New Directions in Film and TV Production Studies

A Conference Report (*Bristol, 14–15 April 2015*)

The "New Directions in Film and TV Production Studies" international conference was held on April 14th and 15th, 2015, in Bristol, UK at the Watershed Cinema. The conference was organised by Andrew Spicer and Steve Presence of the University of the West of England, and Justin Smith of the University of Portsmouth. Its aim was to map current developments in the interdisciplinary field of media production studies which has stimulated a range of ethnographically-informed enquiries into the lived experiences of workers in the film and television industries.

The conference's location logically led to a foregrounding of European perspectives on production cultures versus the American one, which had been more dominant in the works of researchers who have developed the field in the US during the last ten years. However, the most prolific and influential among them, John Caldwell — professor at UCLA and the author of *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (2008) — was one of the keynote speakers in Bristol. Thanks to him, the conference's geographic focus did not obscure the parallels and vital links between European screen industries and Hollywood. At the same time, the conference gave a space to several methodological moves which seem to be changing the field of media production studies in the last couple of years: a turn toward history; a shift toward a broader understanding of what production is; moves towards production aesthetics (including genre analysis and other textual issues typical for more traditionally-conceived film studies); a focus on new research and pedagogical approaches based on closer collaboration with the industry (studying *with* the industry); and finally, a turn toward new research practices, mainly team projects, online platforms and new data sources (e.g. the so-called "Sony hack" from November, 2014, which quickly proved to be an extremely fertile ground for research into practices behind the studio's walls[1]). In the remaining part of this report, I will sketch the first four of these moves - some of which exemplify also the fifth one (see my references to several team-based research projects).[2]

The two-day meeting started with the opening remarks by Andrew Spicer, who provided an overview of the disciplinary roots, publications and current research initiatives in the field, including the pan-European research project "Success in the Film and Television Industries" (SiFTI),[3] which was one of the inspirations for the conference itself. Since Professor Spicer (who is also the co-editor of the first international col-

1) The "Sony hack" was discussed in a roundtable discussion under the same title at the 2015 SCMS conference in Montreal.

2) I presented a shorter version of these points in my response address at the end of the conference.

3) See: <http://sifti.no/index.php/en>, [accessed 10 July 2015].

lection of essays on producers, *Beyond the Bottom Line: The Producer in Film and Television Industries* (2014)), specializes in historical research on British producers, it is not surprising that the first of the "new directions" happened to be a turn toward historical production studies. In her paper on Warner Bros.' I AM A FUGITIVE FROM A CHAIN GANG (Mervyn Le Roy, 1932) Helen Hanson showed how detailed archival research into daily practices and professional hierarchies of sound personnel allows for reconstructing "the flow of style ideas right through from script to technical realisation". By focusing on below-the-line creativity and craft knowledge (stressing so-called "story values" of sound and techniques allowing sound film to regain visual fluidity), she shed a new light on the aesthetic consequences of coming of sound in the studio era production cultures.

Historical production studies often counterbalance the prevalent focus on contemporary production culture and inspire revisionist research perspectives on existing archival collections. Thus, it also represents one of the options for a dialogue with the industry itself, for example by reconstructing histories of particular practices and professions that tend to forget its past too easily. Anthony McKenna (who, similarly to Spicer, specializes in historical research on producers and co-edited two volumes on the subject with him) discussed genealogy of "showmanship" as a key concept to understand producers' direct engagement with the audience and their historical role of cultural intermediaries. The historical turn might be illustrated also by the ongoing project ADAPT,[4] headed by John Ellis, who introduced it at the conference. By using such methods as filming "simulations" and reuniting industry veterans with the technologies they used, the project investigates not only how British television technologies (from 1960 on) were "adopted and adapted by the TV industries and its creative staff" but also how these adaptations affected working lives of television technicians as well as the onscreen content. Mathew Freeman likewise elaborated on historical technological anticipations of today's transmedia production. Laura Mayne took a different approach in her paper "Historicising Luck in the Film and Television Industries", where she proposed a case study to show that the mythologized "chance" as a key factor of "breakout hits" could be studied by looking at "pre-existing networks of informal relationships" that made such productions possible.

A number of papers challenged the traditional views of what production entails by stressing its inseparability from distribution, marketing, and even reception — thus implicitly alluding to theoretical "circuit" models which have stressed that circulation and consumption always feed back into production.[5] The conference proved that production studies might be a useful perspective to look at sales agencies, video-on-demand providers, marketing, agents, cable companies, etc., and, along the way, to learn from the existing marketing, audience, exhibition, or distribution research. Such a move was present in the second keynote by Philip Drake who built on his rich work on cultural policy, by showing how studying initiatives such as a VOD platform or a public agency (while deeply engaging with the industry) can expand our understanding of what a local production culture means. Luca Barra, on the other hand, focused on the "hidden profession" of schedulers as a site of negotiated creativity in the digital, multichannel environment of Italian television. He convincingly explained why scheduling craft has not lost its relevance despite the

4) The Adoption of new Technological Arrays in the Production of Broadcast Television (2013–2018), online: <www.adapttvhistory.org.uk>, [accessed 10 July 2015].

5) See e.g. Julie D'Acci, Cultural Studies, Television Studies, and the Crisis in the Humanities. In: Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson (eds.), *Television after TV. Essays on a Medium in Transition* (Durham & London: Duke UP, 2004), pp. 418–446.

new technological context: the schedulers have kept their vital role in shaping a network brand, defining the cultural value of programs, and building relationships with audiences who are now being offered multiple encounter points with every program. Schedulers form a "production culture", consisting of specific professional hierarchies, routines, and what Caldwell calls "industrial reflexivity". This culture is being challenged by the digital revolution which has led to new understandings of programming temporality and competition, replacing the Italian "palimpsest" approach with an "American style" of schedule. Similarly, Eva Novrup Redvall, the author of the acclaimed book *Writing and Producing Television Drama in Denmark: From The Kingdom to The Killing* (2013), pointed out the "creative" role that the audience research department plays in the DR's (Danish Broadcasting Corporation's) drama production. She showed how the DR's qualitative focus group tests repeatedly influenced the creative decision-making of producers, especially with regards to fine-tuning the first episodes of serials. Several other papers focused on marketing as production or on the production sub-culture of "marketing people", which specially developed in television (Jonathan Wroot, Paul Grainge, Michael O'Neill). At the same time, Gloria Dagnino examined non-audiovisual consumer companies' and advertisers' increasingly active role in Italian film production.

The conference illustrated that studying European production cultures means, among other things, engaging with the national and regional cultural policies and public funding, small-nation markets, public art schools, and also strong art film traditions. It has been shown already that one way of connecting research into production cultures with the study of cultural intuitions is to look at genres and the "situated" aesthetics and ethics which tend to concentrate around them.[6] Brett Mills recently finished a project[7] which has accomplished a similar goal by interviewing dozens of UK comedy professionals and closely observing some of them while working on scripts, at production meetings as well as on the set. Mills was primarily interested in comedy workers' management of "portfolio" careers and the ways in which their working lives are determined by specific contexts of comedy production within and outside television. It seems that comedy people are willing to accept higher risk and see their outsider status as essential. As such, they are interested in working outside the "system" (moving from in-house to independent production) more than workers in other genres, while the genre attracts more people who had never done a television show before. Some of this has apparently to do with the standing of comedy, especially in the public-service sector, as a genre which is considered relatively unimportant and constantly needs to justify its existence.

Focusing on the small television market of Flanders' drama series production, Tim Raats convincingly showed how broadcasters and independent producers increasingly work with public funding. The composition of their budgets reveals dynamic tensions between various players with differing interests, whereby one type of financing works as a catalyst for the other. At the same time, the series production serves for the small "cottage" industry of Flemish television as a vital source of sustainability, professionalization, and continuity. Raats' case is an example of the advantages of small-nation markets for production research: such markets potentially allow for a holistic approach which includes virtually the whole national production in its full complexity. A number of other papers engaged with national or regional policy and public funding systems, especially in Scandinavia, Benelux and the UK, where they strongly influence operations

6) See Georgina Born, *Uncertain Vision: Birt, Dyke and the Reinvention of the BBC* (London: Vintage, 2014).

7) "Make Me Laugh: Creativity in the British Television Comedy Industry." Online: <www.makemelaugh.org.uk>, [accessed 10 July 2015].

of large media institutions such as BBC as well as independent producers' project-based strategies and portfolio careers, and where the field of cultural policy studies developed as a key partner for academic exchange with production studies (such as in the work of Caitriona Noonan and Ruth McElroy, Jamie Steele, Stine Sand Eira, Kim Toft Hansen, Annette Naudin).

One of the two panel discussions involved media practitioners working in academia,[8] and it revealed how different, or even contradictory, mutual expectations and stereotypes these two sectors have of each other. On the one hand, there is the pragmatic idea of media production programs as "conveyor belts" of talent for the biggest employers — the success of such an enterprise seems to be conditioned by close relations the university cultivates with influential industry figures and with changing trends on media job market. From this perspective, the industry needs to know the program of study, and industry needs to know the professors. Such an idea of the academia-industry collaboration seems to be rather one-sided though: where is a room for critical thought about the industry, or for free experiments which only the protected space of the academia can provide? Nonetheless, some of the discussants argued against instrumentalizing film training and stressed ethical, aesthetic, and political aspects of teaching media production. They claimed the aim is not only to study production, but to change it, too - through critical thinking. From the opposite perspective, there were questions asked about how the practitioners feel about being studied by production scholars. This point was an important addition to the well-developed discussion in ethnography on access barriers. Here, the influential practitioners tried to articulate fears and expectations they feel while being studied and analyzed, sometimes without being fully aware of the scrutiny. It seems that there is a lot more in this topic to debate: how could production cultures be studied side by side with the practitioners that decided to bridge the gap between the two spheres, by working *with*, not just *on* industry workers and companies? Or, what is the best practice of internships, how could they feed back into teaching and research?

There have been numerous other interesting papers which I can't discuss in this report. There seem to be also certain blind spots which wait for attention of production and media industry research. John Cladwell pointed to many aspects of the rhizomatic Hollywood industry that remain invisible — among them what he calls "speculative" labor and other forms of secret work and projects, invisible costs, in-kind support, etc. The whole of Central and Eastern Europe seems to be almost absent from these academic discussions, despite the fact that the region's previous state-socialist regimes provide extreme examples of production cultures under more or less direct political control. There appears to be also surprisingly little being said about professional organizations and collective action in European media industries (unlike in the US where scholars closely study issues such as writers' strikes).[9] We will still have to wait to see production-studies based re-evaluations of more traditional issues such as authorial styles, literary adaptations, or many aspects of public-service media. Hopefully these challenges will be addressed by further conferences, back in the pleasant city of Bristol or elsewhere.

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8) Laura Marshall (Icon Films); Kate Ogborn (Fly Films); Rod Stoneman (National University of Ireland, Galway); Frank Mannion (Swipe Films).

9) See e.g. Miranda Banks, *The Writers: A History of American Screenwriters and Their Guild*. New Brunswick (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2015).