Horizon

Strengths, Limitations, Opportunities and Threats of New Research Agenda

Screen Industries in East-Central Europe Conference, Brno, 11–13 November 2011

The hosting of a screen studies conference is by no means a risk-free endeavor, considering the steady stream of such events taking place around the world. Notwithstanding the conference's widely accepted importance as a forum for scholarly dialogue, a new conference is required to justify its existence. *Screen Industries in East-Central Europe* conference, which was held at Masaryk University, Brno, and which was organized by Petr Szczepanik, in association with the Czech Society of Film Studies and the Department of Film Studies and Audiovisual Culture, Masaryk University, was intended to fill several sizable gaps remaining in the study of East-Central European cinema. As the conference's "mission statement" made clear: the cinema of the region is usually subjected to textual analysis and is usually either analyzed in terms of its expression of political and cultural currents or is discussed in terms of style; political significance, new waves, auteurism – and more recently a partial shift to considerations of popular cinema – have come to characterize scholarly approaches to the region's films. Questions concerning the production and distribution of films and more generally the dynamics and practices of the region's screen industries have rarely featured prominently at conferences or in academic discourse more generally. To be more specific, the region's screen industries are predominantly discussed either in national terms or by way of a broader supranational optic which positions them in relation to the "Soviet model", to post-communist transition or to contemporary European cinema. These tendencies have served to highlight the need significantly to broaden the scope of investigation into East-Central European Screen Industries and the need to draw comparisons, and to spotlight the relationships, between the constituent industries of the region. In short, they have meant that organizing a conference on these countries' production cultures is both salient and timely.

One could debate the reasons for including the so-called "Visegrad countries" (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) or labeling issues (is it East-Central or Central?), but this is neither the time nor the place to do so, not least because of the necessity of conducting research characterized by its regional and transnational stances, as well as by comparative analysis (there are evidently strong historical connections between the region's cinemas) and also because the overall agenda of the conference was one of inclusivity and variety, with, for example, papers delivered on such topics as early Soviet film industry and Barrandov-DEFA co-productions.

More important at this stage than questions of terminology or "boarder-patrolling", is the challenge posed by issues of method and of theory. Production studies and institutional analysis/history, on the one hand, and media studies and media industry studies, on the other hand, may be the disciplinary fields that best describe the prevailing approaches on show at the conference. It was indeed fitting that Anikó Imre raised in her thought-provoking keynote delivery the question of who has the authority or the right to speak for the whole (East European) region, before she called for the adoption of a new regional research perspective which would embrace in their broadest sense both transnational/global interconnections and contemporary media cultures. Conceptualizing Central European screen industries is a difficult theoretical-methodological challenge but this conference was nevertheless an exciting initiative – and not simply because it was the first of its kind.

Besides boasting an inspiring topic, which brought together scholars and critics each with a deep-rooted concern for Central European screen industries and production studies, the success of the *Screen Industries in East-Central Europe* conference was catalyzed by its cordial and smooth running and by the organization of the panels and the presentations. Taking place were six well structured panels, comprising a total of eighteen presentations, and a keynote address. The schedule was ideal: there were no panels running simultaneously and there was sufficient time for discussions after presentations had been delivered, with respondents facilitating debate well. Moreover, the program was clear and everybody had the opportunity to contribute to discussions.

Panels were organized chronologically/historically – beginning with the emergence of Socialist regimes' centralized systems and closing with contemporary market reports and industry investigations. Featured were case studies and overviews of different aspects and eras of the Eastern European production field, from early Soviet film production to the Socialist mode of production and contemporary funding systems. Papers discussed division of labor in the screen industries: the change of functions in Socialist dramaturgy; the role of women in Hungarian cinema; external advisers' roles in non-fiction filmmaking in 1950s Czechoslovakia; relations between Czechoslovak State Film and Czechoslovak Television.

The geographic focus of presentations conceptualizing Central European screen industries was more than interesting. Apart from two papers on co-production (where Marsha Siefert examined a Hungarian-Soviet biopic on Franz/Ferenc Liszt made in 1970, Pavel Skopal discussed DEFA-Barrandov Cooperation in the late 1950s and 1960s), the majority of presentations limited their scope to a single national industry; the conference's real potential for transnational exchange could have been found here. Presenting were speakers born and raised in the region, speakers from Western universities, and Western scholars sometimes living in but always speaking about a given Central European country; however, nobody from Central Europe concentrated on another Central European country. There were dialogues between different cultural and academic perspectives but border-crossing analyses, at least on the part of the "native" speakers, were missing. This imbalance can easily be explained. When making a production/industry analysis of a certain Central European country it is essential to know the language used in that country. For example, as a Hungarian national, I personally can far more easily present an analysis of Jan Svěrák's oeuvre than I could carry out research at the Barrandov Studio archives. The papers presented, and the disputes that unfolded, at the conference made it clear that these cultural blind spots make detailed and comparative illumination of the region's screen industries quite challenging – but exciting. Following the conference, we can better assess the state of academic research in the region. It seems to me that in the case of the Czech Republic and Poland, the basic archival research in the production field is more advanced than in Hungary, where cinema and television production studies are less developed in the academy.

The conference showcased at least two presentations which spotlighted why it is so crucial to adopt a regional perspective. Both papers concentrated on well-known issues of classical politi-

cal-institutional analysis: censorship and the Socialist studio system. In her paper "Dare to Be Critical: Making Films in Poland under Communist Control", Anna Misiak painted a portrait of Polish censorship – with emphasis placed on the 1970s. While introducing the formal structure of the system (from pre-production to distribution license), she demonstrated its intrinsically flexible character as well as the negotiable and cyclical nature of control; the same point was also well demonstrated by Daniel Bird's detailed case study of the troubled production history of Andrzej Żuławski's NA SREBRNYM GLOBIE / ON THE SILVER GLOBE. Misiak's paper showed convincingly that Polish censorship cannot be described in terms of a linear model of progress, i.e. in terms of change over decades from a rigid and strict structure to comparatively lenient forms of control. Rather, argued Misiak, the situation is best perceived as a push-and-pull system characterized by cyclic change. What was particularly striking about this description was that similar claims could also have been made about the dynamics of Hungarian censorship, which to-date have been considered quite unique to Hungary – hence the image of the "happiest barrack in the Soviet bloc". Now it does not only appear as though the push-and-pull logic of censorship characterized both of these countries, at least the situation in 1960s Hungary can be compared to that in 1970s Poland, but that the role of informal-personal factors was quite similar as well. These shared circumstances invite a questioning of the myth of the incomparability of the Kádár regime's "enlightened" cultural policy not to mention that of the unique role of its most influential figure, György Aczél.
The other striking example of the need to adopt a regional perspective emerged from the topic of the Socialist studio system. It is generally known that during the late 1950s and the 1960s – following the highly centralized model of the early 1950s – the production system or mode of production across the Soviet bloc became less centralized via the emergence of the creative unit system. These creative units, which were based on the collaboration of directors, cinematographers, scriptwriters, and dramaturgs, later gained increased levels of autonomy and developed into production units; besides being the center of creative work, these units/studios were responsible for production. Although film scholars have explored the history of the Socialist studio system, as far as I know, there exists no detailed comparative analysis of the Soviet bloc's modes of production. Without this type of work, it is difficult or might even be misleading to discuss as nationally specific a given country's production system. Complicating this matter further, are differences between English-language terms (unit/creative unit/studio) and those used in other languages, with the same phenomena often being labeled differently. For this reason, Petr Szczepanik's paper was extremely instructive and illuminating. Szczepanik examined the Socialist mode of production with focus placed on the roles and functions of dramaturgs; his paper not only charted the transition from central dramaturgy (dramaturgical unit) to creative and production units, but used dramaturgy as a filter through which better to understand the specificity of the state Socialist mode of production.
Several presentations challenged master narratives of East-Central European film history, using apposite case studies to develop broader issues, themes, and models. Perhaps unsurprisingly, some of these presentations focused on the early years of the implementation in the region of the so-called "Soviet model". A central element of this model was nationalization and centralization. The assumed uniform application of the "Soviet model" was revised in presentations delivered respectively by Ivan Klimeš and Jindřiška Bláhová. Klimeš argued that the nationalization of the cinema industry in Czechoslovakia in 1945 was not, as previously thought, a product of replicat-

ing the Soviet model but was in fact born out of experiences during and immediately preceding WWII and was inspired by the Nazi model.

In her paper "The Real Mission to Moscow: Hollywood, the Soviet Film Industry, and Eastern European Markets", Jindřiška Bláhová showed that, after WWII, the Czechoslovak market played an important role in the plans of Hollywood; what Bláhová dubbed the "Soviet Sphere Project" aimed, she argued, to prevent the Soviet film industry from realizing its own globalist ambitions.

With respect to the "Soviet model", Valérie Pozner delivered a paper on the technological and economical problems of building the Soviet film industry in the 1930s and Jamie Miller suggested that there were alternative models even within the Soviet system – an example being the Mezhrabpom studio and its model in the 1920s, which combined commercialism and ideological commitment, meaning that the centralization of cinema industry was not the only option at that time.

Two panels discussed contemporary trends, transformations in screen industries, and the state of national markets: Marcin Adamczak provided an overview of box office data and production trends in Polish cinema after 1989; Petr Bilík focused on the Czech Republic showing how film festivals can strengthen national cinema markets; Andrea Slováková spoke about contemporary Czech documentary filmmaking; Tereza Czesany Dvořáková discussed legislative concepts and the logic of state support for Czech film. My own contribution to the conference focused on questions of self-governance and the rise and fall of the Hungarian Motion Picture Foundation – Hungary's main organization in the cinema industry over the last two decades. The situation in the Hungarian cinema industry has however, changed radically in the past one and a half years. Accordingly, John Cunningham's presentation "The Last Round-up? Problems and Prospects for the Hungarian Film Industry" outlined the political-cultural background of changes in that country's film industry.

As the region's first foray into the field of screen industry studies, *Screen Industries in East-Central Europe* can be regarded as an intensive but challenging three-day long SLOT analysis. It showcased the *s*trengths (developing disciplines, new agendas and territories), as well as drawing attention to the *l*imitations (perspectives confined by the continued preeminence of the national optic), to the *o*pportunities (cross-cultural, comparative, transnational perspectives), and to the *t*hreats (language barriers, lack of information) of embarking upon a new research agenda. The outcomes of the first trial run are promising. What comes next is, however, up to the participants.

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