

Editorial: Institutions and Agency (Part II)

In my issue 13 editorial I introduced the concept behind the *Film Studies* double issue on 'Institutions and Agency': to provide productive examples of how film and media scholarship can investigate the larger drama and the individual player, the panorama and the close-up, the macro and the micro.¹ That is, to undertake research that understands phenomena comprehensively, rather than in a solely piecemeal or wholly synoptic fashion.

The larger impetus behind this approach can be traced back at least to late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century institutionalism, a body of work that inflected a number of disciplines. Émile Durkheim, Max Weber and Thorstein Veblen represent a sampling of the prominent thinkers who fundamentally altered how we understand sociology and economics by widening horizons from rational individuals to social frameworks. More recently, developments in the social sciences put the delicate balance between institutions and agency back into debate, with Anthony Giddens's work on structuration being an archetypal and hardly isolated attempt to further the cause.² And in our young field, pioneers such as Thomas H. Guback, Thomas Schatz and Douglas Gomery have done their part to examine film industries, film studios and production cultures with due attention to both the genius and the system.³ Even David Bordwell and collaborators' seminal studies, which dissected the interface of Hollywood's artistic innovation and industrial history, must be understood as attempts in this very vein.⁴

Today, in the broad discipline of film and media studies, important work is coalescing around the banner of 'media industry studies'. Works by scholars such as John Caldwell, Jennifer Holt, Alisa Perren and Paul McDonald and the new journal *Media Industries* have paved the way in championing a critical sensitivity to the inner workings of production and reception cultures and advocating a collective investigation of texts, producers, audiences, culture and history.⁵ Beyond a shift of focus from directors (the traditional organisational principle for film study) to 'below-the-line' and other less visible agents, certain data-collection methods mark much of this research: perhaps, above all, interviews and fieldwork,

but certainly also traditional archival work and the assimilation of quantitative and qualitative methods. In Part I of this double issue, to cite only a few examples, Julia Knight re-examined a feminist distribution collective through its management meeting minutes and William Thomas McClain proposed a new look at Paramount via company budget documents. In this issue Alison Peirse as well as Andrew Spicer and Steve Presence use interviews with both media creatives and managers (often overlapping categories) to make conclusions about how the industry ticks and why we see what we see. Marco Cucco (in issue 13) and Roddy Flynn and Tony Tracy (here) quantitatively analyse blockbusters and Irish films, respectively, to complement and complicate prior qualitative examinations.

As is to be expected with any development or direction, not all scholars have welcomed the burgeoning and expanding reach of media industry studies. Some of these critiques have come more or less from within, that is, from the proponents of the political economy of communication, in many ways a cognate or precursor movement. Eileen Meehan and Janet Wasko have bemoaned what they deem to be a blithe and uncritical approach. 'Despite an occasional reference to post-Fordism or neoliberalism', they write about the likes of Schatz, Caldwell, Holt and Perren, 'these scholars erase the larger context within which media industries, corporations, production, employment, audiences, fans, and artefacts exist: capitalism'.⁶ If the political economy of communications and media industry studies share overlapping objects of enquiry but differ on the point of methods, other colleagues no doubt have even more fundamental disagreements, wondering for instance whether we should be spending our time investigating larger structures and constellations when there are plenty of individual films worthy of our interpretation and analysis.

Such objections are not to be taken lightly. Indeed, comprehensive approaches, whether called media industry studies or any other name, cannot simply describe and celebrate. They must judiciously analyse, decipher and evaluate. That said, one wonders whether Meehan and Wasko's rejoinder could in fact be aimed at any scholarship in any discipline. Shoddy, third-rate work is descriptive and derivative; excellent research illuminates pressing questions, produces real insights and expands the boundaries of what we know and want to know. To be sure, comprehensive approaches to film and media are prone to pitfalls and myopic visions. Such eventualities hardly preclude the prodigious potential, however.

It is not the intention of this special double issue to convert the unconvertible. But perhaps the productive examples that follow might help proselytise for a comprehensive approach to institutions and agency, among those open to the call.

Andrew Spicer and Steve Presence seek to understand the potential for small and medium production outfits in a distribution landscape dominated by Netflix, Amazon, BBC iPlayer and so on. Analysing the cultures of the UK production companies RED Production and Warp Film through interviews and other means, Spicer and Presence uncover the complex networks that the senior management negotiate with both creative personnel and other industry agents in order to produce some of the most dynamic and successful content available in Britain.

Roddy Flynn and Tony Tracy turn to recent Irish film as a way to put forward a quantitative-qualitative approach to national cinema. Constructing a database of 242 Irish Film Board-funded productions between 1993 and 2013, Flynn and Tracy uncover clear generic and narrative patterns, recurring themes and character types, filtering these findings through the shifting policy debates and structures effected by various agents at the IFB.

Script development and British horror are the focus of Alison Peirse's contribution. Through a series of interviews Peirse reconstructs the story and screenplay development of *The Awakening* (2011). Honing in on the persistent rewriting of the Florence character, Peirse demonstrates how the long, collaborative development process (with personnel joining and leaving the project frequently) generated problematic gender perceptions, a widespread issue in the national industry.

Examining four specialist Chinese-language film festivals in London, Luke Robinson scrutinises the role that individual workers play in sustaining the global film festival network. Via interviews with organisers, who contemplate their labour and strategic collaborations (e.g., with directors, sales agents or other organisers), Robinson reconfigures the 'network' as an 'assemblage', a process that yields insights about how to address issues of scale when investigating the festival circuit.

Finally, and before a series of book reviews pertaining to the issue theme, Richard Lowell MacDonald revisits *Monthly Film Bulletin*, the British Film Institute's former review organ. Examining the role of individual writers in the context of the magazine and its institutional imperatives to cover all new releases, MacDonald unearths insights into taste cultures and critical purpose, but also the effects of constraints on creative people writing about creativity.

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Notes

- 1 Mattias Frey, 'Editorial: Institutions and Agency (Part I)', *Film Studies* 13 (2015): 1–4; here esp. 1.
- 2 See Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of a Theory of Structuration*, Cambridge: Polity, 1984.
- 3 See, for example, Thomas H. Guback, *The International Film Industry: Western Europe and America since 1945*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969; Thomas Schatz, *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era*, New York: Pantheon, 1988; Douglas Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System*, London: British Film Institute, 1985.
- 4 See David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1985.
- 5 See, for example, John Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008; Jennifer

Holt and Alisa Perren (eds), *Media Industries: History, Theory and Method*, Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

- 6 Eileen R. Meehan and Janet Wasko, 'In Defence of a Political Economy of the Media', *Javnost - The Public* 20:1 (2013): 40. See also Eileen R. Meehan and Janet Wasko, 'Critical Crossroads or Parallel Routes? Political Economy and New Approaches to Studying Media Industries and Cultural Products', *Cinema Journal* 52:3 (2013): 150-7.