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Screen industries in East-Central Europe

Cultural policies and political culture (22-25 November 2012, Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic)

Olof Hedling

Credit must be given to the academics that created NECS less than a decade ago. After the organization's first conference in Vienna in 2007 European film scholars finally had an annual venue where new acquaintances could be made and networks cultivated. This process has even facilitated new annual events, most often on a specific subject compared to the more wide-ranging NECS.

The conference Screen Industries in East-Central Europe, arranged for the second consecutive year at Masaryk University in Brno in November 2012, is the result of this kind of productive networking.¹ In 2011 the event was first introduced as Screen Industries in East-Central Europe: International Conference, an outcome of the NECS Film Industries Work Group. While immersed in a particular region and a rather specific area of film studies the pan-European flavour of NECS is still in evidence at this conference. Though many presentations were obviously concerned with the Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary along with their respective national cinemas, the transnational state of affairs both present and past in Germany, the United Kingdom, Sweden, and Austria were also addressed.

With about 200 registered attendants a core group of approximately 50 academics and industry representatives delivered various presentations and acted as respondents while also participating in discussions and forums; these attendance numbers represent more than twice as much in comparison to the previous year's proceedings. In a way this was two conferences blended into one: there was the ongoing screen industries portion, this time with a focus on 'Cultural Policies and Political Culture'; there were also a number of sessions and keynotes devoted to screenwriting called 'Theorizing Screenwriting Practice Workshop: An East-Central European Perspective'. The divergence between the conference and the workshop was difficult to distinguish as the parts took place in the same room and there was a somewhat similar combination of presentation formats. Accordingly, as a member of the audience, one could perceive the division only by the fact that approximately half of the various presentations and panels were devoted to issues of screenwriting while the remaining constituted the somewhat more general screen industries section.



Fig. 1: Conference presentations
(Courtesy of © Lada Žabenská & Project FIND).

While the two domains of inquiry are obviously associated – both may be seen as developments whose origins are in the expansion of media production-related courses at European universities during the last two decades or so – distinctions also became clear. Methods and theories derived from anthropology, statistics, political economy, organisational studies, and political science take on a much more prominent role within screen industry studies. However, the study of screenwriting is geared towards narrative structure and character arcs as well as issues of collaboration and adherence to existing forms. In addition to this there were examples of what might be termed a cultural studies approach to the craft, focusing on practitioners and the environments in which they toil.

Although Hungary is not often mentioned as the most prominent among Europe's smaller national cinemas it nevertheless was the subject of focus within the industries component. Consequently, both keynotes in this program section were devoted to matters Hungarian, as was the case with a number of papers and presentations. Even though one of the keynotes sketched the paradoxical and slightly chaotic conditions of the country's film sector at the outbreak of the Second World War it was recent events that were at the centre of attention. Since these circumstances have already been related in both European and American media while also discussed at the previous year's gathering the conference proved to be an excellent opportunity to get to know more about some of these developments from sources close to the action.

In 2010 The Motion Picture Public Foundation of Hungary (MMKA) went bankrupt; the fund appears to have been a typical European national sponsor. For years comedies, historical dramas, and sometimes more alternative auteurist visions were supported by this fund. During the last decade production increased steadily. However, the domestic audience dwindled. The bankruptcy of MMKA finally arrived as a result of the government's refusal to fill the escalating gap between available resources and spending. Production crashed to a halt. Despite Budapest being one of Europe's busiest runaway production spots a number of working individuals inevitably came to suffer.

Instead of designing a similar scheme the Hungarian government opted for radical transformation; in doing so a kind of renewal was sought which represented a break with the tradition of film support systems as they have developed all over the continent since the 1950s. This pertains in diverse ways to both state support in liberal democracies operating under a welfare provision and largely being concerned with artistic integrity, variety, and national identity, and also East European communist countries where pre-1990 support was ideological and political at its core. The break appears to be profound in nature compared to the post-1989 support in Hungary which, from the little I was able to pick up, appeared to be modelled after European liberal schemes.

Enter Andrew G. Vajna, a Budapest-born former hair dresser who from the 1980s on evolved into a producer of Hollywood action franchises such as the Rambo series (1982-2008). Besides situating the production of his ventures *Red Heat* (Walter Hill, 1988) and *Evita* (Alan Parker, 1996) in Budapest, Vajna also produced a few 'local' films. Among them were *Szabadság, szerelem* (Children of Glory, Krisztina Goda, 2006), a sleek, bloody, and streamlined rendering (expatriate Joe Eszterhas co-wrote the script) of the notorious and politically-laden water polo match between Hungary and the Soviet Union at the 1956 Melbourne Olympics. Allegedly *Children of Glory* together with a few other Vajna titles are among the select few authentic box office successes that have been made in Hungary since 1990.

Because of this background and the fact that Vajna had returned to Budapest after 1990, in 2010 the government offered him the post of national film commissioner in charge of the new Hungarian National Film Fund (MNF). In this position he has refurbished the support system and proclaimed the goal to make domestic films that Hungarians actually will see. The rationale is that while the annual output during the preceding decade was around 20 films the domestic market share oscillated between only 3-5% – a diminutive figure even by European standards.

Vajna has positioned script development at the midpoint of operations. Meanwhile production support is reserved for only some six to eight films a year. Furthermore, each chosen film will receive better financial support than in previ-

ous years. This arrangement clearly addresses three critiques habitually directed towards European film production: the lack of funds for development and pre-production; the minuscule budgets; and the habit of not being as discriminating about manuscripts as Hollywood is, for example.

Despite occasional disparaging sneers and reports of annoyed local filmmakers, among whom Béla Tarr has been the most vocal, the general discourse on the matter at Brno actually seemed slightly affirmative. In his keynote András Bálint Kovács of ELTE University, Budapest gave a historical exposé of the background to the collapse. Intriguingly, he also provided perspectives into the working process of the new regime. Bálint Kovács, well-known as a historian and theorist of European art cinema as well as a friend of Tarr's, has been (perhaps ironically) selected by Vajna to serve on the board of the new fund. At the time of his talk he had the experience of habitual exchange with the controversial commissioner. Since the Hungarian scholar's expertise is on aesthetic matters and a mode of film production which is hardly known to be driven by conventional market pressures – and certainly not with procedures initiated by Vajna – a slightly reserved stance when relating the state of things may have been expected. This, however, was not the case. Bálint Kovács spoke in earnest about what he perceived as Vajna's analytical brilliance and narrative sense when scrutinising scripts. The scholar seemed in favour of the new principles; moreover, he believed that they would strengthen the endeavours of all future domestic filmmakers, both mainstream and those more inclined towards the properties of the European art film.



*Fig. 2: András Bálint Kovács
(Courtesy of © Lada Žabenská & Project FIND).*

Less surprisingly, one of the newly-employed story consultants at the fund talked in fervent terms about inviting Oliver Stone and Joe Eszterhas to Budapest for workshops. Hungary has elected to set out on a different path from the majority of Europe regarding the aims and the cultural-political context of its film support. In some quarters, both domestically and abroad, this entire transformation will be observed in the light of what on occasion has been referred to as a persecution of cultural dissenters. Nevertheless, and it ought to be said, the discussion at hand connected particularly well with the focus of the conference being on cultural policies and political culture.

A great deal more was assessed within the industries component of the conference. Fascinating papers were delivered on the role of co-production practices, film festivals, propaganda, and the convoluted cinematic relationships with the West during the era of the Cold War. More contemporary matters were addressed as well including Konrad Klejsa's tragicomic tale of how Łódź, home of the venerated Polish national film school, has attempted to become an international production center under the moniker 'HollyLodz' – and with the help of David Lynch no less.

Quite a number of presentations within both sections of the conference dealt with subjects that did not touch upon the geographical region in question. Patrick Vonderau of Stockholm University, a member of a research project sponsored by Warner Brothers, conferred the anguish of film executives in California considering why high-income, well-ordered, and protestant Sweden, supposedly a perfect market for Hollywood home entertainment, is not quite that. Besides being the place where *The Pirate Bay* was conceived in 2003, Sweden is a territory where non-authorized file-sharing is purportedly more common than in any other place. Additionally, surveys and questionnaires seem to indicate that from an ethical standpoint few Swedes consider the act of piracy particularly shameful or dishonest. Instead, questions about piracy have become situated in a particular domestic discourse where anti-corporate sentiments, anti-Americanism, cultural imperialism, and discontent regarding global media distribution are contested. In this particular environment the perhaps legitimate claims of Hollywood officials are resisted and regularly received with ironic cheering. More than elsewhere perhaps the situation highlights the present transitory phase in which the industry's attempts at replacing time-honoured business models are met with confrontation, unanticipated manipulation, and lack of trust. As the inclusion of Vonderau's paper implies, presumptive future participants should not feel discouraged from applying to the conference on the grounds of not being scholarly experts on the particular region at hand, as long as the topic has a general bearing on the field.

The screenwriting workshop often seemed infused with a more practical tenor. Screenwriting education is more connected to practitioners with experience in the craft, be it in soap operas, multi-platform production, or different forms of script

development and supervision in television, documentaries, or at various support organisations. In this respect the discipline represents a kind of subdivision to creative writing, albeit quite beyond that on occasion. The emphasis on method, theory, and history was not always as underlined as in the parallel conference section. However, it has to be mentioned that both intriguing historical scholarship as well as sociologically-instilled explorations on an assortment of conditions of writers were represented. Jill Nelmes' keynote on British screenwriter Janet Green, her work on *Victim* (Basil Dearden, 1961), and the sometimes confrontational relationships between writers, directors, and producers was such an instance.

Ironically enough, one thing that appeared to bring together almost all of the participants in this section was the eagerness to critique the escalating industry of screenwriting manuals. This field was also the topic for one of the more intriguing papers: Swiss scholar Matthias Brütch's amusing deconstruction of the much hyped notion of three-act structure. By comparing a number of books on screenwriting – everything from Syd Field's *Screenplay* (New York: Delta, 2005 [orig. in 1979]) to Kristin Thompson's *Storytelling in the New Hollywood* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999) – he pointed out that while each and every one of these guides speaks with seeming assurance about structure, acts, and dramatic arcs, they are in fact at great variance concerning the most basic details of these concepts. Moreover, the manuals almost never agree how the concepts and terms are related to tangible moments in a given film.

Examining how a few of the more common films that are treated in several of these guides are subdivided into different parts, Brütch convincingly established how each writer suggests differing propositions in regard to the most basic notions. For instance, in studying a number of the guides as they refer to the oft-cited film example *Three Days of the Condor* (Sydney Pollack, 1975) not one of them can agree on such an ostensibly simple observation as when the first act stops and the second starts. In short, what the individual guides attempt to present as simple knowledge seems somewhat complicated, arbitrary, and of dubious value when placed under closer inspection and in a comparative discourse. As hinted at earlier, I am not sure that the term 'theorising' is the most apt description of the differing perspectives, aims, and queries that were addressed at the screenwriting workshop. Still, that inquiry does not undermine the diverse intellectual and factual richness of the proceedings. There were presentations on as diverse topics as writing practices in contemporary East European television, on the conception of characters in European art films, and on scriptwriting manuals of many decades ago, among others.

In many ways this part served as an introductory, synoptic view to a field which is becoming quite set in its aims. Even if the production section seemed the more rigorous one the screenwriting element added significance to the overall proceed-

ings – not in the least since writing, as well as the scholarly teaching and inquiry of it, in certain ways has been suggested to be underdeveloped within the European audiovisual sector. British film scholar Paul McDonald has recently spoken about the ‘industry turn in Film Studies’.² As a somewhat broader tendency in Europe, this development seemed to manifest itself in the early NECS conferences and in the eventual developments they provoked. The simultaneous Brno conference and workshop, with its growth and thematic development since last year, may be seen as further evidence that such a turn is in place – not in the least because of the decision to make the conference a recurring event. Moreover, it is an expansive development, most clearly suggested here by the inclusion of the event devoted to screenwriting.

With Europe’s conflict-torn past, its atrocious displays of political extremism, and its many disparities, the continent’s screen industries have come to exist under vastly different circumstances compared to those in the United States. These particular and often unstable conditions need to be illuminated and examined. After all, they reflect local, transnational, economic, cultural, social, and political dimensions not only in film and television but also peculiarities that are crucial to a multi-faceted Europe at large. By being generously inclusive to wider national and geographical topics beyond the East-Central European focus the conference delivered such illuminations and examinations in abundance, even if some were more intriguing than others.

The conference arrangements in Brno were both generous and terrific; the staff prepared well and continued to do excellent work throughout the event. If one may still have a reservation or two it is with regard to the format itself. Every panel had, aside from a chair, a set respondent. Since the latter role is hard to perform without at least a bit of collegiality and some paraphrasing, the audience, due to time, was to some degree kept out of the Q&A sessions. The wider discussion consequently became limited. In addition the academic proceedings lasted until well after eight in the evening without a dinner break. This created a slight sense of fatigue and the time for pursuits like casual socialising – when articles are often commissioned, new collections planned, and the occasional serendipitous finding is made – became slender. With the hope that these minor quibbles will be addressed next year’s edition of the conference in the Czech university town of Olomouc promises to be even more valuable.

Notes

1. http://www.phil.muni.cz/wff/home/Events/2012/screen-industries_program.pdf
2. See the announcement for the upcoming European Film Cultures: An International Conference, 8-9 November 2013, Lund University, Sweden. <http://www.ucc.ie/en/filmstudies/fullstory-205216-en.html>

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