, plainly put, exciting. The plenaries in themselves, as outlined above, evidence the many possibilities that thought around scale can manifest as. One is tempted to conclude this review with some closing commentary of the necessity and beneficial nature of such conferences, but the wholehearted collaboration of both the Science and Arts faculties speaks louder than words. One may end, then, by starting anew, by looking forward to, and jotting down some notes for, next year's conference on 'Control'.