Bridging the Gaps

Screen Industries in East-Central Europe Conference and Theorizing Screenwriting Practice Workshop, Brno, 22–25 November 2012.

Back in 2011, the inaugural Screen Industries in East-Central Europe Conference (SIECE) was driven by the need to complement textual analysis with examinations of the institutional contexts that shape the production and content of films. This was a particularly important step for a region in which such studies have been quite rare. In its second year, the conference expanded in size and included a workshop entitled Theorizing Screenwriting Practice. Whereas the conference was intended to foster debate among screen studies scholars, the workshop was intended to encourage mutually beneficial exchanges between academics and creative practitioners.

Screen Industries in East-Central Europe Conference

The conference itself offered a useful platform for the exchange of ideas among scholars. In particular, it provided a unique opportunity to compare historical and national developments among the constituent film industries of Eastern and Central Europe. The broad range of presentations delivered confirmed that Production Studies is presently a rich and varied field of study.

The first conference panel focused on the bellwether topic of film festivals. Dorota Ostrowska, Stefano Pisu, and Jindřiska Bláhová each considered the complex relations between festivals and state-socialist institutions during the Cold War period. Meanwhile, Aida Vallejo examined the roles festivals played with respect to the production and distribution of documentaries. The second panel was concerned with contemporary relations between the state and the film industries of the former Eastern bloc. Marcin Adamczak broached the question of what constitutes political cinema in post-1989 Poland. In addition, Balázs Varga and Hana Rezková analyzed film funding in Hungary and the Czech Republic respectively. As had been the case with the previous year's conference, this panel provided a much-needed opportunity to compare developments that had taken place in a number of post-communist countries.

Although a panel entitled "Ideology", which was dedicated to textual and reception analyses, stood out from the conference's general industrial-orientation, it confirmed that more traditional approaches to the study of cinema still have a significant role to play in Film Studies. The panel included Drehli Robnik, whose presentation confronted some of the implications of US runaway productions based in Eastern and Central Europe, and asked how they impacted upon the ways region is represented in Western fantasy films. Pavel Skopal detailed how Communist party notions of "ideal" cinema influenced Stalinist-era films such as Czechoslovakia's New Warriors Will Arise (1950). From there, Fernando Ramos Arenas charted the political and ideological struggles against which the Leipzig University Film Club operated from 1956 and 1966.

Contemporary transnational approaches to screen industries were showcased by the "Co-Productions and Commissions" panel. Philip Drake's paper questioned the status of the Scottish film industry, in the context of the London-centered production culture of the United King-

dom, while also considering the implications on that country of Hollywood and Bollywood co-productions and runaway productions. The relationships between East-Germany's DEFA Studios and the country's television industry were taken up by Thomas Beutelschmidt, who argued that the relationship was characterized by a mixture of tension and cooperation that was born out of competing political and artistic goals as well as by the targeting of audiences. The panel continued with Francesco Di Chiara's paper on collaborations between Italian, German, and Yugoslav film institutions, and their different creative ambitions. It was rounded out by Alice Lovejoy's analysis of the competition that existed among socialist-era Czechoslovak producers such as the Army Film Studio.

The "Industrial Sites and Trends" panel opened with Patrick Vonderau's bold and timely overview of digital delivery systems. Thereafter, Konrad Klejsa shed light on the ways in which the Polish city of Łódź has developed into, and been promoted as, a center for film production in that country. Kavin Sanson focused on the place of local creative labor in runaway productions, and city-to-city competition to host them. Lastly, Melis Behlil provided an overview of developments in the Turkish film industry, which unlike most of its European counterparts is able to boast a sizable share of the domestic market.

In addition to these panels, the conference also boasted two keynote addresses. In the first of them, David S. Frey paired an overview of the pre- and postwar Hungarian film industry with an analysis of the films it produced during WWII, paying particular attention to experimental approaches to nationalistic films and those that themetized the idea of nation. The second saw András Bálint Kovács detail how state funding and regulation factored into the Hungarian government's response to the recent collapse of the nation's film industry.

Theorizing Screenwriting Practice

In addition to agreeing that greater attention needs to be paid to screenwriting practices in both film production and scholarship, the participants of this workshop also agreed that specific objects of study are less clear-cut than one might think. As Ian Macdonald suggested in his keynote address, the study of screenwriting requires attention be directed to multiple sites, from completed films and various draft scripts to the discourses of power that develop around and through the process of writing for the screen. Macdonald also listed four questions that have preoccupied contributors to the *Journal of Screenwriting*: How do those involved attempt to convey their ideas? How do they interact when working on a project? How is their work influenced by phenomena such as technology or a specific culture? To what extent does theory influence the organization and conduct of the participants? These questions were approached by the workshop panels.

The first workshop panel, "American Models, European TV", revealed the influence that American models have exerted over post-1989 television production in Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. Media scholar Sylwia Szostak and industry professionals Tomáš Baldýnský, Magda Bittnerová and Gábor Krigler highlighted both the difficulties and opportunities related to the adoption in these post-communist countries of American models, which initiated not only aesthetic changes but different styles of writing and new production strategies

The second panel, "Practices and Communities", was comprised of film scholars. In her presentation, Juliane Scholz detailed the changing historical roles and functions of screenwriting in Germany. Petr Szczepanik explored how, at different stages of script development, top-down political control influenced screenwriting practices in Czechoslovakia from 1945 to 1990. My own presentation attempted to explain how gender stereotypes shape certain film professions in the Czech Republic.

In her keynote address, Jill Nelmes focused on preproduction cooperation between screenwriters and producers in the British film industry, and emphasized the opportunities offered to production studies by archival research, especially its capacity to shed new light on creative development.

Adam Ganz's keynote address positioned screenwriters in relation to other aspects of the industry. Ganz argued that screenplays are adapted in ways that complement different stages of production — writing, casting, shooting, editing — and that this process is extended by new forms of storytelling inspired by website such as YouTube, by computer games, by crowdfunding, and by other interactive platforms. This line of argumentation reminds us of the difficulties in defining our objects of study, as Macdonald's address suggested.

Ganz's paper segued neatly into the next panel, which focused primarily on contemporary screenwriting. Andrew Kenneth Gay delivered a presentation on the teaching of screenwriting and the position of the screenwriter in the age of crowd-funding and micro-budget productions executed outside traditional channels. Balázs Lovas detailed the state of screenplay development in Hungarian movie-making, and Vít Janeček considered whether documentary filmmaking needs scripting at all and if it does what kinds of script should be used. To my mind, one of the most fascinating presentations of the event was Matthias Brütsch's thorough and illuminating analysis of the concept of the three-act structure. Brütsch ultimately concluded that mainstream cinema is more narratively complex than the popular notion of three-act structure might otherwise suggest.

Steven Price's keynote address analyzed the different ways in which characters have been conceptualized by novelists, playwrights, screenwriters and film scholars, including American playwright and screenwriter David Mamet's suggestion that there is no such thing as a character, merely lines on a page. In the subsequent panel focusing on characters, Mirosław Przylipiak focused on contemporary Polish documentary, Agnieszka Kruk on the contemporary practices and teaching of screenwriting in Poland, and Marja-Riitta Koivumäki on the roles of minor characters in Andrej Tarkovsky's film Nostalgia (1983).

The closing panel concentrated on screenwriting pedagogy with a focus on manuals and schools. In her presentation, Bridget Conor suggested that manuals should be taken into account in examinations of screenwriting practice, demonstrating that they not only offer advice on writing screenplays but also serve to position screenwriters in the industry and are commodities in and of themselves. Claus Tieber analyzed screenwriting manuals and seminars from a historical perspective, paying particular attention to Classical Hollywood and New Hollywood storytelling, and stressing that manuals need to be seen as products of specific historical contexts. In addition, Pavel Jech introduced the work of the Czech-born American screenwriting guru František Daniel, and, finally, Talvio Raija provided a history of teaching screenwriting in Scandinavian countries (with a particular focus on Finland).

Although it may seem logical that film scholars need to communicate with film professionals in order to fully grasp the complexity of film production, both the conference and the workshop indicated that two different discourses dominate discussion of film production. On the one hand, is the practical and anecdotal discourse of the industry professionals who shed light on the everyday struggles that are a part of film and television production; on the other, is the discourse of film scholars who try to understand more about how film production works, and about its ideological and aesthetic implications vis-à-vis cinema. At times, common interests emerged across the conference and workshop, particularly the problem of what screenwriting was, what it is, and what it might or even should become. Yet, there remains a gap between these two discourses which, if overcome, may benefit both film professionals and scholars alike. Similar workshops promise to serve as a platform for this type of cooperation and in so doing may help to bridge the gap between film scholars and film professionals in the same way as the SIECE bridges the gap between scholars from different countries.

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