

## Beyond the crisis of film studies

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If compared to my dear memories of the early years of NECS, film studies (I chose to address the state of film studies instead of media studies, because the former is the core discipline of NECS) as an academic field certainly lost some of its integrity, as did film as a medium and a cultural form, however fragile it has always been. For me, and I believe that for some of my colleagues too, Thomas Elsaesser was the key integrative figure in Europe, always ready to cross and question different kinds of disciplinary borderlines, including those between philosophical film theory and empirical history, or digital media and media archaeology, while always keeping filmic text as an implicit focal point. The generation of his students and their peers across Europe — the founders of NECS as well as their own students — have certainly carried on this tradition in the best ways possible. The journal NECSUS is proof of that, while at the same time functioning as a lively critical arena where the discipline's 'crisis' and the ambition to venture beyond 'film' have been overtly present from the very first issue. Nevertheless, the profound changes in global screen media as well as the ongoing multiplication and simultaneous dissolution of disciplinary boundaries have accelerated our (meaning NECS members) dispersion into different academic subfields, more or less specialised, often even further away from the original idea of studying a filmic text against its (relatively close) context than the selection of themes in NECSUS might suggest.

To put it in simplistic terms: complex film narratives have largely been replaced (at least in the popular imagination) by television series; film art has unmasked itself as the arthouse industry, vitally dependent on various public support schemes and driven by the symbolic economy of sales agents and festivals; movie theaters are being challenged by the global SVOD ecosystem;

film critics have to re-legitimise their public role vis-à-vis the increasing impact of algorithmic recommendation systems, and so on. Film scholars, who are aware of the ways their research subject transforms, often push themselves to look far beyond their field of expertise and enter collaborations with data scientists, geographers, media lawyers, or environmental scholars to come to terms with the challenges they face when studying these issues. The readiness to work in cross-disciplinary teams and to respond to the practical needs of different stakeholders involved in screen media industries and cultures are perhaps the key lessons we could learn from the pandemic era, which so drastically placed a question mark on our role in society and the ability to survive as a research field.

After working on various themes related to the Czech film and media industries, moving from the historical issues of the coming of film sound and acoustic media of the 1930s to state-socialist production systems, the post-socialist producer practices, and today's digital distribution, I realised that key transformations almost never originated from within the national cinema or even the film world more generally. I gradually lost the sense of film as a unique medium as well as national cinema as a bounded space worth being interpreted in isolation. When looking for concepts allowing me to leave what Andreas Hepp and Nick Couldry called 'territorial container thinking' and for a framework to do comparative work reaching beyond the Cold-War dichotomies that I found too confining, I came across literature on cultural imperialism and center-periphery hierarchies from the 1970s and onward. It is well known that the cultural imperialism paradigm since the 1990s has been sharply criticised and largely overshadowed by proponents of cultural hybridisation and counter-flows, but it seems to be enjoying a comeback under the guise of circulation studies and the political economy of 'platform imperialism' (see e.g. the recent work of Dal Yong Jin).

Inspired by Ramon Lobato and other pioneers of digital distribution studies, a group of colleagues and I coined the term 'digital peripheries' (in a volume bearing the same title) to reflect, for example, on territorial Netflix catalogs as cases of cultural and economic power imbalances that position peripheral markets as those attracting uneven attention in terms of localisation, local content acquisition, original production, or outgoing circulation of local content. On a more general level, we tested market scale and 'peripherality' as frameworks for transnational comparative studies of media industries and policies. In my newest book, titled *Screen Industries in East Central Europe*, I have built on this conceptual framework to reconsider the role of

small/peripheral market producers and their 'production cultures' in the so-called Visegrad countries and across all sorts of screen media. This body of research follows up in the tradition of research on postsocialism and small nation cinemas, developed in the 1990s and 2000s, and puts it in dialogue with more recent discussions of transnational production networks, internet television, video-on-demand, and platformisation. It thus aims to provide a 'peripheral' perspective on the major transformations going on in Europe's media industries, namely globalisation, digitalisation, and the Europeanisation of national media policies, without sacrificing the kind of culturally-localised and historically-informed knowledge that film studies can be proud of.

Beyond the urgency of academically responding to the above-mentioned major transformations, the pandemic, overlapping with the accelerating climate crisis, also makes us question our professional value for society. What issues, perspectives, methods, and outcomes remain relevant in such a situation? Is it worth fighting for the future of the field as we know it, or is it time to radically transform and reposition our agendas? I do not have answers for that. But I realised that what gave me some peace of mind in the most depressing moments of the last two years was work for various public institutions outside of academia: helping the national film fund to quickly put together a Covid-19 relief scheme, drafting a report for local ministries comparing different scenarios of the national implementation of the so-called Audiovisual Media Services directive (AVMSD), and designing a joint research agenda with a department of the Czech public service television responsible for developing a new online platform. None of these activities have resulted in academic publications yet, but they all helped me to escape at least some feelings of uselessness.

Of course, academic researchers face multiple pitfalls and dangers when conducting commissioned or applied research for industry and policy players: not just those threatening their academic integrity and independence, but also of simply doing more harm than good by confusing different registers of problem-solving or sticking to a narrow perspective. Their task should not be to provide ready-made solutions to a problem, or even gaining more influence, but to frame the problem so that its complexity and urgency become more visible and more manageable at the same time. They should be able to produce more critical and more ambitious analysis than commercial consultancies that have almost monopolised this field in larger markets and of whose methods I grew skeptical after closely observing one of the most

renowned of them at work. To be successful in this kind of ‘applied’ research, critical scholars need to build relationships of trust (or at least mutual respect), leave their desks, and interact closely with their subjects and partners, which often creates ethical dilemmas and a sense of losing ground or focus. Such a move should not be purely instrumentalist or defensive (strategies to preserve funding or legitimacy). Scholars may gain a lot more in exchange: not just access to the inner spaces of the industry or policy-making, to what John Caldwell called ‘embedded deep texts’, which they can potentially (after getting consent) study in their more academic work, but also the epistemologically-enriching exposure to radically different ways of thinking about subjects of joint interest.

To cite a concrete example: when co-writing reports on the European Commission’s Digital Single Market strategy, it never ceased to amaze me how copyright lawyers think about media production and distribution, how they read their sources and contextualise problems, revealing new dimensions of industry practices to me (such as the social function of collecting societies, or economic consequences of different legal definitions of the ‘independent producer’ in various national audiovisual laws). And from the opposite perspective: my most rewarding experience as an academic supervisor in the last couple of years was consulting two experienced media professionals on their ethnographically-grounded PhD theses. This cross-fertilisation between different registers of research and theory made me think that perhaps we need a new vocabulary going beyond ‘applied’ versus ‘pure’, ‘theory’ versus ‘practice’, or ‘field’ versus ‘desk’, a vocabulary that would better capture the ways we interact with our subjects, colleagues, partners, students, and the public in today’s convergent and networked media ecosystems (for a broad discussion of current trends in ‘applied media studies’ and their employment of collaborative, experimental, and cross-disciplinary methods, see a volume of the same title edited by Kirsten Ostherr).

What might be the future of film studies when seen through this lens? Based on my personal experience, I would say that instead of just looking after aesthetic canons and fighting academic turf wars, it is – apart from multiple other things – to bring culturally-localised and aesthetic sensibilities, the micro-level attention to cultural practices, into areas beyond its comfort zone: policy, industry, data, etc., while collaborating in cross-disciplinary teams both within and beyond academia. When doing that, we may better follow an audiovisual text wherever it takes shape, circulates, acquires value, gets regulated and leaves traces: not just public events, archives, home

screens, and VOD catalogs, but also at places behind ‘closed doors’ that might open only when we offer something in exchange: writers’ rooms, film sets, tech labs, professional association conferences, public fund board meetings, ministerial consultations, business negotiations and corporate offices, and, perhaps most challenging of all, platform algorithms. However, getting ‘inside’ does not have to mean complying with the rules of the state apparatus or corporate media and making friends on the ‘other side’. Furthermore, it should not be limited to effectively becoming an artist, producer, programmer, or DIY engineer. In fact, the move can also be accomplished through dialogic, interventionist or even subversive methods, which may occasionally result in open conflicts, such as in the recent Spotify project from a team of five researchers including the NECS co-founder Patrick Vonderau, or in the 2014 Sony hack research, or through activism and advocacy on behalf of exploited workers, frustrated users, endangered art works or natural resources. I believe that NECS and NECSUS remain key platforms for discussing and coordinating such collective, boundary-breaking, engaged work.

## Author

Petr Szczepanik is Associate Professor of Film Studies at Charles University. He is the author of *Screen Industries in East-Central Europe* (2021) and the editor (with Pavel Zahrádka, Jakub Macek, and Paul Stepan) of *Digital Peripheries: The Online Circulation of Audiovisual Content from the Small Market Perspective* (2020) and (with Patrick Vonderau) *Behind the Screen: Inside European Production Cultures* (2013).