

Studies in Eastern European Cinema
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A first of its kind production studies meeting at Brno: Screen Industries in East-Central Europe, Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic, 11–13 November 2011

1. Screen Industries in East-Central Europe, a conference held at Masaryk
2. University, Brno, Czech Republic, 11–13 November 2011, was a first of its
3. kind. On the one hand it was an attempt by the host – the energetic Petr
4. Szczepanik of Masaryk – to broadly introduce and establish the swiftly emerg-
5. ing field of audio-visual production and screen industry studies within the
6. region at hand. On the other, the meeting served as an inventory of what sort
7. of work had already been done in and on the region as well as what appeared
8. to be emerging. In many ways an intimate affair, at least compared to large
9. general film studies conferences like the annual SCMS or its ever-growing
10. European counterpart NECS and the meeting was fertile in numerous

ways. As the focus and set theme were clear and most of the attendees and presentations unproblematically subscribed to it, a productive framework for scholarly exchange, occasionally lively discussion as well as personal contacts and networking was soon established.

The event had attracted some 30 academics as well as a group of local students, who also attended the entire conference, and besides scholars from what appeared as the core East-Central European nations of the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Poland, scholars from the United Kingdom, Germany, France, the United States and other nations were also present. Some eighteen papers were delivered in addition to the keynote address by Anikó Imre of the University of Southern California, and entitled 'Brave new European media industries – a regional research agenda'. Moreover, almost all presentations were concerned with production matters in the geographical core region even if a few papers also dealt with co-production issues and with film production in the former Soviet Union – evidently a ubiquitous presence in these parts for many decades.

To get matters somewhat in perspective one may thus first consider how production studies has been promoted lately as a new area of investigation with its own theories and methods. In the programme for another similarly themed conference, which took place in Stockholm in 2011, the emerging field was consequently depicted in the following way: Production Studies has developed into a new field of inquiry going beyond traditional examinations of authorship, industry structure, or active audiences. Production Studies explore media as production cultures. Studying production as a culture involves gathering empirical data about careers and contracts, collaboration and conflicts, routines and rituals. Production Studies likewise involves the analytical work with texts and practices readily available: trade stories and practitioner interviews, the films themselves, biographies, or even promotional material disclosing the 'behind the scenes' of filmmaking. (for more details see <http://ddata.över-blog.com/xxxyyy/1/84/11/48/ConfStockholm.pdf2011-11-16>)

Nevertheless, as laudable as the above cited policy statement appears, it is also imperative to bear in mind that it is offered in terms of ideals and objectives rather than as a well-established practice of investigation or as a research agenda. Due to difficulties of access for instance, it is not always a viable option to study contracts, conflicts, collaboration or, for that matter, to interview studio executives. Similarly, the time and cost involved in extended anthropological observation can additionally be an obstacle far pressed for time academics. As one visits these kinds of conferences and panels, quite a bit of 'traditional' examination of authorship, industry structure, global variations, co-production, wage levels and gender relations within the production world as well as archival research thus seem to find its way under the discursive umbrella. At Brno, I had the impression that it was rather the latter kind of investigation that was being promoted. By using the term 'Screen Industries' in the conference title, it seems the organizers aimed for a wider perspective than just production studies proper.

Imre's talk was concerned with the present. She took as her example the international television series *The Borgias* (2011), a runaway production created by Irish film-maker Neil Jordan and starring British actor Jeremy Irons. The series was shot in Hungary and employed considerable numbers of local below the line personnel during its making. She suggested that the sheer circumstance that such megaprojects are routinely made in

1. Budapest – and occasionally in Prague and elsewhere in the vicinity – gives
2. the region a centrality of place with regard to audio-visual production in
3. Europe and even the world. This fact, in turn, almost in itself legitimizes
4. an expansionist agenda of research where popular culture as a field, among
5. other things, needs to be more vigorously addressed by regional schol-
6. ars than has been done previously. With its double perspective, the talk
7. seemed to be able to include both a geographical insider's and an outsider's
8. viewpoint simultaneously; the keynote almost seemed aimed as a promo-
9. tional summons for the conference participants as well as for film studies
10. scholars within the region.

11. A few further papers also dealt with contemporary matters but with a
12. few exceptions they seemed to some extent descriptive, mainly depicting the
13. present post-socialist national production setup in various parts of the region
14. rather than being critical or theoretical investigations as such. The now almost
15. two-decade-long boom in runaway production, at first in Prague – sometimes
16. dubbed 'the Hollywood of the East' – while later increasingly gravitating
17. towards Budapest, was accordingly paid scant attention. This is something of
18. a pity since that bustling activity in no small part forms part of the surrounding
19. world's – at least film scholars engaged by production matters – conception
20. of the kind of film and audio-visual environment East-Central Europe has
21. become. Perhaps consolation can be found in the fact that the host Petr
22. Szczepanik has previously contributed to this issue. As the conference drew
23. towards its end, a sequel in a year's time was tentatively announced. Maybe
24. that will be the occasion for further investigation in connection with the runa-
25. way scene.

26. What rather seemed to distinguish the proceedings, at least in contrast
27. with a growing number of other meetings centered on production stud-
28. ies and screen industries was, first, what may be described as a compar-
29. atively prominent *historiographical and national dimension*. At the SCMS
30. conference in New Orleans in the spring of 2011 there were several panels
31. centered on production. Typically, one of them took its cue from the differ-
32. ent outcomes since the introduction of tax breaks and public incentives
33. in various US states during the last fifteen years. Nothing similar was put
34. forward at Brno, even if public incentives are as imperative a factor behind
35. audio-visual production in East-Central Europe as they are in the various
36. regions and states of the United States. In its place were intricate descrip-
37. tions, critical consideration and analyses of procedures that quite often took
38. place a while ago.

39. In this regard, Ivan Klimeš' exposé on how comparatively small measures
40. were needed to adapt the film industry as Czechoslovakia became a social-
41. ist state after World War II, seemed exemplary. As the Sudetenland was
42. annexed in 1938 and part of the region was transformed into the Protectorate
43. of Bohemia and Moravia in 1939, the Germans gradually shaped the film
44. industry into a centralized, authoritarian and state-controlled setup which
45. the communists saw little need to radically adjust as they eventually came to
46. power. The paper developed a linear history, described causal developments,
47. was empiricist in nature and appeared based on thorough archival research.
48. Likewise, and as hinted at already, besides a few papers on co-productions,
49. what was at stake was very much the national cinema of the countries in the
50. region. For instance, industrial circumstances surrounding Czech language
51. films, produced by local companies for primarily the domestic audience was
52. most often the type of subject covered. As previously mentioned, runaway

production was unfortunately not much considered, neither was the vast production of audio-visual pornographic material even if Budapest reputedly is the porn hub of Europe.

Second, from a certain *ideological and theoretical standpoint*, the conference also seemed to differ in various ways. Accordingly, production studies can sometimes turn into a discourse of discontent of sorts. Consequently, quite a few studies have been conducted from a perspective informed by what very broadly can be termed as Marxist critical theory. With that, a certain kind of language and certain kinds of theoretical assumptions and attempts recurrently become part of the mix. Take the 2005 book *Global Hollywood 2*. Here the international film industry, abbreviated as 'Hollywood' throughout, is almost presented as one great conspiracy, out to get the best out of both the world's exploited film workers as well as the various regions that attempt to attract productions. Beyond this in many ways very impressive work, there is no shortage of papers and articles about labour division and alienation as well as various kinds of exploitation at the hands of global capitalism. This sort of attempts at 'system building', for lack of a better word and theoretical consideration did not take up much time at Brno. In its place, and as briefly discussed, a reliance on more established, empirical, statistical and historical methods of research conduct largely prevailed. Although Marxism, communism and socialism were most certainly mentioned, it was chiefly in connection with the region's former political system and always with at least implicitly critical overtones.

Third, it seemed that the conference and its attendee's presentations were especially rich on *institutional and infrastructural history*. This does not mean that the field in any way is or was entirely investigated, but rather that, among the scholars present, there appeared to be a desire to try to understand and map the mechanisms and workings of the audio-visual systems of the past. This, of course particularly pertained to the socialist period, which in most of East-Central Europe lasted some 45 years, as compared to the approximately seven decades within the former Soviet Union. Consequently, an abundance of diagrams, statistical records and charts in different forms were included in many of the PowerPoint presentations. Here, the set-up of the former state-controlled institutions and structures responsible for censoring, making, distributing and showing films was illustrated and scrutinized in various ways. This trend may perhaps have something to do with a still existing broader tendency to process and mediate the end of communism and the Cold War and what on occasion has been questioned as the incomplete 'system-changes' in the wake of 1989. Regardless, this penchant is in a number of ways commendable. Ever since the broad introduction of film support, subsidies and much later on tax incentives in Western Europe during the decades following World War II, films have in certain ways also been produced by 'institutions' rather than by independent film-makers and companies unreservedly navigating and operating in the market. Yet there is a surprising and widespread lack of knowledge and analysis, at least within the scholarly community, of how these systems and policies really work. What, for instance, are their considerable effects on production cultures and can we predict what the situation would be like in the absence of these particular support systems? Following the path of their East-Central European colleagues would be a good start for remedying this gap.

All in all, the Brno conference was accordingly a very gratifying experience, neither too grand nor so small that one felt the area dealt with to be of

1. only marginal importance. The academic exchanges were lively and repeatedly
2. broadened one's knowledge and horizon, new acquaintances were made,
3. articles were commissioned and the informal chats nurtured one's curios-
4. ity. Local venues where meals were partaken of proved good and the stately
5. Moravian Gallery downtown was an appropriate setting for the main wine
6. reception. Moreover, the conference staff had prepared well and continued to
7. do excellent work throughout the proceedings. In short, one looks forward to
8. the planned 2012 meeting with anticipation.

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