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**Report on the screening of BIO.FICTION, The International Synthetic
Biology Science Art Film Festival, at the S.Net conference, Bergen, 12 October
2016**
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The S.Net BioFiction Science Art Film Festival screening took place from 18:00 to 20:30 at the end of the first day of the S.Net2016 conference. The day had been long and filled with different impulses, and yet most of the conference participants stayed to watch the films (possibly helped by the pizza and snacks served in connection with the event).

The screening was done in collaboration with Biofaction KG, the EU project SYNENERGENE and the University of Bergen's Centre for the Study of the Sciences and the Humanities (SVT). The initiative for the event was taken by SVT and SYNENERGENE researcher Ana Delgado, and the practical preparations for the event were carried out by SVT researcher Nora S. Vaage. The screening and ensuing debate was held in The Egg, the main auditorium of the Student Centre in Bergen.

The screening itself ran smoothly, with a minor issue of the sound volume being solved during the second short film. Many of the audience members left in the break between the screening and the panel debate, which was to be expected at the end of what had been, as mentioned, an intensive conference day. The remaining audience counted about 50 people. The panel consisted of Fern Wickson (GenØk Centre for Biosafety), Christopher Coenen (ITAS, KIT), and Cathrine Kramer (Center for Genomic Gastronomy). Nora S. Vaage (SVT) was the moderator. Karen Kastenhofer (ITA, Austrian Academy of Sciences), was announced as another member of the panel, but had to leave before the debate due to an intense migraine.

The panelists started out giving 5-minute introductions to their work – they were also asked to reflect on how it related to the topics of the films. Cathrine Kramer was the first one out, and gave an overview of her artistic practice, which revolves around food, technology and society. She described how she identified with Claire Pentecost's idea of the "public amateur, the artist as someone who learns in public, putting the production of knowledge itself up for scrutiny". She stated, upon prompting, that she thought some of the films were very good, others not so good – and that this was to be expected.

Fern Wickson was next, starting out by stating that she didn't consider herself more qualified than people in the audience to comment on these films, and inviting participation from the room.

Christopher Coenen, who is project leader of the EU project SYNENERGENE, which has previously involved BioFiction, shared some of his experiences of earlier events of the festival series, as well as of other SYNENERGENE public engagement events.

The film screening triggered a lively debate, with active participation from the public. The conversation revolved in three topical levels:

1. Comments on the movies in general
2. On the relations between art and science
3. On particular movies

Below is provided a summary of the discussions that followed the screening, grouping them within these three levels:

On the collection of movies. It was several times pointed out that the selection of movies was quite diverse in terms of topics, framing and quality. Some thought most of the movies were quite polarized: presenting developments in biotechnology in a quite black and white fashion. Cathrine Kramer argued that while some movies were quite plain and just celebrating technology in very uncritical ways, others managed to pull out multiple perspectives in more interesting ways. In this same line, Christopher Coenen emphasized how some of these movies (and he refers to “The Arsehole Gene”) bring in a number of messages mixed together.

Other members of the panel indicated that the selection of films had been stimulating in many ways (Fern Wickson) and that they triggered reflection and new ways of seeing old issues - in ways that academic formats are not able to do and in this sense, the inclusion of the BioFiction Festival in the frame of the S.NET conference was seen as working very well.

Fern also pointed out how she was expecting a selection of movies on synthetic biology (what kind of organisms it produces and how it does so), while she was pleasantly surprised that these movies address broader questions about “Who we are as humans”.

On the relation(s) between art and science. Most of the debate centered on the relations between art and science, particularly on how artistic and design practices might be research, and how artists and designers could collaborate in research with SSH (social science and humanities) scholars. How are science and art different practices? Fern Wickson pointed to literature as a form of art that is not necessarily so far from what we do in other disciplines.

The marked attention on the relations between science and art could be due to the fact that there were practitioners from the Bergen Art and Design Academy. In particular the director of this institution was quite engaged in the discussion, arguing how art and design are research-based practices, and exhibitions are a way of showing results, different from scientific papers.

Christopher Coenen mentioned that he sees these kinds of art and science collaborations as flourishing and he thinks this is very positive in many ways (it is good to introduce an “alternative approach to reality” through the “aesthetic

reason” in Habermas’ words, Coenen said). He still thinks that different spheres of reasoning should be kept separate (emotion based arguments should not be used to justify scientific practices). To Coenen, the BioFiction film selection evoked a question that he has been having in mind for a long time: “What role can these artistic interpretations play in the kind of work that ‘we’ are doing?” An advantage of using art in SSH research, he points to, is that it enables us to resituate technologies that appear as being very “far out” in the everyday life of people. He mentioned the movie “Copy & Clone” as an example of this, as the movie relates the transhumanist idea that life is information with everyday life experiences such as computer software crashing.

The discussion focused on the advantages of art (or film) as a language to engage publics, in particular on how art can actually contribute both to problematizing issues as well as to communicate them. The importance of using art language to communicate dimensions of technological development and experience that otherwise could not be communicated was an issue of discussion. Fern Wickson signaled how this collection of movies had been able to trigger in people what a scientific paper could have never triggered: Disgust, anxiety, laughter, curiosity...). There seemed to be agreement on the advantages of using this kind of format (film) for communicating and problematizing science. However, someone in the audience expressed that she was not sure that every technological issue and related social concerns could or should be addressed by using this language, and that sometimes it could be more appropriate to address these issues from just another (more serious?) language (she was specifically referring to the “Arsehole Gene movie” and the issue of genetic determinism). Towards the end, it was also indicated that film is not the only form of art that is relevant for engaging with publics but that other more “hands-on” and embodied forms of art should be considered complementary too (like different forms of DIYBio and bioart).

On the particular movies. The Arsehole Gene was the movie that was more repeatedly addressed. Panelists and people in the audience had mixed views and understandings of this film. While Coenen saw it as working at different levels (as for instance mixing gross humor on politicians with clever hints on a socio-scientific tendency to “pathologization” of everything that deviates from the normal - everything can and could be cured). A philosopher in the audience saw this film as just being inappropriate and making too serious issues (i.e. genetic determinism) laughable or ridiculous.

Another film that received quite a lot of attention was “Simply Complex”. Two aspects of this movie were discussed, the establishment of the ‘code’ as an accepted metaphor to explain the workings of biology (this choice of metaphor being questioned by Fern Wickson), and the fact that the movie did not present scientific credentials.

“Copy & Clone” was also mentioned a couple of times, both by the panel and the audience. It received an overall positive response because it combines simplicity with taking a critical approach, and for being situated.

Fern Wickson also mentioned the movie *Hybris*, “living forever in a loop”, and made a reflection connecting the topic of this movie with the introductory plenary talk at the S.NET Conference by Silvio Funtowicz. She recalled how Silvio’s talk was evoking the idea of the ‘end of the world’, emphasizing how the modern world we inhabit is in a deep crisis and in transformation towards something new (and unknown). The reflection that this movie stimulates, Wickson argues, is quite the opposite: That things keep repeating, and perhaps they are not as new as they are presented or we would like them to be. This theme, Wickson mentioned, came up also in other movies, such as in *Reinventing the Dodo*, where you think that you have made something new and fantastic, and it ends up in a factory just as everything else – “so, are we really making new worlds?” was the reflection that Wickson shared with the audience.