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Editorial: Institutions and Agency (Part I)

Paramount budget forms in the early to mid-twentieth century. Reports on French film audiences from the 1950s. The meeting minutes of feminist distributors in 1990s London. Contemporary European auteurs' government-funded forays into science fiction. The television broadcasting of the 2014 World Cup in the football-phobic United States. Millennial British horror screenwriting. 1970s listings magazines, Asian-themed film festivals, small and medium-scale television production collectives in the age of Netflix.

At first glance this listing seems unhinged of any organisational principle, whether historical, national, theoretical, methodological or ideological. To some it might sound like a random excerpt from a large academic conference programme, a desperately stitched-up panel or – seeing as these are some of the subjects of articles that appear in this issue and the forthcoming Part II – the permissive po-mo-anything-goes attitude of a lazy editor. Unrepentant nostalgics and other fantasists will no doubt see this as a symptom of an atomised discipline and intellectual culture; those accessing each article individually via search engines, blissfully ignorant of the contributions that surround it and of this introduction, will hardly blink an eye.

To clear up any confusion: despite the apparent idiosyncrasy of subject matter, the articles that comprise *Film Studies* 13 and the forthcoming Part II represent a double issue that shares a common approach to 'Institutions and Agency'. This is an album, rather than a collection of singles. To this end, the diversity is strategic and the conceit is simple: to agitate for and provide productive examples of film and media scholarship that attends both to the larger drama and the individual player, the panorama and the close-up, the macro and the micro. How can film and media scholarship effectively attend to both larger networks *and* human agency? This special issue seeks to answer this question by collecting a series of varied case studies that illustrate such comprehensive approaches.

Naturally, the drive to provide more productive explanations by answering

larger and more comprehensive questions is not entirely unprecedented. If anything, there has been ever growing interest in such endeavours, ways of researching that bear various names. Under the auspices of the new film history, media industry studies, the new political economy of communication and other monikers, film and media scholars have increasingly investigated institutions. This trend agitates against the long disciplinary tradition by which media have been appreciated as the expressions of subjective visions and artistic designs. To be sure, the new institutional approaches are not without their critics, who have maligned them as inflexible, reductive and ignorant of extra-economic motivations, cultural inflections and individual decisions. (In my editorial to Part II I take up and engage with this scholarship.) But clearly, good practice (of which the following articles provide constructive examples) shows that it is possible to devote attention to larger structures without forgoing the nuances and subjectivities of individuals.

The articles, arranged here in rough chronological order of subject, precede reviews of books that pertain to this approach. To be sure, some of the authors pay more attention to agency and others more to institutions. It should not be the dogma of comprehensive approaches that in every case a prescribed fifty-fifty division obtains. Rather, it must be left to the scholar's judgement and the facts and implications of individual cases themselves to determine how phenomena are best understood.

William Thomas McClain revises long-held beliefs about agency and the Hollywood studio system using an unlikely source: Paramount budget documents from 1927 to 1958. Revealing how the pre-printed forms and other related organisational structures (e.g., budgeting meetings) contributed substantially to systems of surveillance, created (sometimes imbalanced) regimes of knowledge and code-terminated power relationships within the company, McClain confirms Howard S. Becker's dictum that all art and media contain signs of the cooperative work that creates them.¹ Furthermore, he points to instances where 'below-the-line' workers exerted significant influence over the production outcomes of canonised 'auteurs' such as Billy Wilder.

Eric Smoodin's article demonstrates an example of institutions investigating agency, in this case cinema-going in postwar France. After the Second World War, both private film corporations and the national government took great interest in deciphering the leisure habits of locals, particularly in the context of what was perceived to be a 'crisis' of diminishing cinema attendance. Smoodin reveals how such surveys and reports took on national importance and in France addressed not only the economic needs of the industry, but also intervened in debates about what it meant to be French.

Distribution is a film world activity with relatively low barriers to entry. For this reason, small distribution companies have arisen seemingly out of nowhere to disrupt conventional networks and fill market gaps. As a result of their modest size, however, these organisations have received less scholarly attention than they often deserve, considering the important work they do to connect films with

audiences. Julia Knight investigates one such case study: Cinenova, a London-based cooperative with a feminist ethos. Examining Cinenova's management committee meeting minutes from the 1990s, when the distribution company was under serious pressure because of diminishing subsidies, Knight makes conclusions about how management practices had substantial effects on the reception of female filmmakers in the United Kingdom, and how studying such examples can benefit our understanding of distribution, both historical and in the digital age.

Aidan Power's contribution examines the role of science fiction at the Council of Europe's film funding programme, Eurimages. In this, he seeks to reconcile a seeming paradox: while the Council of Europe aims to promote its institutional goals of European integration and harmony, dystopian science fiction films – especially those delivered by recognised arthouse darlings such as Michael Haneke and Lars von Trier – are programmed and incentivised to challenge conventional views and undermine the official, received wisdom. Balancing an analysis of filmmakers' aesthetic choices with an investigation of institutional rhetoric and funding, Power concludes that even if individual instances seem to undermine the project of European fraternity, the macro-industrial logic of cross-border co-production attenuates these tensions to a substantial degree.

Marco Cucco re-examines 'runaway productions' and, in particular, how the blockbuster, a mode of filmmaking most associated with Hollywood, has increasingly left its southern California location and skill base in recent years. Using a largely quantitative approach – but nevertheless attuned to policy changes both in California and in the regional and international organisations charged with attracting film productions to their areas – Cucco demonstrates how blockbuster outsourcing serves many aesthetic, economic, cultural and social needs.

Finally, Jon Lewis looks back to a most recent cultural event: the US broadcasting of the 2014 World Cup. In the US media and popular culture, 'soccer' has hardly been portrayed as an 'American' sport, despite its popularity among young people, immigrants, the middle classes and, indeed, the rest of the world. Examining the policies, machinations, programming and business models of the major television channels that broadcast football, and especially ESPN, Lewis shows how a complicated set of motivations and target demographics, and a particularly US-American nationalism, inflected the 2014 World Cup coverage and the blunder to allow Fox to outbid the Disney subsidiary for future broadcasting rights.

Before turning to these pieces, it is important to make a final note. The response to my call for papers – both direct solicitations and broader trawls for interest – was positive and overwhelming. In miniature, this demonstrates that a whole host of researchers, from nearly every imaginable corner of the discipline, is seeking to harness more flexible and comprehensive approaches and methodologies. Unfortunately, not every one of the promising ideas could find the space to appear as an article in this issue or Part II. Nevertheless, these pieces will find other

outlets, embedding the belief, infiltrating and commingling, propelling individual career arcs and embarking on a long march through the institutions.

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Issue editor

Note

- 1 Howard S. Becker, *Art Worlds*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982, p. 1.