

Petr Szczepanik

On the Ethnography of Media Production

An Interview with Georgina Born

Georgina Born is Professor of Music and Anthropology at the University of Oxford. She is a classically trained anthropologist who turned to the study of art and media production in such diverse fields as television, contemporary music, “art-science”, and information technologies. She is perhaps best known for her pioneering ethnographies of two major cultural institutions: the BBC, at the time of its transformation under the influence of the neo-liberal policies of the late 1990s and early 2000s; and the influential French computer music institution, IRCAM (Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique) in the mid 1980s. In her work, she combines long-term ethnographic research with a strong theoretical perspective on cultural production, drawing in the process from Michel Foucault’s genealogical method and Pierre Bourdieu’s field theory.

Her books include *Uncertain Vision: Birt, Dyke and the Reinvention of the BBC* (2004), *Rationalizing Culture: IRCAM, Boulez, and the Institutionalization of the Musical Avant-Garde* (1995) and *Western Music and its Others: Difference, Representation, and Appropriation in Music* (edited with D. Hesmondhalgh, 2000). Two further edited collections, each with major Introductions, came out in 2013: *Music, Sound and Space: Transformations of Public and Private Experience*, and *Interdisciplinarity: Reconfigurations of the Social and Natural Sciences* (edited with A. Barry). Between 2010 and 2015, Born is overseeing a research programme entitled “Music, Digitization, Mediation: Towards Interdisciplinary Music Studies”, which focuses on the transformation of music and musical practices by digitization and digital media; this involves comparative ethnographies in seven different countries (Argentina, Colombia, Cuba, India, Kenya, Canada, and the UK).

Unlike most contemporary US-based “production studies”, Born attends to the historical specificity of each institution or genre, and combines social and aesthetic analysis, to shed light on the social logic of creative decision-making and artistic or media innovation. What is more, in contrast to many sociologically-based studies of art, her complex accounts of institutional and creative practices trace multiple sets of causes — political, economic,

institutional, and aesthetic — and their unpredictable relationships to each others. Central to her theory is the concept of mediation, influenced by Alfred Gell's anthropology of art, which allows her to take into account a wide range of social, material, and temporal factors that are entailed in production, and thus to move beyond the traditional chasms of context and object, and of object and subject. Born's insistence on connecting social and aesthetic aspects of creative work is most apparent in her concepts of situated aesthetics and ethics, which she identifies always in relation to specific genres, and which she finds rooted in particular historical trajectories. Her work also has a marked political dimension. Reconstructing these embedded value systems allows her to develop a critical perspective on what she sees as a decline in creativity at the BBC and an erosion of its public service mission, and on public service institutions' failure to respond adequately to social diversity.

The following interview was recorded on the occasion of Prof. Georgina Born's visit to Masaryk University, Brno, in October 2012. In her seminar on ethnography of media production, Born taught a group of students who were themselves involved as intern-ethnographers in the study of contemporary production cultures.¹⁾ She explained ethnography as a multi-layered methodology that oscillates between theoretical reflection and participant observation, between synchronic and diachronic perspectives, and between micro (production cultures and practices), meso (organizations) and macro (industries and policies) scales.²⁾ This enabled the students to broaden the localized experiences they had gained in small professional worlds of media practitioners. In June 2013, Prof. Born returned to Czech Republic to attend the annual conference of the European Network for Cinema and Media Studies (NECS), at which she delivered a keynote address entitled "Media Politics 2.0: from the BBC to African Media Capitalism." In this interview, Born maps her ethnographic approach, one which has underwritten undoubtedly the most elaborate and original work on European media production cultures.

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Can you situate the ethnography of media production in your professional biography? How did you get to the point of studying modernist music, then a public service broadcasting institution, and finally digital media and global music culture? To what extent was your training as an anthropologist useful and sufficient to study those contemporary cultural institutions and trends?

The important thing is that I was myself involved as a musician, and I also did soundtracks for experimental films and television programs in Britain, until my first child was born when I was 33. My stepfather was a theatre director and a filmmaker; he directed operas, and I spent my childhood watching him at rehearsals. I was trained as a classical musician as a child; I went to the Royal College of Music but dropped out because

1) They conducted participant observation in film or television crews where they simultaneously worked as assistants; this collective ethnography was part of an EU-funded project called "FIND" (www.projectfind.cz).

2) On Georgina Born's methodology, see "The Social and the Aesthetic: For a Post-Bourdieuian Theory of Cultural Production", *Cultural Sociology*, vol. 4, no. 2 (2010), pp. 1–38; and 'Reflexivity and Ambivalence: Culture, Creativity and Government in the BBC', in Brian Moeran and Ana Alačovska (eds.), *Creative Industries: Critical Readings, Vol. 3: Organization* (London: Berg, 2011), pp. 245–273.

I knew I wouldn't be a soloist. Then I went to Chelsea School of Art for a year and enjoyed it a lot. After art school, I began to work with the experimental rock band Henry Cow, and we toured Europe continuously for two years. I was twenty to twenty-two years of age at the time.

By this time, I had decided I wanted to do a degree, and I did anthropology. I already had a considerable background in music, art, and cultural production. I was very taken by anthropology, got a Ph.D. grant, and, when I tried to decide what to do with my Ph.D., it seemed to me I might begin to write about music. I could see that ethnography could be used in very interesting ways to illuminate aspects of contemporary Western music. It happened that I was with a group playing for a dance troupe at the Centre Pompidou, and we were shown around the place that I would later write about: IRCAM (Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique), a globally influential modernist computer music institute run by Pierre Boulez. I thought it would be extremely interesting to study, but I didn't really have an angle, an agenda: I wasn't a modernist composer, although, in London, I had played in a number of contemporary music ensembles — with Michael Nyman, I played the music of Steve Reich and Terry Riley and so on — so I played a lot of contemporary music.

When I went to do that research,³⁾ it proved to be a very powerful method of addressing the way cultural production proceeds, and that particular study was all about the nature of the institution, and it's a public institution. I felt that the reason I had some insight and some instant questions was because of my background as a musician and an artist. I had been to East Berlin by then; we had toured all over Europe, playing for the left, the Communist Party in Italy, far left parties in France, the Communist Party in Britain and so on. So a lot of questions I had were cultural-political questions. All of this informed the study I made of IRCAM, which became my first book. The idea of taking a situation of cultural production as a total social event, and addressing it quite carefully — the labor relations, the nature of the social relations and social hierarchies, the gendering of production — all of this was informed by my early years.

You just explained how your interest in institutions of cultural production emerged from your previous experience, but how did media come specifically in to play? There was a shift in your work from music to the BBC, which is a more complex media institution.

But remember that IRCAM was not just about music, it was also about bringing computers and IT to music. So my book and a number of papers at that time were actually about the cultures of computing. In fact, I wrote ethnographic papers on software before anyone else did. This is the early 1990s. So in IRCAM, there was a lot of writing of software, quite high-level artificial-intelligence oriented software for music: expert systems. And there were links to media industries: a number of people doing this at IRCAM came from Lucasfilm, so there were direct links to the American entertainment scene, where the same software ideas were being used in computer-based visual simulation. So that early work was also about media, but new media as we call it now.

3) Georgina Born, *Rationalizing Culture: IRCAM, Boulez, and the Institutionalization of the Musical Avant-garde* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

What happened was that I began getting jobs in media departments. My first job was with Roger Silverstone, who became the doyen of audience studies. I was his assistant and a lecturer, and we created a degree in Communication Studies at Brunel University. After three years, I went to the Department of Media at Goldsmiths' College, and there I taught the basic first years, second years and so on, running the teaching program. I was then in an environment where to work on music was not considered particularly relevant, because music is always considered not to be part of the mainstream of Media and Communication Studies.

So I needed to go in a new direction with my research, and I dreamed up the idea of doing another major cultural institution, and the BBC had not been studied in that way. There had been particular studies, like that by Philip Schlesinger, who had done a kind of ethnography of the newsroom in his book *Putting "Reality" Together*, which he wrote from a very specific leftist position.⁴⁾ But it seemed that nobody had ever tried, or certainly had never succeeded, in getting the access needed to do an ethnographic study of the BBC. I decided to try, and I applied for a grant which gave me three years out. I began in early 1996 and conducted two years of fieldwork inside the corporation.

What I didn't say earlier was anything about anthropology. You might have thought that the story of my career — that is, being involved as a musician and then going to study anthropology and then taking the anthropology to look at cultural production — was unproblematic. But actually it's very significant that I applied for an anthropology job right after my Ph.D. and I didn't get it, and that began a pattern. I would often apply for an anthropology job and would always be the runner-up! That happened to me at Oxford and at Cambridge. Each time I was the runner-up to an insider who got the job. It has actually been a quite tense relationship in my career, because I trained as anthropologist in a very heterodox department, although a rather important one: at University College London. And UCL was always famous for not being like Oxford or Cambridge, not being traditionalist. We would read in many fields: cultural studies, sociology, history, development studies; anything that was adjacent to the concerns of anthropology. It was not a purist anthropology degree. This helps to explain why I felt completely free to take the different interdisciplinary directions that I have in my career.

My Ph.D. on IRCAM became high-profile because it was critical of Boulez's institution, and that was controversial. The book was published by the University of California Press, and people in musicology were very excited because it was so new and daring to write critically on Boulez. And within a couple of months, I got a post-card, out of the blue, from a very renowned American anthropologist, George Marcus,⁵⁾ who was famous for taking anthropology in new directions in the mid 1980s, and he wrote that this was a wonderful book: "well done". We stayed quite close ever since. The point is that I had quite independently, on my own, done what the Americans were advocating in two important books at the time: *Writing Culture* and *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*, both co-edited or co-authored by George Marcus. These books were advocating a revolution in anthropology: that it must begin to study our own cultures, to study Western institutions

4) Philip Schlesinger, *Putting "Reality" Together: BBC News* (London – New York: Methuen, 1987).

5) James Clifford and George E. Marcus (eds), *Writing Culture: the Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1986); George Marcus, Michael M. J. Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

and forms of professional power; that it should collaborate with both political-economic and cultural studies approaches. I didn't know about those books when I did my fieldwork in 1984 and 1985. They came out in 1986, but somehow I had arrived quite autonomously at the same point — doing these kinds of things that avant-garde American anthropology was advocating. However, all in all, my work has somehow been judged too heterodox and eclectic for the mainstream in anthropology, and this rather saddens me in career terms, because the discipline to which I feel closest intellectually is anthropology, in terms of the basic approach that I take.

So, I began to be hired in media departments, and in fact I was rather reluctant, but I needed to have a job! So I got a job in the Department of Media and Communications at Goldsmiths' College, which is probably the liveliest university in Britain for the arts and humanities, for cultural studies, media studies, and so on. I had eight years there, and towards the end of it I took time to do the fieldwork on the BBC. It was at the end of my BBC fieldwork that I applied for and was offered a job at Cambridge. In fact two jobs: first, a Senior Research Fellowship at King's College, to write up my BBC book; and then a lectureship in the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences. My brief was to teach media in the sociology stream. In fact one man had pioneered this: John Thompson, who was my predecessor. John wanted to do different things, and needed somebody to take over the teaching of media. I was in the sociology group within Social and Political Sciences, and I was the primary person teaching media in that context, which was hugely popular with the students; so I had many incredibly smart students wanting to study media, effectively media and cultural sociology, but I also widened it to teach anthropology of media.

So the BBC ethnography came, frankly, out of me being inserted in the Goldsmiths' Media department and feeling "I must do something!". And I found it an exciting challenge. Similarly to IRCAM, my philosophy was "I don't know enough to have a prior position on what I'm going to say" about the BBC. Indeed, in neither of those ethnographies did I know in advance what I wanted to say. I see this stance as an important ethical commitment on the part of the anthropologist. You prepare for fieldwork by reading a lot, filling in with any existing literature that relates to where you are going to work; so before the IRCAM study, I read a lot of Boulez's writings, which are very Adornian, and for the BBC study there was a lot of history and policy literature, as well as the BBC's own documentation. But at the start of the fieldwork you must begin again with an open mind, trying to take the temperature of *this* institution, of *this* culture.

Were you aware, at the time of your work on the BBC, of the existing tradition of ethnography of film and TV production, which is now being rather constructed retrospectively, mostly by American scholars, and which supposedly started in the 1940s with Leo Rosten and Hortense Powdermaker and continued into the 1980s with Todd Gitlin and Horace Newcomb, to be finally taken up in the 2000s by the production studies of John Caldwell and his students? Or, is this tradition rather an artificial construct that responds to current trends in media studies or in media culture itself?

No, I didn't know of these books. You've noticed how American-centric this history is, and the same is true of the history of anthropology! It's one of my problems in recent years: how ethnocentric the Americans are about their scholarship. The genealogy you've out-

lined, which is being constructed now, in order to legitimize or try to consolidate and produce a kind of spurious retrospective unity: well, I guess we all need to legitimise what we do sometimes. But my own research was not informed by any of this literature; I just stumbled into it because I wanted to work on production, and because I always have done. Remember that I was doing this research, from the early 1980s on, in the context of the overwhelming turn in media studies toward audiences and in cultural studies toward reception. My closest girlfriend is Sonia Livingstone, we had our first jobs together, and she is supreme in audience studies. But my orientation from the very beginning — I think because of my background and my fascination with creative practices and creative processes — was toward production.

But in the face of the overwhelming wave of interest in reception — even in film studies, with people like Annette Kuhn — rather than production, I was always the odd one out, and people were always asking: why are you doing that? So I developed a kind of defence, but actually it's much more than defence. It's a positive account. I argued that it is an ontological issue: it is production that results in the cultural object or text with which audiences then have to engage. Even if we don't take a textual-determinist position, which we should not, the point is that production is prior, temporally and ontologically prior, to reception, and it creates conditions within which reception can occur. We should therefore attend to production because production puts out into the world those texts, objects or things with which policy and public debate then have to engage. In other words, normative issues are framed by production. It's extremely interesting to me that this idea was not fashionable, that it didn't seem to convince people, and then in Britain, since the early 2000s, a lot of my friends, including Sonia, have become interested and involved in policy, and suddenly they are concerned with issues of production. And by the way, perhaps the leading figure in cultural industry and production studies worldwide, David Hesmondhalgh, was my first ever Ph.D. student at Goldsmiths' and is clearly very influenced by my work; so the tradition I founded also lives on.

That was a long self-justification. But back to your question: no, there never was a thing called production studies when I was doing my work. David Hesmondhalgh, as my first Ph.D. student, was a very smart guy, and he came to work on music with me, writing his Ph.D. on independent, post-punk music labels and the early period of electronic dance musics. He was already very interested in questions of the organizational side of the dance labels, and why it was that you saw a kind of politics of diversity, of cosmopolitanism and anti-racism, being played out even in the organizational forms at this period in the late 1980s and early 1990s in British popular music. Then I got another Ph.D. student, the Canadian Jonathan Burston, who worked on the American "megamusical": basically, the globalization of musicals around the world, and the impact on them of Disney and other corporations. Jonathan did fieldwork inside the musical companies, and wrote a marvellous analysis of the formatting of megamusicals. They are scripted down to the last tiniest detail, formatted and then franchised around the world, and he made a powerful ethnographic study about how this feat was achieved.⁶⁾ So we were basically incubating at Gold-

6) Jonathan Burston, 'The Megamusical: New Forms and Relations in Global Cultural Production' (PhD Dissertation: Goldsmiths College, 1998).

smiths' a little unit doing ethnographies of production. Then David went off and had an amazing career, and became the man writing about cultural industries.

I was invited to the ICA conference (the International Communication Association's annual conference) in 2008, where we had the first production studies pre-conference.⁷⁾ At that time, David made connections with Vicki Mayer, Laura Grindstaff, and other people around John Caldwell, and John was there himself and gave a paper. So these traditions kind of met, and John and I have been in touch ever since: I like his work a lot. I like his work probably more than that of his students. Why? Because he also addresses textuality and questions of the aesthetic. This was very much my thing, something that David, for example, has *not* addressed in his work, until recently at least. David somehow bracketed the whole question of the actual text. But right now, in 2011, we had a preconference on media aesthetics at the ICA, in which I gave the keynote,⁸⁾ and suddenly questions of the aesthetic are coming in. And, actually, already in 2009, I organised an ICA panel on media aesthetics⁹⁾ with Fred Turner and Mark Andrejevic, who is now a very influential scholar writing on media and surveillance. It was quite successful, so, in 2011, they did the all-day preconference on aesthetics, co-organized by David Hesmondhalgh. You can see that I think it was my own initiative that finally put issues of the aesthetic on the agenda at the ICA, which were overdue.

I think we can create genealogies in this. While Americans have this tradition of Powdermaker and so on, I actually don't find Powdermaker's study¹⁰⁾ very interesting, and I don't see much relation between her and Gitlin,¹¹⁾ for example; they come from totally different mindsets. A more important tradition for me is that associated with Howard Becker, and Becker's students. For my Ph.D., I read Becker, Robert Faulkner,¹²⁾ Stith Bennett,¹³⁾ and Edward Kealy, another student of Becker who wrote on the recording studio.¹⁴⁾ So, Becker had generated a sort of interactionist sociological school of ethnography of production, spanning music, film, and other fields. I had also read on the "production of culture" perspective, associated with Richard Peterson, Paul Hirsch and so on, because they had also written influentially on popular music, indeed some of their best work was actually on music.¹⁵⁾ So David also read these people. But we were also coming from the

7) A sponsored session called „Analysing Media Industries and Media Production: An Emerging Key Area for Communication Research". Participants included, in addition to Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh: John T. Caldwell, Graham Murdock, Joseph Turow, Vicki Mayer, Laura Anne Grindstaff, Lisa M. McLaughlin, Michael Curtin, Jyotsna Kapur, Serra Tinic, Amanda D. Lotz, Jonathan Burston and Timothy Havens.

8) The preconference was called „Placing the Aesthetic in Popular Culture: Quality, Value, and Beauty in Communication and Scholarship".

9) The session was called "Putting the Aesthetic Back into Communication, and Vice Versa", with Georgina Born's paper called "For an Analytics of Media Aesthetics".

10) Hortense Powdermaker, *Hollywood, the Dream Factory: an Anthropologist Looks at the Movie-makers* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1950).

11) Todd Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983).

12) See e.g. Robert R. Faulkner, *Hollywood Studio Musicians, Their Work and Careers in the Recording Industry* (Chicago: Aldine-Atherton, 1971).

13) See e.g. H. Stith Bennett, *On Becoming a Rock Musician* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980).

14) See e.g. Edward R. Kealy, 'From Craft to Art: The Case of Sound Mixers and Popular Music', *Sociology of Work and Occupations*, vol. 6 (1979), pp. 3–29.

15) See e.g. Paul M. Hirsch, *The Structure of the Popular Music Industry: the Filtering Process by which Records Are Preselected for Public Consumption* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Institute for Social Research – The University of

British cultural studies and media studies environment, where Marxism and critical political economy were extremely influential, but so were Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams. Williams was incredibly interesting because as a literary scholar and English don, he was in his middle period, when he effectively became a sociologist and wrote *Culture*¹⁶⁾ and other books on the sociology of culture and on cultural institutions. In my own trajectory, I discovered all of this during my Ph.D. at UCL; they didn't make me go into this literature, but I got into it anyway. And then probably more important than any of this for me was reading Bourdieu and Foucault, both of whom were introduced to me in my anthropology degree. In fact, my partner is a scholar named Andrew Barry, and he became one of the leading Foucauldians in Britain. So I used both Foucault and Bourdieu in my IRCAM study; Bourdieu in part because of the importance that he, among sociologists of culture, accords to production, as is evident in his powerful theory of the field of cultural production. This is just a sense of some of these things that were influential on me: not so much the Americans. And although Becker's *Art Worlds* is a really interesting book, its message is quite limited. And Becker, like Bourdieu and much sociological theory, is very poor on linking sociological analysis with history — which has been a defining feature of all my work.¹⁷⁾

You already touched on one important issue which is coming back again and again in film and media studies, and that's the split between people who study industries and people who study texts. In your work you try to reconnect questions of institutions and institutional cultures with texts, critical interpretation and aesthetics. What would you answer to a film scholar who would ask you: how can I enrich my understanding of film text, which I am trained in, trained in textual analysis? How can I enrich this knowledge by doing ethnographies of production communities and institutions?

This goes back to a core interest of mine from the very beginning. I have always had a politics in which I've wanted to argue that production situations and scenes are significant in themselves, whether it's a tiny three-person outfit or a 20,000 person institution like the BBC. My position is therefore that the institutional or organizational form — I'm going to use the term the *social mediation* of a particular cultural practice or creative practice — matters in itself. We should be interested in, and make an analysis of, those social mediations in and of themselves. There is a cultural politics to that. This is probably one of the foundations of my work.

Now, there is also a cultural politics to do with the text. And that matters, too. The key contribution that I hope to have made is to be interested in both without reducing one to the other. The classic rejoinder to the work of people like me is that we are sociologically reductive, that we want to reduce the text or music to the institutional form, or to determining conditions — whether they are economic, political or institutional. Sociologists have accused me of this as much as music people, or the defenders of Boulez. But I want to refute this criticism completely because the key care I have taken in my work is *not* to

Michigan, 1969); Richard A. Peterson and David Berger, 'Cycles in Symbol Production: The Case of Popular Music', *American Sociological Review*, vol. 40, no. 2 (1975), pp. 158–173.

16) Raymond Williams, *Culture* (London: Fontana, 1981).

17) Howard S. Becker, *Art Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

do that. In other words, I can't think of another solution to this problem than taking seriously all the forms of mediation that go into a particular text or cultural object. And it's not only social, it's also discursive and technological, visual, notational, and whatever else is included in this assemblage which is producing something. So my earliest methodological papers were all about the kind of multiple mediations that go into creative practices, and that we should be concerned with all of them. In my IRCAM book, the fact that a particularly pronounced rationalist, hyper-positivistic discourse prevailed about computer music: this was a kind of discursive mediation of the music. But this extremely positivistic and rationalist account of computer music was contradicted by the practices, by the fact that the software was full of bugs and problems and didn't actually work as it was intended to. One of the classic IRCAM claims was that you can reproduce any imaginable sound perfectly, by digital means. Even in the mid 1980s, I was able to show that this is an ideological claim, because there are limits to how well you can reproduce certain complex sounds digitally. And this raised an incredibly important set of questions by highlighting the kind of universalistic account of the digital given by the IRCAM modernists.

So my answer to your film scholars who say "why shouldn't I just read the text?" has several components. One is that if all they are interested in is the vagaries, the evolution and the mutations, and the life history of this genre or this aesthetic — well, good luck! But if we ask questions, and if we want to go beyond some crude accounts like auteurism or other idealizations of authorship, if we want to interest ourselves in why is it that we get particular turns, particular moments of either the opening out of new aesthetic possibilities, or the absolute closure or closing down of new directions in the history of a given genre — than we have to look beyond the text. And my work has always tried to ask questions like "under what conditions does something interesting occur?", or, "why is it, at IRCAM, that actually nothing interesting musically was going on, despite all the claims?" — which was a view I arrived at probably two-thirds of the way into the fieldwork, thinking "there is something about the situation which is not proving to be creatively terribly generative".

One kind of humanities which concerns itself with the text says: "I already know the value of this Kieślowski film, so all I want to do is sit and watch Kieślowski's oeuvre and comment on its marvels, on its low points and high points." I think a higher level of science in humanities, a higher intellectual achievement, would be to say: "Why did Kieślowski happen when he happened? Was he part of a whole wave of Polish film in a certain era? What were the conditions within which films could be made at that time?" Those kinds of question, which also film historians are interested in, are ones that — in the present — we can answer with maximum subtlety by deploying a rich method like ethnography.

You just touched on the issue of causality, or, as you call it, multiple causalities, between the outcomes of cultural production and its social conditions. How do you avoid being reductionist, picturing the conditions as actually determining the products?

One is not necessarily asking immediately the question of determination. As an ethnographer, you first try to understand this complex scene in which production is happening. That's what you are there to do first. Of course, in ethnography you can only really

capture the present. But the present offers up very clear clues to historical processes. And you also have access to secondary sources and to doing oral history. Ethnography is a very opportunistic method. You are picking up the clues from the culture you are observing and from all the other sources in an effort to try to piece together a sense of this production scene now, but also as it has been evolving. I have always, as I said, connected ethnography to history. It is hard to read clues in the present without developing some kind of historical consciousness.

So your first job is to understand this situation in and of itself. And then you are as well interested in the output coming from this production culture. My method is that I listen widely to the modes of analysis and the judgements in and around this culture: I listen to the producers, the values they aspire to and how they evaluate their own and others' creative work; but I also try to take the measure of the bodies of circulating commentaries on that, and that's usually through criticism, by reading critics and journalism and scholarship. In my BBC research, by watching the television shows coming from the production cultures I was studying, listening to the creatives, having some understanding of what they think they are doing and trying to do, and then reading the critics, I put myself and my own analysis in dialogue with these different sources. As an ethnographer, I have to listen to the artist, but also to the cloud of critical discourse around what are they doing, and then take the measure of the textual material myself. After all that, I try to develop a position based on a kind of maximum exposure to everything that is out there discursively. Sometimes I find that I agree with the artist. For example in my BBC work, a documentary filmmaker, Peter Dale, who I followed for some time, would tell me certain things; over the weeks I followed him in pre-production and then in the editing suite he gave me access to some of the thinking and the values behind his film — the things he was aspiring to do with it. And later, when the film was broadcast, I read the critics, which were fairly negative. But at the same time, I was also watching all the other documentaries being produced in this period by the BBC and the rival channels, and listening to the critics' and the industry's debates about them, for instance at the regular TV industry conferences. In this way I built up a strong sense of the state of the various genres and subgenres of television documentary in this period. My own judgment, based on a textual analysis informed by all these soundings, was finally: Peter Dale's film was a very interesting experimental film. In other words, I took an independent stance, not the same as the critics', and Peter had not filled out the account that I gave, although I had listened to his ideas and values. This is the method that I advocate in connecting the ethnography of media production with textual analysis, and I've outlined this in an important methodological paper for the journal *Cultural Sociology*.¹⁸⁾

If we take another area, serial drama, which I described in the BBC book, I was mainly watching the pre-production, listening to script meetings and dialogue with writers.

18) Georgina Born is referring to her ethnographic observation of the editing process of Peter Dale's *THE RETURN OF ZOG* (1997), a documentary film about an Albanian referendum on whether the monarchy should be restored, with Leka Zog as the would-be king, aired as the 20th episode of the BBC documentary strand "Modern Times". See Georgina Born, *Uncertain Vision: Birt, Dyke and the Reinvention of the BBC* (London: Vintage, 2005), pp. 444–448. The methodological paper referred to is "The Social and the Aesthetic: For a Post-Bourdieuian Theory of Cultural Production" (see note 2).

I also spent a lot of time in, and took the temperature of, the Drama Serials Department, getting a strong sense of their cultural referents. They were a very literate and cultured group, attending theatre and very knowledgeable about film. In their script meetings and editorial meetings, they were always seeking to push the genre on. This was very conscious and clearly articulated: they were open to experimental directions, even formal experimentation, and each production was purposefully done in a different way. I watched the shows when they finally came out, and then I read the critics, and in this case the best television critics in Britain were absolutely lauding what they were doing with the serial form. And I agreed with them. What they were achieving was a kind of regeneration of the classic serial form, and they were doing this also in contemporary serials: it wasn't just the classic drama. There was a really golden period in the Serials Department from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s. I am telling you this story because I had done an analysis of conditions in the BBC, and they were very adverse. The reason I am not deterministic is that I could see all these awful, onerous initiatives from management bearing down on this department: the use of market research, constant attempts to tighten budgeting, a whole army of accountants being visited on these productions, constant auditing procedures, and so on. But in the end, my analysis was led by the output, by the texts, by the fact that they were still able to do fantastic work, even in those arduous and anti-creative conditions. This shows that, finally, it is an empirical matter: if a genre is being imaginatively renewed and enlivened, then it seems this autonomous aesthetic invention can even overcome difficult conditions.

As I've argued theoretically, what is vital is to acknowledge the autonomy of the aesthetic on some level. Some genres seemed to find or enjoy a propitious era or moment. Ideas are happening: if there is some sort of autonomy creatively, things can happen. Other genres — and my example in my BBC ethnography was the single television play in the same period — may happen to be at a low point. This particular genre was exhausted in this period; they just couldn't find a way to revivify the single play, to get out of the rut of social realism. The same conditions, but different outcomes.

In this way, my conviction is that we can avoid sociological determinism. However I insist that, whatever the quality of the output, it *matters* that conditions inside the BBC were onerous and difficult in the period of my study. Indeed, within a few years, most of the permanent staff in the Drama Group in the BBC had been shed, and a whole generation of fantastic drama producers in their mid-forties-to-mid-fifties were lost to British television. After the amazing work I'd seen made by these people, it was shocking and sad.

It's very interesting for a film scholar to hear how you are emphasizing aesthetic judgment. You even use some techniques of film criticism and aesthetics, which is quite unexpected from an ethnographer. One of the most striking aspects of your approach is precisely the way you combine social and aesthetic analysis of production cultures. I found especially interesting your concepts of situated aesthetics and ethics, and their relationship to histories of specific genres. How did these concepts emerge in your work? And how do you make them operational in your ethnographic work?

The critical thing about ethnography as a method is that it defies some of the more restrictive and, frankly, boring and dull epistemological precepts that have prevailed in the

humanities and social sciences for decades. One of those ways in which it defies those precepts is that ethnography both aspires to social-scientific rigor and yet it is of course profoundly interpretive. It somehow muddies and traverses that old boundary between a more positivistic social science and a more humanistic interpretive epistemology. One of the ways it manifests this is that, as an ethnographer, in part you are working as a positivistic social scientist using existing theories; so you take theories to the field, and you are sort of testing them. You take theories of political economy, of public-service broadcasting as it supposedly stands outside the market and has freedom and autonomy unlike the mass media and Hollywood. But you don't need to do very much to produce a subtler account of the way in which public service broadcasters are always in competition with commercial broadcasting for legitimacy, larger audiences, and public popularity. Which means: hey, they have to behave rather like commercial broadcasters! Surprise! So you take theories to the field. Often they are rather crude, and you are engaged in applying them deductively, with the aim of improving and amending them. So that's one way ethnography develops its analysis. On the other hand, as an ethnographer you enter into a situation which you know a little about, but not very much, and about which you try to have an open mind, in principle. You are assaulted by an avalanche of things that you didn't know about, that were unanticipated, and you have — first very rapidly and then over a long period of time — to absorb, make some sense of, organize, and finally analyse them. What fieldwork is characterized by is this weird kind of oscillation, moving between the deductive mode and this very inductive, interpretive mode. Both happen at the same time: they are tangled up, and go past each other. Together, they are very powerful.

The most interesting writer on ethnographic method — who is recognised as the leading anthropologist of our day — is a British anthropologist called Marilyn Strathern, who has written with insight about the retrospective nature of ethnographic work, which is to say that you are gathering material without really knowing what you are finally going to be doing with it. You sort of have an intuition during fieldwork that this is highly significant, and sometimes you do know that it's significant; you realize that you must follow this, you must follow that, but then there is something that exceeds your current analysis. Finally, only after fieldwork, you put it all together. And it's often after fieldwork that you retroactively work it through, and find what is important in your material. And some of it is the stuff you already know to be important, but some of it is surprising; you are surprised by your own material, and that actually then changes your analysis.

Once again, to your earlier point about determination and reductive analysis: one of the most powerful elements of ethnographic work is that one can in fact be forced to *change* one's analysis by what one finds. Sideways here, there is a little epistemological moment in Deleuze, in a book of dialogues with Claire Parnet, where he is discussing issues of epistemology and method, and he says: what's at stake in thought and research is not the application of abstractions to a given situation, but rather seeking to find from empirical research complexities that require one to revise the abstractions, to revise the conceptual scheme.¹⁹⁾ That's the most productive way in which empirical research can proceed. I am a big believer in that, and I coined the term post-positivist empiricism as a way of think-

19) Gille Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues* (London: Athlone, 1987), pp. vii–viii.

ing about an empiricism that is primarily oriented toward producing these kinds of conceptual effects.

Now, back to situated ethics and aesthetics. This was given to me by fieldwork. Over my career I have worked with an impressive body of television producers, musicians and contemporary artists (I have also done research on an interdisciplinary field called art-science, where artists and scientists collaborate, and I have just finished a book on interdisciplinarity with my partner Andrew Barry).²⁰⁾ I became convinced of the need to think about positioning, a term that Bourdieu gives us: that is, the ways in which artists and creative producers position themselves in relation to the genres in which they work. Now there is an interesting initial problem of identifying those genres; they are not given to you in a simple way, and often people are working in a confluence of several genres, and so on. Moreover, there are also emergent genres: art-science, for example, is such an emergent, self-defined field which also borders on new media art, bio art and other fields. Having tried to broadly identify where this artist or producer positions herself or himself, the question is then: they are working with certain sets of aesthetic possibilities or horizons, to use the Jaussian term.²¹⁾ What I was very struck by was that one was confronted not only by an aesthetic positioning, but always also by an ethics — an ethics that is radically relative to genre. Television is perhaps the best way to see this, and I don't know if it translates to film. There is something about the wonderful heterogeneity of television, particularly in a big television organization, where you are confronted with people who run a comedy department, who run sit-coms; people involved in popular music, drama, documentary, current affairs, news, sports, or light entertainment. Of course it's a feature of public service broadcasting that they don't come imbued with the cynicism of purely commercial broadcasters. So maybe my idea arose from the conditions of working within the BBC. Whether you are talking to a guy running comedy or a light entertainment producer or a script editor on a single drama, *everybody* had a different kind of ethics, an ethical orientation to the particular nature of their work, an ethics relative to the genre in which they were immersed. And, as I describe in my paper "Reflexivity and Ambivalence,"²²⁾ the ethics are extraordinarily, precisely to do with working in a specific genre. If you are working in sports, it's about achieving things for the sports audience, something particular to the way television sports can fulfil their optimal social and cultural role. If it's popular music radio, than it's about a certain address to the youth of the nation. At the time I was studying the BBC, there was a lot of ethical concern in popular music radio, BBC Radio 1, with diversity — with serving and drawing in young people from ethnic minorities. By the way, it goes without saying that identifying the existence of these distinctive ethics did not guarantee that creative practices, or shows, fulfilled those ethical aspirations.

Another crucial thing about the ethics of popular music radio in the BBC was that the ethic was in a way the aesthetic. The dominant public service ethic was: commercial popular music radio just plays what's the biggest hit now; it simply follows what's happening.

20) Andrew Barry and Georgina Born (eds), *Interdisciplinarity: Reconfigurations of the Social and Natural Sciences* (London - New York: Routledge, 2013).

21) Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetics of Reception* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

22) Georgina Born, 'Reflexivity and Ambivalence: Culture: Creativity and Government in the BBC', *Cultural Values*, vol. 6, nos. 1 & 2 (2002), 65–90.

The man running the popular music radio station in the BBC was at pains to stress to me that his job was not to follow, but in fact to find the talent that was unknown and was producing what was to come. So finding unusual things, and giving a chance to those who would become the next hit-makers, but also the niche stuff that was coming up — they considered all of this their proper role. So that's the kind of ethical stance that the BBC, as a public service broadcaster, can embody in relation to the ongoing evolution and optimization of interesting currents in British popular music.

It was by taking the temperature in a number of genres, and noticing how people would be enunciating an ethical stance that was to do with the very particular challenge of this genre, that brought this issue home to me. The aesthetic was, in a way, the delivery mechanism. Let's return to my example of Peter Dale's BBC documentary *THE RETURN OF ZOG* — about Albania following the fall of the communist regime and the attempts to create democratic government there. Peter's professional politics were, of course, to go in there and to develop a sympathetic portrait of what was going on, which was barely being covered by mainstream journalism. The ethics were to cover unusual aspects of the process and to report acutely about things like armed militias and a great deal of violence, and the threat of the return of the fascist leadership. But these challenges then get transmuted into an aesthetic problem for the director, Peter Dale: How do I give this content life? How do I cover this material without turning off the British public, who might say "We already know about the terrible state of the post-communist countries!"? How do I renew the way people come to these questions? How do I grab them and make them stay with the film? In short, Peter was seeking aesthetically to find ways to fulfil his ethical orientation. My argument was that the critical element here is the aesthetic, because without the aesthetic address being achieved in a powerful, provocative and seductive way, the film would fail to achieve its ethical ambitions, because it would fail to attract viewers. In my experience of watching artists and television producers, the ultimate challenge was always an aesthetic one. I find it very strange that people think the other way round: that you have a given aesthetic and the problem is the ethical orientation.

I would now like to turn to more technical issues of your research method. Your study of the BBC might be perhaps called in anthropological terms "studying up" because you were looking at quite powerful people, at least in the field of media production. One of the specific skills you had to develop was accessing those people. But I'd like to ask more generally: How does such a project develop from the preliminary research questions via getting access, conducting participant observation, to analysing your notes, and finally writing the book? When I read your book I was immediately surprised by how extensive, but not quite instrumental, is the use of diaries and interviews. They are not used as mere illustrations, but rather as a way of developing and continuing your theoretical arguments, sometimes even more important arguments are said in the quotes than in the commentaries. Could you tell me more about the process and stages of your work, especially on the BBC: how you get access, how you work with your notes?

What you mention that I do in the BBC book, the use of quotes, interviews, and stories from my diaries, was sometimes quite risky. It was a form of innovation in the book, and as you observe, sometimes the quotes are meant to be in tension with my own com-

mentary. So I set up a question for the reader: I am arguing this, but here is a story that you could read in a different way. So I didn't want always to be controlling the reader and saying "Here it is, and here is the evidence", because I wanted to invite the reader's own interpretive work.

Access to the BBC was very difficult. I was either lucky or clever, or both. At IRCAM, I turned up as a young, unknown British woman doing her Ph.D. in her twenties. I guess I wasn't that threatening, so they let me in. In the BBC, it was a long campaign, over months. I had a couple of friends who worked in the BBC, one in the classical music radio station, the other one was a drama producer. They each opened a door for me, and I kept trying to open other doors, and some came to a halt and some worked. But the crucial one was when my friend the drama producer set up a meeting with the head of the Drama Group. The Drama Group is the biggest production department in the BBC. It's hugely expensive, and always considered to be somehow difficult and in crisis. So it's heavily managed and often criticized. I went to see the then head, Charles Denton. He was across the table, as you are from me, and he looked at me and said: "What do you want to do?". I gave him a five minute pitch, and he said "It sounds great! When can you start?". I thought "Hello? Did I wear the right dress or something?". I didn't understand why he absolutely wanted me to do this, and immediately. In fact, I couldn't start my fieldwork for some months. Meanwhile, I had contacted a top bureaucrat in the BBC through the other friend, working in classical music radio, and I'd sent this man my IRCAM book. When I arrived, he said: "Very interesting book. Perhaps *too* interesting for the BBC!". He was perfectly genial, but nothing special, and he said: "We'll get back to you." Then I heard he'd asked my friend whether I, Georgina, had an "agenda". And she said to him "no". Then I got a call from this guy, who said "OK, Georgina, we have decided you can come and do the study, and we are going to place you in Science Programmes and the Community Programme Unit", both of which were tiny, very public service departments. I don't know how I had the courage, but I said "thank you, but actually, I want to study the News Department, as well as the Drama Group and Entertainment". I could hear a silence and then he said: "Talk to the head of television", and walked away. I was also contacting the people in News, and they are always much more suspicious and closed. Then I heard back, I don't know why to this day: the head of the Drama Group had probably talked to the head of television, and the head of television finally said "yes". I needed a letter from them saying they are giving me permission, in order to get my grant. And then I finally got a fax the day before the deadline.

Access is like that: partly legalistic, partly about sheer determination, partly about luck, and partly about going to the key gatekeepers. In the case of the BBC, it was like a military campaign. I made openings on several fronts; one didn't work, another did work, and that was it. I started in the Drama Group some months later, and I spent almost a year there because it was so complex. All of the key problems and transitions faced by the BBC somehow met in the Drama Group.

Within a short time, I learned that the reason the head of Drama Group had said "yes" to me was that *he* had an agenda. I was naive not to realize that. His agenda was that he was very, very angry, and he thought that all of these managerial initiatives, the marketization, auditing and so on, were destroying the Drama Group. He wanted me to be the chronicler

of this. It was sort of obvious, although he never made it too plain. He left, resigned in angry protest, four months after I began my fieldwork. His successor was not quite so easy, but I managed to hold on.

But access is only partly like this. Ethnography means that every time you go to a new place or talk to new people you are engaged in getting access again. You have to persuade them from scratch again to allow you to be there. In other words, you can't just wave a paper saying "I've got permission!". Often, people don't want you to be there or they are simply disinterested. If there is hostility, you have to drop it and move on. But at the same time, you have to use your skills to build relationships and trust: ethnographic fieldwork is dependent on real relationships with people. I managed to get to one of the most charismatic leaders in the BBC, Alan Yentob, who ran all the channels. He is now near retirement. He was always considered the creative leader of the BBC, a fascinating guy. Yentob did a kind of dance with me. He would meet me, be genial, and then I wouldn't hear from him. I wanted to understand commissioning, scheduling, and the running of channels. Nobody had studied that before or since, to my knowledge. And so I went to channel meetings, and there he would be, like an emperor presiding over a table with forty creatives discussing next season's dramas, and so on. And I would be in a corner, trying to write notes. Everybody would be talking about the politics of what's happening, or eating food and drinking. And suddenly, at one such meeting, Yentob said: "Is that anthropologist woman here? ... I don't know if I want you to hear this bit". And I said: "Oh, I'm sorry, ok, shall I go?". So these were the funny moments to do with access. Access is always ambiguous. I would go into meetings of thirty, a hundred or four hundred people, and I couldn't say to everybody "Hello, I am here, I am an anthropologist." In that sense, you are almost doing covert fieldwork. The BBC was particularly like that; other fieldwork is different.

There is always a lot of suspicion from some people. Your job as an ethnographer is to reassure people, and to reduce their anxiety and distrust; to invite them to talk to you. I also anonymize very carefully. Whenever there is anything that I think could be sensitive for the individual in question, I do things like transform a man into a woman, as long as it doesn't matter for the issue at hand; I alter something in order to make it impossible to identify them. In this sense, my BBC book seems to be incredibly successful: not one single person has come back to me to complain. In the IRCAM book by contrast, people had their online guesses about who is who in the book. Computer music and experimental music are small worlds, and people know each other, so they tried to crack my code!

Can you tell me more about the actual process of your observation work? It's seven years between 1996 and 2003 when you conducted your BBC research. Was it like going to work every day? We know participant observation is about immersion into the concrete community ... how much time did you actually spend there?

For two years, I went there just about every day, more or less every week. I had young children, so it was demanding. That was 1996 and 1997. Then I would do follow-ups, I kept returning and talking to more people, doing little bits of fieldwork. But I was living in Cambridge by then, from late 1997 when we moved for my new job. I had another year without teaching and I could continue to do some fieldwork in 1998. But then I began teaching, and

one teaches very hard in Cambridge. I would just do returns occasionally, to understand particular things, to update. Then I got this grant in the early 2000s to look at the transition to digital television and radio: how the BBC and Channel Four had got into digital channels, and their nascent online activities. I went back to do a new round of interviews, forty or fifty interviews. I couldn't do observation any more, I didn't have the time. I made an analysis of this really important transition to digital, including some rather interesting and good decisions made early on by the BBC. The BBC's digital strategies were immensely more interesting and well judged in public service terms than what Channel Four did, which was almost entirely commercial.²³⁾ So the contrast was very instructive.

That's how the fieldwork was. I spent a year in and around the Drama Group but always made forays into related departments. For example, co-production funds were becoming essential for all higher cost drama in the BBC — so for serials, single plays and film. I began to follow co-production, and went into the body responsible for this, called BBC Worldwide, the BBC's commercial wing which is also involved in seeking co-production money internationally. I did a sub-study on how it works, sat in co-production meetings, heard about the problems of rights, and so on. That all came out of Drama. Through the Drama Group, I also followed the imposition of extraordinary new accounting rules and procedures, which abolished the former cross-subsidies between low-cost-high-ratings dramas, like soap operas, and high-cost-low-ratings dramas, like the single play: subsidies that effectively allowed a certain creative freedom to experiment. I followed the increasingly intensive and coercive use of market research, including ethnography! That was one of the biggest ironies: they were hiring outside companies who specialized in doing ethnographies of audiences, and I would be sitting with the producers looking at these ethnographies. And the drama producers were being told: we will commission you only if you follow what this market research tells us. And thus I understood the whole transformation of the BBC's culture of finance, and of commissioning. Then I spent four or five months in the main flagship programme of the News and Current Affairs departments, *Newsnight*, the most "public service" daily programme. I wanted to see how the highest aspirations of BBC News and Current Affairs were put into practice. *Newsnight's* day begins with an editorial meeting at 10 am and goes to midnight or 1 am. Because the show finishes at 23:30, I would do about three of those days a week. These were very long, intense days. I took some of my best field notes there, covering the whole production process, following particular teams all day. Then I began to diversify: I went into the Documentaries department for a couple of months, and I did some work following the channel controllers, and talked to heads of other departments, including radio.

A particular psychological problem of ethnography, especially when you are working on an institution with twenty thousand people, is that it's extremely difficult to know when to finish and how to finish. In a sense it was unfinishable: I could have spent my whole life doing ethnography at the BBC! Happily, we moved from London to Cambridge, and that was a kind of natural end to the intense fieldwork.

23) See Georgina Born, 'Strategy, Positioning and Projection in Digital Television: Channel Four and the Commercialisation of Public Service Broadcasting in the UK', *Media, Culture and Society*, vol. 25, no. 6 (2003), pp. 773–799.

Can you be more specific about how you worked with all these diaries and interviews? Did you have a specific coding method or how did you analyse this immense and complex body of notes?

From the BBC study I have about seven field notebooks, about 200 pages each, and about 200 interviews, many of them an hour and a half in length, and a lot of documentation from all the departments. There is a big methodological difference between how I approach my work and the contemporary trend to use software packages for coding interview material. I don't do that. The reason is that the very premise of coding is inductive: I don't know what I have got, I code for "audiences" or "aesthetics", and then I get four hundred mentions of this term, and I go to each of them. It's from the ground up. But in my view, by the time you are finishing two years of work, you have a very strong basic sense of many of the lines of your argument and analysis that you want to write about. No amount of coding is going to throw those lines of analysis up. You have got them, because you have been through this process of deduction-induction, continually refining your analysis in the fieldwork as it goes along. With coding, there is a problem of the overproduction of trivial instances of the mention of one key word. If I know from my *Newsnight* fieldwork that one of the key issues on that program was elitism — the fact that it is talking to a particular audience of highly educated upper-middle-class Britons, and that it has been given an imperative from management to broaden its audience, but it seems unable to do that — then I am going to look at my field notes and interviews just for things that bear on that topic, and they wouldn't be searchable by keywords, they are not thrown up that way. So I don't use coding.

At the time of recording my interviews I note down when they are exceptional, when there is something really important that has been revealed, as much as I know at the time. And in field notes you also do this — you take note when something exceptional happens. In fact you often keep a sort of mental list of important days, of key stories, and of when something astounding happened. I had a running notebook, at the time of the BBC fieldwork, which contained things that I called "bizarreries". By "bizarreries" I meant things that were bizarre, and that I knew I would want to come back to and to put into my book. These were stories, events that I witnessed in meetings, or moments in interviews, and things that happened to me. So many of them happened, and I knew that they would be so rich and powerful in making my analysis, that I began to collect them in one place. They are now laced throughout my book: all the extraordinary stories and incidents, big and small. You see, you are already sorting material as it's happening.

Then, in writing the book, I was working through key topics, and once again having to go back to the material to find all the stuff that was relevant. For example, one of the central chapters is on employment and labor issues. I did brief potted autobiographies with everyone I interviewed, it's a good technique, and as a result I knew that I had numerous interviews with BBC staff with amazing quotes early on about their elite social or educational backgrounds. I knew I had to go back to these early pages of my interviews to find all this material that showed, in aggregate, how the majority of BBC senior staff had come through Oxford and Cambridge: I could simply pull this stuff out and put it into that chapter. The "bizarreries" were just such astonishing stories.

Towards the end of the book, I have another example of "bizarreries". The funding

body in Britain for the social sciences, which is called the ESRC (the Economic and Social Research Council), which gave me my grant for the research, began to ask all of us who were funded by them to take our research findings back to industry and policy, to make them useful to government and to society. I took that very seriously and began to engage in policy issues. I presented to a well-known think tank, the Institute for Public Policy Research, and tried to publish with another think tank, Demos. I went to a House of Lords committee on the BBC, and I gave evidence. At one point, I went to the government Department for Culture, Media and Sport, responsible for overseeing the BBC and Channel Four, and I brought along one of my early reports, before the book. I asked to meet the key official to talk about it, and to offer it to them. I went to a meeting with this guy, I said “I’d like to offer you my research. It might be of interest to you”. This guy was sitting there, and I could tell he was not listening to anything I was saying. He had a big pile of documents and he began to give me these documents: “You might like to read this and this.” Half of it I had already read. I said “Thank you, but I thought I was here to offer you something”. He was totally disengaged, and finally he leaned over to me and said “Look, who do you know?”. I thought: “What is he talking about?”. Then, I realized that the key thing in these policy circles was not what research you are doing, but whether you are connected politically to key think tanks — which are very influential in Britain now — and whether you are part of any influential networks. He basically advised me to go and get in touch with this think tank, that think tank, and to develop my contacts. And then, he implied, my research might have some impact and be listened to. I came out, and I realized how politically naive I was. It wasn’t what you know, but who you know.²⁴⁾ There were many other stories of this kind that happened to me, or that I overheard. So that was one category of story.

The organization of your fieldwork data is led by topics, and by aspects of the analysis, and once you’ve got a basic structure you are basically looking for the material. In this dialectical way, the fieldwork material relates to your analysis, but it also helps you to further it. It speaks to that analysis, whether it’s to exemplify it or to complexify it.

I would like to conclude with a hypothetical question. You “studied up” in the BBC; you studied mostly powerful people in both management and production departments. Can you imagine how your story would look if you would go to sets to observe crews on location, for example? To what extent would it be different to go from the other way round and study from the bottom up?

I did talk to a lot of accountants, script editors and readers: the lowest of the low. I even talked to cleaners and caretakers. There is a story in my book about a black woman who was apparently just a lowly script editor, but who was in fact extremely active in film and video production outside the BBC.²⁵⁾ But this was not recognised, and she was bitter that her professional life could not advance inside the BBC. The book isn’t just an elite ethnography. But what I didn’t do is go on location. I didn’t watch crews. I spent some time with the radio studio crews though.

24) The meeting is described in more detail in Born, *Uncertain Vision*, pp. 502–503.

25) See *Uncertain Vision*, pp. 203–206.

So how would it look? The substance would be different. My task was not just to make a study of television, or of television production. It's a study of an institution, within which I focused on several departments. So it isn't just a production study. This is one of my problems with the coining of the term "production studies". Because you can have a kind of concrete fallacy, and the concrete fallacy would be: I am looking at this production, and in the course of a production study I am going to stick with everything that there is on production, in a very direct and immediate way — the crew being on location or going to the editing suite, and so. In contrast, the kinds of questions I set out from were larger historical questions, like, for the BBC study: What has happened to this institution called public service broadcasting in the period of neoliberalism? And how representative is this supposedly exemplary organ of liberal democracy? In the IRCAM book it was: Why is it that in the late twentieth century, the French state is pouring money — millions of francs a year — into an institution that produces a music that nobody wants to listen to, except its own elite, this tiny circle of other composers and Jack Lang?

My work *does* look at production, but it tends to frame the question from a different point of view. My work on art-science is about artists, but it began from the core question: What is interdisciplinarity? How does it look in practice, and what kinds of things does it make possible? I find a certain parochialism these days in the tendency to carve something up and name it. Now we have a field, it's called "production studies". It becomes this self-referential, self-reifying thing, whereas the important question might be something else, something larger. I like John Caldwell, because he puts this stuff within a historical frame: not just what is happening now, but also why it is happening. His work is at the borders of a kind of ethnography and political economy, because he is always asking about how the macro-transformation of the American industry is impacting on the lives of producers and production teams on the ground. But it's not good enough to say: "We have coined the term 'production studies,' so let's study production!". The question is *why* study production? If it's about the transformation of labor conditions, about the casualization of the industry, about stress aesthetics, that's fine: make that a historical analysis. If it's about why is it that good European art film has dried up?, then that can also be taken into a production study.

What would happen if I'd taken my study, as you put it, from the other way up? You'd encounter these general issues that cross-cut all large-scale divisions of labor in film and television: issues of labor, employment conditions, and the transformation of the labor process — all of them very important problems. Actually, you could probably access issues of what are the conditions bearing on the text through that kind of work almost better than through my kind of work, because you'd be watching really carefully the minutiae of the various elements of collaboration that go into the production of a film. I was looking often at scripting and script editing, pre-production, that level of editorial activity, but not at their implementation. So optimally, one would want to do both. I'd want to follow these kinds of scripting process into production. People who follow day-to-day production processes can also look at how a script is discussed and negotiated, to find out about the origins, about creative decisions going into the script. When I told my husband how I have been teaching your students about the BBC documentary that I saw being put together and edited, he said: "Isn't it fantastically interesting that there isn't a whole field of editing

studies?”. And he is absolutely right. Where is the body of work on the editing process, and on different styles of editing? What a marvellous topic for future ethnographies! Let's make sure this happens.



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