

The Fourth Annual Screen Industries in East-Central Europe Conference

28–29 November 2014, Palacký University, Olomouc, Czech Republic

The “Screen Industries in East-Central Europe” (SIECE) conference already has an established tradition as part of the European academic calendar. Although Polish film and media scholars had previously participated in the conference, this was the first time for the two of us to have the opportunity to visit the university town of Olomouc and exchange ideas with scholars from Russia, Romania, Slovakia, Germany, Hungary, Bulgaria, the United Kingdom, Poland, and the Czech Republic based at a number of universities in the EU and USA. This short report will consequently present our “fresh eye” observations on the conference organized under the auspices of the Czech Society of Film Studies, the Department of Theater, Film and Media Studies, Palacký University, and the Department of Film Studies, Masaryk University.

Prestige — 2014 central theme

After examining topics such as the general material conditions of East-Central European cinema, cultural policies, and industrial authorship in previous years, this year’s SIECE focused on the “industry of prestige”: issues of symbolic capital and cultural power, its formation, reproduction and emergence in relation to the realm of the media industry. “How markers of cultural value are mobilized in relation to particular institutions, initiatives, people, traditions, works, and awards in the region?” was the central question posed by the organizers. The organizers therein directly re-

ferred to James F. English’s influential book *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value* where he employed Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of symbolic capital in the study of the roles of prizes in the field of literature and arts. English demonstrates how symbolic capital is generated through the system of prizes — the “economy of prestige” as he calls it, and its importance in the elevation of particular artists. This insight is also valid for the screen industry which is undoubtedly an industry of prestige.

The conference was also based on the idea that it is worthwhile emphasizing not only the general mechanism but also the spatial dimension of the relations between symbolic capital and its accumulation. This aspect is crucial in understanding the complex dynamics of the regional situation since East-Central Europe may be conceptualized as peripheral or semi-peripheral. What are the symbolic — and geographic — centers of power (social networks, festivals, prizes, funding bodies) which constitute points of references in the trajectories of various actors struggling for visibility and recognition in the field? What are the forces that regulate this struggle? And — what is no less interesting concerning the turbulent political history of the region — how did they change over time? These were the various issues addressed in the presented papers.

Conference road map

The conference prelude was the Czech Society of Film Studies' workshop (held on 27 November in the Czech language). The actual English-speaking event began on 28 November. It took place over two days consisting of three keynote lectures presented by András Bálint Kovács and Janet McCabe and five panels entitled: "Festival Prestige", "Support and Branding Schemes", "Professional Prestige", "Canons, Cults and Awards", "Transnational Strategies". Most of the eighteen delivered papers presented empirical case studies. This often entails for contemporary conference attendees the risk of experiencing a plethora of somewhat hermetic arguments and conclusions which are difficult to apply in contexts other than the native culture. This was not the case in Olomouc, however. The well-chosen conference subject — the industry of prestige — implicitly uncovered the transnational dimensions of the media economy.

In his two-part keynote lecture, **Kovács** addressed directly the question of the relations of symbolic power with particular reference to the case of Hungary. He first provided a historically situated analysis of cinematic modernism by demonstrating how particular preferences of the critics from *Cahiers du cinéma* constituted what we now perceive as the modernist canon. This conceptualization served as a productive background for the second lecture delivered by Kovács where the question as to how the contemporary festival circuit and discourse of art cinema shapes national art cinemas was addressed. In the presentation entitled "'East-European Touch' and International Recognition in Hungarian Cinema (How to Make Successful Hungarian films?)" the speaker showed how young Hungarian directors have responded over the last five decades to the expectations of international A-level festivals (specifically Berlin, Cannes and Venice). He argued that the key to success abroad is to be able to represent the image of Hungary and its core political problems ("regional post-communist tough-

ness" as he put it) which are shared by the international audience. That is what Márta Mészáros did for instance when presenting a Hungarian feminine perspective and what was also achieved by Béla Tarr in creating what the international audience imagined as the atmosphere of post-communism. Their strategy resulted in festival prizes. Contemporary Hungarian cinema, in Kovács' view, does not possess this ability, however — as he concluded — it is not a key problem since the primary concern for the national cinema should be the popular domestic audience.

The struggle for visibility — be it economic, social or aesthetic — always therefore implies the gaze of the other and in East-Central European countries this often entails attempts to go abroad in order, to be in the network and imitate Western standards or meet Western expectations. Several presentations consequently highlighted the dubious relationship between international recognition and the rules of the domestic market as well as the transnational interlinking of evaluation rules.

Balázs Varga's contribution supported Kovács' general conceptualization by providing data demonstrating which Hungarian movies circulate between festivals, how many of them actually receive prizes and what is the divergence between Hungarian films acclaimed in Hungary and internationally. Similarly, **Constantin Parvulescu** spoke about the criteria Romanian critics use when creating the canon of Romanian cinema and the problematic relationship between their choices and the Romanian box-office as well as international festival prizes.

Several papers tackled various other issues of the contemporary cinema industry. **Kuba Mikurda's** paper on Polish film schools demonstrated how the transfer of knowledge supports a certain creative strategy. He demonstrated the strength of the French image of modernist cinema as a default film practice since it has strongly influenced professional education curriculums. **Jana Dudková** spoke about the marketing image value of an-

other occupational group within the media industry, producers, and historical changes in branding strategies within contemporary Slovak cinema which are actually based on the producer's personality as an extrovert celebrity. **Jan Hanzlík** examined the notion of prestige in relation to film tourism. He analyzed how the exhibitions related to the film *THREE WISHES FOR CINDERELLA* (1973) organized in the winter 2013/2014 changed the position of three historical castles in Germany and the Czech Republic. **Mariana Ivanova** tackled the tension between the historical and cultural specificity of East-Central Europe as a region and European funding policy which promotes transnational co-productions in order to construct spaces and values perceived as "European."

Two other papers concerned the strategies and functions of non-A-level-festivals. **Marcin Adamczak** demonstrated why and how the most important Polish festival in Gdynia imitates Cannes and suggested that the potential box-office success of the main competition winner is actually disconnected from its festival success. **Michał Pabiś-Orzeszyna** focused on another Polish festival, The International Film Festival of the Art of Cinematography Camerimage which represents a distinct strategy by seeking recognition outside the national film production field in order to validate a specific occupational group position (namely cinematographers).

Concerning insights delving deeper into the history of the screen industry, **Jonathan Owen** traced the notorious *émigré* Polish filmmaker Walerian Borowczyk's adjustment to the shifting relation between art and exploitation in the 1970s and 1980s by joining motifs from art cinema and softcore pornography. This brought him critical acclaim among western alternative audiences which valued aesthetic and moral transgression. **Grażyna Świętochowska** made an attempt to reconstruct the topography and cultural hierarchy of film awards in the 1960s which were important for Czechoslovak cinema. **Zorka Varga**, in con-

trast, as an addendum to the first keynote lecture, focused specifically on the origins of Balázs Béla Studio in Hungary in the 1960s and the emergence of the Hungarian New Wave. **Oksana Bulgakowa** discussed the politics of the Moscow Film Festival whose distribution of symbolic capital through prizes is allocated according to the idea of "geopolitical justice" disconnected from the West. The Festival consequently did not acclaim i.e. New German Cinema. It has not succeed, however, she argued, in establishing its own canon. **Juliane Scholz** and **Pavel Skopal** examined certain aspects of what Petr Szczepanik once called the "state-socialist mode of production". Scholz focused on the position of screenwriters, dramaturges and production units in the regulation of the state-owned film industry in the German Democratic Republic from 1949 until 1970, especially as concerns the remuneration system. Skopal in his study on DEFA-Barrandov fairytales co-productions in the 1970s and 1980s emphasized the importance of the categories of "trust" and "credibility" in the production culture of the period. **Šárka Gmíterková** examined popular press discourse in Czechoslovakia in the 1930s to demonstrate how the local film industry made an attempt to manufacture genuine cinematic Czechoslovakian starlets and how it failed. **Łukasz Biskupski** finally moved back to the origins of the screen and examined business strategies of the Warsaw-based film company Słomka before World War I to demonstrate how the small local film company used its limited economic and symbolic resources to establish a presence on the local and national market.

The ability to overcome the solipsistic threat of the case study presentation format by exposing the transnational dimensions of media practices, visible in the delivered papers, may be considered a trademark of SIECE meetings. As a result the case studies uncovered a common field of struggles for recognition. It is also perhaps worth mentioning that although empirical research (and the interrelated focus on social, political and eco-

nomic rather than aesthetic issues) was the main methodological coordinate, the prevalence of the qualitative approach or better said, the absence of big-data analysis, was also a common feature. The majority of the presented papers were based on the outcomes of projects based on narrative interviews, discourse analysis, participant observations or archival research. Leaving aside the minor presence of statistical data usage and the occasional use of tabular comparisons (for instance in **Balázs Varga's** paper), the absence of digital humanities tools and methods seems to be quite significant. To clarify, the perceivable distance to quantitative methods is not inevitably a disadvantage. Perhaps, even on the contrary, the qualitative research presentation format actually assured a higher level of comprehensibility and fostered lively discussions after each panel.

Another substantial asset of the conference was its intimate scale which served well for focused attention and debates among the speakers. Moreover, the deliberate paper selection and well thought-out panel divisions made the conference programme readily identifiable. In addition, it was apparent that all the papers were situated in their slots on purpose, not randomly (this being a malady typical of many large conferences). One might argue that such a well-knitted programme might lead to dangerous exclusions and that indeed certain topics were significantly absent or unrepresented. This concerns, for example, the almost completely omitted issues of a digital media economy or the insufficiently discussed phenomena of the "quality television" prestigious landmark. The former case — for instance the problematic issues connected with VOD distribution — was only considered by **Eva Križková** who provided an analysis of attitudes by Slovak producers and distributors toward new media business models. To provide an example of the latter, we should make mention of **Janet McCabe** contribution to the debate on television's "cultural value" in her keynote lecture entitled "Conversations on Quality TV: a Transnational Dialogue

from HBO to Public Service Broadcasting on Producing Culture". During her presentation McCabe provided tremendously inspiring insight into "quality television" and HBO branding strategies. Something different, however, was perhaps of the greatest value for research on East-Central European screen industries. This was namely her description of how the idea of "quality television" (an idea manufactured by HBO and based on such "non-televisual" notions as "innovation", "creativity", "artistic distinction" or "cultural value") proliferates outside the USA, specifically in Great Britain. McCabe demonstrated how the transnationally imported Scandinavian crime fiction sub-genre is employed by BBC to create the image of culturally valuable television which is able to match its own tradition of cultural identity and expectations as to how public broadcasting should function.

Only **Eva Pjajčiková** along with **Petr Szczepanik** contributed to the discussion on televisual prestige by asking a question as to how Czech television production standards are changing partly because of the imperative to use foreign work templates (derived from HBO or Western-European networks). Therefore although McCabe's reflections on the global proliferation of "quality tv" aesthetic and economic patterns created a legible and inspirational link with Pjajčiková and Szczepanik's paper, one might paradoxically argue that these tv-centered discussions appeared significantly isolated among others which were primarily cinema-centric. Perhaps this cinema-centrism was a condition for the coherence of the debates. It is nevertheless still worth stressing what has been lost.

Conclusion

As we have already mentioned, the entire conference was extremely well thought-out. There was always enough time for debates, not only after the panels but also on the margins where an atmosphere of kindness fostered the exchange of ideas and networking. It is also useful to point out that

the conference format employed the figure of the respondent. This undoubtedly effectively facilitated the exchange of questions and remarks. At times, however, we felt that the respondent's strong role within the panel scenario resulted in audience detachment and could even discourage taking part in discussions. One might also ask whether this should not be the responsibility of the panel chair. Perhaps the roles of respondents and their relation to chairs would be worthy of reconsideration.

With its fourth edition in 2014, the SIECE initiative co-organized by **Matěj Dostálek**, **Petr Szczepanik** and their colleagues proved to be productive, valuable and much needed. In addition to several other undertakings, it constitutes the Czech Republic as a leading country in the institutionalization of transnationally networked research on the specificity of media industries in the region — both concerning past and present media environment. In conclusion, we would like to express our wishes that this unique endeavor will gain necessary sustainability.

Łukasz Biskupski – Michał Pabiś-Orzeszyna