Andrea Virginás
'Work' and 'labour' in film and media studies: Lifepath, introspection, survival
2021-12-13

https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/17291

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

DFG Deutsche
Forschungsgemeinschaft

Philipps Universität
Marburg

'Work' and 'labour' in film and media studies: Lifepath, introspection, survival

Andrea Virginás

We have a tutorial for every problem we face, every work that needs tending to. Academic life is no exception, with the 2021 autumn televisual series *The Chair* actually a twofold tutorial. Amanda Peet and Julia Wyman's creation is a funny and explicit introduction to departmental and faculty housework – be it related to administration or human resource and/or office room – while also offering an interesting model of tackling academic labour from within the global media and film industry. One needs only a step back, however, to ask for a further level of introspection when the media and film industry turns its gaze inwards, to offer tutorials in the vein of *The Chair* about its own everyday (house)work. In what follows, I argue for the importance of such a move in academic media and film studies too, suggesting that – literal, symbolic, and/or metaphoric – 'work' and 'labour' need constant attention in our research if we wish our field to retain relevance in a rapidly deteriorating natural world encasing an unpredictable social and cultural context. My argument is conceived in the simplest possible manner, with a personal life narrative standing for case study, and the concepts of 'work/labour' unifying the essayistic composition of the ideas below. Not that I am unaware of the paradox of reflecting upon futures for film and media studies while assuming one's standpoint in the old feminist fashion – as summarised in the bon mot 'the personal is political' – which cannot but result in a truly limited way of argumentation.

Similarly to a number of us working within film and media studies nowadays, I also have a humanities training peppered with a pinch of social sciences. Historical background examinations, various forms of textual close reading, and qualitative methods have been defining my research questions

and results – as far as my formal, institutional training is concerned. However, an equally important, if not more essential share in my understanding and knowledge of media and film has been constituted by my three-decades long activity as a media worker. This started with my contributions to local radio programs as a 6th grader – under the form of what today would have been hyped as monthly podcasts; continued with writing and editing for high school and then university newspapers; morphing into (daily) film, television, and literary criticism as time passed, and finally leading me to the position of an invited expert on television and film cultural phenomena on both radio and television. Having bridged academic and media/film industrial spheres in my life to a degree – teaching and researching in a media department in the morning, commenting on film or television trends on television in the afternoon, and hurriedly writing a critical piece in the evening while attending a film festival – makes me look fortunate, which indeed I am. However, I suspect that it is the long-term functionality of this match that also contributed to mine being a loosely outdated professional profile, where – instead of big-data wrangling or digital humanities escape routes – cultural studies and its numberless ramifications and crossbreeding with theory remain a safe and muchly enjoyed harbor whenever I work with narrative and fictional audiovisual material – once denoted by expressions such as 'film' or 'television series'. Also, mismatches have existed.

Obviously, the biggest fissure is constituted by temporal (or even/perhaps existential) dislocation between the sphere of media and film industry – as it incessantly produces content, under no matter what circumstances, and to audiences that have gone to sleep not knowing that their hookup show is being uploaded – and its academic examination, as well as the dissemination of that examination in teaching and training. According to my personal experience of the kind sketched above this paradoxically named temporal dislocation was bigger throughout the 1990s and the 2000s in an Eastern Europe limited to Hungary and Romania, to the extent that working within media – and, evidently, consuming it – or reflexively studying media and film were two fully different universes. The one who wrote the newspaper article on Sylvia Plath in the high school journal could not have been the one who perhaps examined her novel in a seminar; or the one who watched *Natural Born Killers* or *Trainspotting* or *The Matrix* several times in the cinema frenzy that surrounded these films in the 1990s could write a critical piece at most – if there was an interested venue for it, but no scholarly examination of these

titles would have been accepted (and was not accepted, as my personal experience showed).

It might seem strange that I call this 1990s/2000s fissure between media and film industry, and media and film studies, a temporal dislocation; perhaps it would have been more adequate to call it a canon war (renamed these days as culture war) between popular/consumer/mass culture and high culture as embodied in university curricula. Or, if not canon/culture war, a disciplinary non-alignment between industry/production/practice and the academic sphere in a post-communist region where democracy was hardly settled (and did not settle ever since). Its nature of temporal dislocation, too, became more evident in the 21st century when Eastern Europe's rigid contours softened within a context of integration in the European Union and becoming part of 'the digital North' (and as opposed to a 'mobile South'). The disappearance of this type of temporal dislocation – between media and film as sensed from within its own logic of production and dissemination, and media and film as studied from an outer perspective of objective knowledge production – became blatantly evident (for me at least) in our pandemic existence.

Having elucidated my standpoint as that of an academic and media worker in the most literal meaning of all three involved terms – doing a job that needs to be done – evidently narrowed the number of choices that remain open for me in the effort to answer the three questions that the editors of the NECSUS #Futures issue posed as indicative. These refer to generative texts/concepts/practices, perhaps under-studied/appreciated in the field of media and film studies; urgent challenges in the field; and future(s) for media and film studies. As already suggested, for me I think it has been 'work' or, using a more field-specific term, 'labour' – interpretative work, the work of the text, the work/labour that each new creation has to do against the (apparently) pre-defined mould of genre – and, by derivation, 'worker' – the one who is permitted to work, the one who is recognised as such, the one who is allowed to create and labour in film and media production, but also in film and media studies – that have been the most fundamental concepts I have been dealing with. While humanities equipped me with histories of all sorts of 'works', 'workers', and processes of labour within the culture industries, cultural studies made me aware of the sophisticated systems of authorisation at work (pun intended), be those the bare working conditions necessary to produce a big-budget pathetic blockbuster as opposed to a small-budget gripping chamber drama, processes of canonisation, or indeed (authorised) red

carpet appearances. Studying work and processes that result in creative examples, or, on the contrary, block innovation, as well as addressing conceptual and social boundaries erected around these activities and results in film and media studies emerged as increasingly topical ever since I defended my PhD in November 2008 (and in which I engaged with, as so many before me and since then, understanding the work that the genre of crime and film noir perform in their evergreen efforts to enter high culture and reach creative variations), with our pandemic existence sadly exacerbating these aspects.

Had I been a hardcore sociologist all these years – trained in qualitative, and foremost, quantitative, methodology, and updating my gadgets and knowledge continuously into the big data era – it would have been 'social class' that I should have identified as a generative, yet (a) still understudied and only partially visible concept, to be highlighted for the 21st century of film and media studies. For the sake of this essayistic incursion, it might suffice to temporarily fix its meaning with a quote from sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (quoting Erving Goffmann) as *'the sense of one's place'*, which 'is at the same time a sense of the place of others'.[1] For does *The Chair* not start with the new workforce occupying the solemn single office, with a clear sense of a detached existence, only to end up on the ground as the chair breaks – thus losing place and sense in a second?

Do I suggest therefore that 'work/labour' or 'worker' – conceived of in a most theoretical/philosophical, or, on the contrary, in a most down-to-earth manner – has been understudied and, hence, should be in the limelight of film and media studies? Do I allude to cultural studies – in all its myriad shades and versions, also paid tribute to in *The Chair* – as the/one meta-framework that definitely needs to be acknowledged hovering over the field, and thus possibly influencing research questions formulated, methods employed, and, ultimately, defining the results that might be reached? Even though the answer is doubly yes, my pledge for more limelight on actual and symbolic labour as filtered through cultural studies comes with a number of restrictive qualifying clauses – as all statements do in the humanities peppered with social sciences. Thus, in what follows I shall shortly address these too.

Yes, I definitely think that work and labour in film and media studies should be given more prominence because my experience, and professional strategies developed during the last 30 years fully support such an opinion. That the pandemic existence emphasised, and continues to do so, patterns of expendability of human creative labour all over (global) human culture, from

film festivals to cinema and human bodies interacting, gives even more relevance to the suggestion. Expendability and obsolescence (also, and more and more of the pre-programmed kind) may be countered only through work and labour. Or, to express it more bluntly: labour and work in media and film is definitely one strong antidote to widespread practices of dispensing with creativity altogether.

Yet, many aspects need to at least be listed that definitely limit the scope of such a generalising proposal. 'Labour', 'work', or 'worker' are obviously concepts not intrinsic to the field of film and media studies, and therefore mobilise much broader issues of global social concern. Perhaps they should not perplex our field as long as there are such scientific problems to be raised, investigated, and elucidated that inherently stem from the field and are specific to the media involved. Furthermore, the sharp divisions conditioned by the temporal advancement of media and film technologies need to be acknowledged too. Digital non-natives like myself – with our teen years defined by MTV, our twenties by the first personal computers, and our thirties by Facebook – could and perhaps even will continue our research journeys as guided by the cultural studies umbrella and a constant appetite for 'labour' of all kind: of the text, of a genre, of a specific production, or of an actual auteur. I truly cherish the dream of coordinated and comparative research in local, regional, continental, or global film and media studies, research that elucidates the very conditions (laws?) that inform the existence of the media and film phenomena examined – with the ultimate aim of a peaceful, harmless, and enriching media and film experience and/or study. Yet, I also think that technological advancement forces us, and especially all those coming after us – the digital natives – to find a more relevant meta-theory and further conditions for piecemeal theorising.

Data science evidently could be a strong candidate for such a position: it is not hard to imagine the day when film and media studies are but a subsection of it, similar to a social media punchline from media theorist Lev Manovich, who suggested that Facebook Department could very well replace Communication Department, and Twitter or Instagram Literature and Drama. Centuries-old concepts and objects on which the field of film and media studies was founded upon melted away, from text to celluloid/film to newspaper to cinema or television in my own lifetime — and I am hardly middle-aged, with many other examples that could be added, even though the mentioned ones hit me the hardest. Is rhizome, data, or content-on-demand the equivalent or heir to text, celluloid/film, newspaper and cinema &

television? Or do they belong to a fully different regime of objects and knowledge? As for the fate of piecemeal theorising of the kind I am also practicing: this might very well end up ignored, because it is absolutely irrelevant either as data or as grand narrative. Grand narratives did not have to die only because poststructuralism came along, but also because of the other big task ultimately looming over the professional credo of digital natives. Unfortunately, they also need to address an issue that I think my digital non-native colleagues and myself did not have to consider in our formative years: the relevance of film and media studies if our ecosystem fails. The loss will be irreparable since 'electronic' is a meaning subsumed in film and media studies – and it is electricity that will disappear first. This question is hardly separable from the digital component of contemporary media and film; I will mention that the worrying aspects of climate change have been running fully parallel to phases of digitalisation ever since the dawn of the computer and the internet.

Not equipped for grand theorising – be that along the critique of capitalism or historical lessons that might be insightful – my aim is less developing a fictional scenario in any of the possible directions if this will happen. I would rather enforce the necessity of constant disciplinary self-reflection upon the conditions of our own labour as media and film industry practitioners and/or scholars of the field, in this case not only as a path towards methodological, and, ultimately, scientific lucidity, but as the condition of film and media studies in a 21st century that we came to know throughout the first two turbulent decades. I truly indulge in the closing sequence of Peet and Wyman's mentioned televisual series, when the ominous sentence 'Not being a chair suits you' is uttered during the coffee break of the former chair. And I definitely hope that we will not see the day when it will become evident that 'not being media and film academics suits us' – as other kinds of jobs, work and labour will have become more pressing.

Author

Andrea Virginás is Associate Professor of Film and Media Studies at Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania, Cluj, Romania. Her research concerns mainstream cinema cultures and small national cinemas, focusing on film genres, narration, intermediality, and cultural theory. Her latest volume is

Film Genres in Hungarian and Romanian Cinema: History, Theory, Reception (Lexington Books/Rowman and Littlefield, 2021). Currently she is in the research phase of the project 'Feature Filmic Processing of Collective Traumatization in Contemporary European Film: A Possible Model of Mediated Public Memory-Work' (Bolyai János Research Scholarship, Hungarian Academy of Sciences).

References

Bourdieu, P. 'What Makes a Social Class? On the Theoretical and Practical Existence of Groups', *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 32 (1987): 1-17

Notes

[1]   Bourdieu 1987, p. 5 – italics in original