

Screen studies and industrial 'theorizing'

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A film/media 'industry expert' sneers at scholars to stay away from his theorizing about television with the following warning: 'academics and analysts looking for reference material, rigorous Socratic arguments, or theoretical pontifications should not read this book'.¹ Yet, in far less dismissive terms, various film and television corporations also invite me (and many others) to gain 'exclusive' forms of access and insight into the ever-greater complexities of contemporary screen practice: 'you will have the opportunity to participate in an historic test that will influence the way motion pictures will look on the screen for the next 50-100 years . . . engineering knowledge is NOT required'.² Such invitations usually offer some costly proprietary information service, trade event or exclusive association membership to achieve the promised insights. Alongside this contrary warning—solicitation posturing by industry, I have also noticed a particular compliance on the part of many film critical studies graduates with the demands of the corporations that produce screen content today, especially in their marketing, public relations and management departments. This vocational trajectory frequently begins through unpaid internships, poorly paid production assistantships or the alienating life of 'assistanting' higher-ups in LA's production culture. I would like in this essay to explore this curious affinity between academic screen studies and commercial, industrial screen 'theorizing'.

In the present context, it is perhaps pertinent to ask where 'screen theory' can now be said to reside, if anywhere. Theorizing about the

1 This quote is taken from television executive Shelley Palmer's book, *Television Disrupted: the Transition from Network to Networked TV* (Oxford: Focal Press, 2006), p. xx.

2 From an e-mail blast sent to the author by Charles Schwartz, chief executive of ETC, 26 April 2004.

3 These arguments are frequently made with partisan career objectives in mind, and usually with much less philosophical rigour than those of either André Bazin or Noel Carroll.

screen is far from confined to the academy. This characterization holds on several levels, and includes taking theorizing to mean 'classical' film theory questions that attempt to 'define' film/television or that argue about what 'quality' is in film/television. Industry panelists and directors in public post-screening question-and-answer sessions regularly tackle these classic 'aesthetic questions' with each technological or stylistic shift in their work.³ At the same time, industry 'theorizing' can resemble more contemporary forms of analytic 'deconstruction'. This is especially so when 'below-the-line' craft associations, camera unions or honorary societies spend extended sessions collectively analyzing how award-winning scenes or sequences were shot and made by their own most influential members. In these ways, media workers make critical sense of their own screen practices to themselves. What is far less likely to happen in these convention-driven, professional theorizing rituals, however, is the kind of 'oppositional' critique with which scholars have long identified. And yet evidence of critical opposition does lurk and leak in the labour faultlines and perimeters of this closely guarded corporate sphere. That is why I focus primarily on the critical practices of below-the-line film and television workers, since their increasingly unstable and threatening labour conditions fuel correspondingly volatile oppositional discourses – about the conglomerates and the politics that exploit, outsource and render them obsolete. The long ongoing union–labour turmoil in Los Angeles makes these kinds of 'ground-up' critiques hard to ignore – even though the 'top-down' marketing of the conglomerates works at just this kind of erasure.

At some level, screen theorizing by the film, television and new media industries and the hundreds of thousands of workers and professionals within them dwarfs the constrained analyses carefully framed by scholars and cautiously reproduced by their graduate students. Even a cursory visit to film festivals, syndication markets, broadcasting conventions, advertising upfronts, industry annual critics' meetings and new media summits – as well as the filmmaker Q&As, demos, pitch sessions, panels, keynotes, 'boot camps', technical 'bakeoffs', retreats and networking mixers that now pervade and define each of them – reveals an overwhelming volume of those very activities that academics hold near and dear to ourselves and our disciplines: namely, close critical analysis, aesthetic speculation, screen technology assessment, reception study, historical debate, and general formal and cultural theorization. All of these play out in the constantly morphing and reaffiliating world of the conglomerates (albeit in a preemptive, proprietary way). Far from being averse to such things, many film and television workers now relish and spur these activities as part of trade habit. Meanwhile, the corporations that employ those workers systematically rationalize industrial critical activity as workaday parts of content development, marketing and branding. All this is part of a profound double bind in which production studies scholars now find themselves: at the same time as

viewers and scholars are offered excessive new amounts of rich 'behind-the-scenes' knowledge, media companies have instituted the most rigorous policies of employee 'non-disclosure', where all information is proprietary. Because so much of this user-friendly top-down industry theorizing is in effect sanctioned corporate disclosure, scholars might gain by focusing instead on the far less sunny unauthorized, ground-up disclosures of film and television workers.

What are academic screen scholars to make of this alternative or 'parallel' screen studies universe playing out across the commercial sphere? Dismissing it because these commercialized screen studies are so very closely tied to corporate profits is disingenuous and shortsighted. In part, this is because university professors in film, media and cultural studies have educated many of the film and television professionals that make up these post-Fordist, contracted and outsourced cadres. In some ways, that is, the new, convergent film and television industries are products of the very sort of theorization and study that we lay claim to as scholars. Work by sociological scholars of 'creative industries', like John Hartley and Angela McRobbie, has of course made clear the integral connections between intellectual and cultural capital on the one hand and social identities, flexible industries and global capital on the other.⁴ What such studies are less inclined to do, however, is offer specific insights into the nature and significance of the industry's screen texts themselves. In what sense, then, does the screen's textual content animate intellectual and critical activities across the industry-academia divide? In attempting to tackle this issue, my scope is limited to the US context, although recent industrial studies show that these trends are increasingly (and problematically) becoming symptomatic elsewhere.⁵

As a textual and aesthetic phenomenon – like commercial television before it – contemporary cinema is a mess. I would argue further that today's technical augmentations, intertextual complications, and repurposing and syndication strategies make film a mess regardless of whether narrative or stars or phenomenological intensity can be said to dominate the individual's 'primary' screen experience. To be 'media-specific' today, that is, also counterintuitively means to narrow one's 'focus' down to the messy, repurposed, heterogeneous nature of the ever-proliferating screen text. US television studies scholars have had to acknowledge this sort of textual 'clutter' since the very start, since US television was commercially developed, aggressively marketed and pervasively consumed as the very antithesis of modernist specificity: as a portal that integrated all of the other arts for delivery in a small, convenient, user-friendly electronic screen package. Since cinema has been primarily seen on the electronic screen rather than the theatre screen for the last half-century (broadcast viewership has dwarfed box-office numbers worldwide during this period), film studies gains little by attempting to confine its research activities to some pure and exclusive – but ultimately non-representative – theatrical viewing state.

4 See John Hartley (ed.), *Creative Industries* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004); Angela McRobbie, *British Fashion Design* (London: Routledge, 1998).

5 Three recent studies show that – due to global marketing and coproduction ventures – various industrial permutations once unique to the USA (like television 'show-running', 'branding' and 'franchising') are now emerging in other national media production markets like the UK, Australia and Canada. See Christine Cornea, 'Showrunning the *Doctor Who* franchise'; Elana Levine, 'Crossing the border: studying Canadian television production'; and Oli Mould, 'Lights, camera, but where's the action'; all in Vicki Mayer, Miranda Banks and John Caldwell (eds), *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries* (New York, NY: Routledge, forthcoming).

- 6 For a critique of these early audience studies, see Judith Mayne, *Cinema and Spectatorship* (London: Routledge, 1993).
- 7 For a more representative indication of the systematic nature of cultural studies fieldwork methodologies in recent years, see Barry Dornfeld, *Producing Public Television* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998); Purnima Mankekar, *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999); Nick Couldry *The Place of Media Power* (London: Routledge, 2000); Nick Couldry, *Media Rituals* (London: Routledge, 2003); Ellen Seiter, *Television and New Media Audiences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Anna McCarthy, *Ambient Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001); Laura Grindstaff, *The Money Shot* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2002); Arlene Davila, *Latinos, Inc* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001); Vicki Mayer, *Producing Dreams, Consuming Youth* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003); Vicki Mayer, 'Guys gone wild: soft-core video professionalism and new realities in television production', *Cinema Journal*, vol. 47, no. 2 (2008), pp. 97–116.
- 8 This work builds especially on that of two key figures: sociologist Paul Willis and anthropologist Clifford Geertz. Willis provides a good reminder of the importance of class issues and what it might mean for human subjects to 'theorize from the ground up'.

The reception of screen content today, therefore, forces us to reconsider what screen specificity might mean, and what industry's relationship to it is. This is especially the case given changes in the scale, scope, seriality and simultaneity of multiscale and multitasked viewing. Granted, filmgoers still pay a premium to watch in theatrical settings, but multiplex-goers and art-house cinephiles also consume images designed for Panavision on one-inch portable screens, YouTube, DVD, television, premium cable and pay-per-view. To theorize film today, therefore, means acknowledging various 'serial' and 'multitasking' forms of viewership. Far from being lost or displaced, the cinephile's pure screen state stands merely as one of a variety of viewing choices. Some of these serial and simultaneous viewing texts may have been designed to help viewers navigate and find content in the cluttered multimedia environment. Many of these 'mongrelized' viewing formats, that is, actually make it easier to find and consume the cinephile's primary obsessive object of desire in the multimedia flux and programming flow: the cult film, the canonical director's work, the kitsch-inflected guilty pleasure. In this sense, cinephilic purity can be seen as icing on a very thick multiscale, multimodal viewership cake. The relationship between the icing and the cake is a matter worth attending to in more detail.

This very textual messiness and multitasked and multimodal reception of screen content is precisely why film studies scholars would gain immeasurably from closely considering *industrial* forms of theorization and critical debate. Even formal and phenomenological studies of the screen would benefit by examining the technologies, trade discourses and work practices that produce and manage those screen phenomena. Such things can provide strategic help in unpacking and unraveling the knot that now stands as the screen text. After all, filmmakers, CGI artists, trade writers and technologists themselves always speak simultaneously from their position as sense-making viewers as well as professionals. Crossing perspectives in this way can mean confronting some nasty disciplinary boundary policing. Especially pertinent in this regard is a reconsideration of film studies' trusty straw man and 'other': cultural studies, widely characterized as antithetical to film studies.⁶ Such dismissals have little credibility in the context of more recent, systematic fieldwork-based studies.⁷

For reasons that should become clear, of the two broad traditions for incorporating industrial considerations into film studies, contemporary ethnographic work on film and media can be just as useful as political-economic analysis. My own screen research integrates textual analysis with economic, institutional and ethnographic research, and attempts to keep the cultural and the class practices of production worlds in dialogue with each other.⁸ From the 'interpretivist' turn in anthropology, I take as a methodological premiss the notion that all cultural practices are themselves texts, each of which is an ensemble of other texts. Rather than falling into the easy trap of asserting the direct social function or meaning of any given industrial practice, for example,

9 See Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1983); 'Deep play: notes on a Balinese cockfight', in Chandra Mukerji and Michael Schudson (eds), *Rethinking Popular Culture* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990).

10 See James Clifford and George Marcus (eds), *Writing Culture* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984).

I follow Geertz's model of 'looking over the shoulder' of one's interpretive ethnographic subjects 'as they make sense of themselves and their practices'.⁹ This means 'looking' closely at the workaday forms of industrial screen theorizing and labour outlined above. It also means constantly attending to the autoethnographic analysis of one's industry informants. From influential figures like Clifford and Marcus in the 1980s, this autoethnographic perspective has come in and out of fashion in anthropology, media audience studies and cultural studies.¹⁰ And yet, perhaps logically, the implications of the interpretivist model did not make much of a dent in either film history or the political economy of media. At least in graduate school, the archival turn in film history frequently means granting greater ontological status to discovered documents and industry artefacts than to screen texts. In fact, all three registers can be productively understood as convention-driven, 'scripted' acts of industrial-cultural interpretation (rather than as 'what actually happened'). Likewise, political economists of media might underscore their corporate critiques by selfconsciously questioning the trade journals and financial pages from which they glean their evidence as forms of industrial-cultural interpretation (rather than as 'what is actually happening'). Saying that all the evidence on both sides of these entrenched oppositions works as stylized genres is not to deny 'real' politics; far from it. Precisely because disinformation and viral marketing now define our world, challenging the credibility of all 'evidence' (textual, economic, archival, industrial) as 'staged' genres is now arguably crucial to 'real' politics as well. In part, this means getting rid of the false 'text-as-screen' versus 'context-as-industry' binary that tends to caricature 'state-of-the-field' debates in the humanities and the social sciences.

So, screen theorizing fuels contemporary industrial practice. But where and how can film studies engage industry to create the kind of critical, textualized fieldwork proposed here? My own fieldwork builds on three background areas: film/video production, film studies and television critical studies. Yet it also draws on many of the other non-film studies disciplines that were presented at a recent state-of-the-field media industries research conference: sociology, anthropology, cultural geography and political economy.¹¹ Attempting to work across this divide between critical humanities work and social science means dealing with a set of nagging straw men erected by one camp against the other. This includes social scientists' dismissals of film studies' naive 'textualism' and interpretivism, as well as film studies' counter-cynicism about the naive forms of ethnographic deference, positivism and 'empiricism' that drive sociological research. Neither view proves very useful in media industries research; and both overlook potential affinities. Texts are also empirical, but are seldom framed as such. At the same time – at least in Hollywood – ethnographic disclosures to scholars (and journalists) by professionals are inevitably stylized and 'scripted', but are seldom acknowledged as such.

11 Analyzing Media Industries and Media Production, International Communication Association (ICA) Conference, Montreal, 23 May 2008.

12 David Hesmondalgh, *Cultural Industries* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2002); Allen Scott, *On Hollywood* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

13 Paul Grainge, *Brand Hollywood*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008); Karen Lury, 'The 'ghastly' re-animation of time on digital television', in James Bennett and Nikki Strange (eds), *Television as Digital Media* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008); Denise Mann, *Hollywood Independents* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); James Bennett, 'Your window on the world' (PhD dissertation, University of Warwick, 2007).

14 Scott, *On Hollywood*. For a particularly productive application of some of Scott's perspectives in the area of contemporary media globalization, see Michael Curtin, *Playing to the World's Biggest Audience* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007).

Beyond this mutual disciplinary caricaturing, effectively researching the multimedia conglomerates in LA arguably means integrating human subjects research, institutional and economic analysis, and systematic critical analysis of industrial texts, labour rituals and practitioner artefacts. Far from being antithetical, integrated critical fieldwork of this sort on cultures of production provides insights that complement those of organizational sociologists, political economists and film historians. Given this situation, scholars would do well to approach their research data, and their working assumptions, with some degree of suspicion. Various factors make this slippery territory. In Hollywood, the default behaviour of socioprofessional communities is rank insincerity: set visits are managed and choreographed by corporate publicists; and most interviews with above-the-line production professionals are sanctioned as forms of commercial marketing. Scholars would do well to see these forms of industrial 'information' for what they are: scripted performances and stylized industrial 'texts' – objects that require considerable subsequent textual analysis. And here lies the scholarly rub: accessing industrial theorizing frequently means extracting it from the fabric of duplicity and marketing into which it is invariably woven.

Two recent books, both of them very important interventions in the field of media industries research, are worth considering in this regard: David Hesmondalgh's *Cultural Industries* and Allen Scott's *On Hollywood*.¹² Hesmondalgh's book is among the most productive attempts to bridge the unfortunate, and sometimes testy, divide between cultural studies and political economy. One recurrent suggestion throughout the book is that sociological and economically oriented industry scholars should start paying more attention to 'texts': a good call, but something that the book itself, given its many other tasks, cannot undertake. What would Hesmondalgh's textual research finally do? Would it be different from the longstanding traditions of textual analysis in film history and television studies? If so, how? I take Hesmondalgh's proposal as a welcome prospect, and think that productive models for approaching this integrated 'textual-economic' research can be found in recent work by Paul Grainge, Karen Lury, Denise Mann and James Bennett, to name a few.¹³ Scott's book, an 'economic geography', has proved influential in other ways.¹⁴ His persuasive formulation of 'agglomeration' provides a convincing picture of the regional textures, material spaces and interorganizational logic of production workers in Los Angeles. Scott, a public policy academic, invokes some film history to set up his account, but quickly moves on to distance himself from the thinness of film studies in favour of the ostensibly more solid and substantive 'empiricism' of the geographer and the economist. One of the only downsides of the study is that the book caricatures film studies as something other than empirical.

I should like to build on Hesmondalgh's call for textual analysis within a sociologically informed cultural industries perspective, on Scott's call to ground industry research more empirically, and on Grainge's, Lury's,

Mann's and Bennett's precedents for integrated research. That is, I propose that the material practices and artefacts that fuel the industry must be engaged on some level through a film studies type of textual analysis – recognized as an empirical method – and not solely through the numerical abstractions of economics or geography. More than a mere producer of onscreen content for the public, the screen industry that I study uses small-scale and mid-level *texts* to forge and maintain trade and professional identities, to build consensus and maintain order, and to facilitate interpersonal, intragroup and intergroup social and commercial relationships. From my perspective, it is impossible to understand media industry business, or its institutions, without understanding industry's *text-based*, socioprofessional relationships and cultural interactions.

Six specific examples of industrial practice highlight why a different set of mid-level questions – somewhere between the higher-level macroscopic perspectives of political economy and the very local, on-the-ground perspectives of ethnography and human subjects research – need to be deployed in contemporary screen production research. Each example raises specific issues about how scholars can access and engage industrial theorizing.

Industry analysis and trade writing as 'whoring'. Going to the source or to the archive to 'get it right' or to 'crosscheck' screen industry 'facts' is necessary, to some degree. But this kind of evidence is also much more slippery than some in the historical turn acknowledge, especially since industry trade analysis and writing are invariably fueled by acute partisan marketing and advertising goals.¹⁵ Industry public relations writers occasionally refer (usually off the record) to writing for trade magazines as a form of prostitution or 'whoring'.¹⁶ Showbiz story editors and publicists have told me that the public relations upon which the entire trade depends is based on effective 'lying'.¹⁷ Many trade 'articles' (and indeed most of the articles in some less prestigious publications) are merely hastily reauthored company press releases. Other industry public relations writers specialize in 'planting' faux-articles in the lesser video production trade journals. Trade editors regularly accept such 'articles' if they include lists of general 'tips' for doing things better in the production specialization. Yet this form of 'helpful', but stealthy, writing in the trade journals usually conceals some vested product interest.¹⁸ Screen organizations and the press, therefore, are tangled in a messy dance of information control and gossip that passes from a studio or network to the trade press. Constrained by widely demeaned confidentiality and non-disclosure agreements, which even unpaid interns and poorly paid production assistants are required to sign as a condition of employment, almost every firm guards all company backstage information or on-location news as private and proprietary – at least until the corporation decides to release it. Unauthorized storytelling is a threat that must be monitored, managed and punished. In one video production trade journal, the editor consciously likens the trade

15 Of the six examples, this and the third, fifth and sixth summarize and adapt more detailed, chapter-length studies, in John T. Caldwell, *Production Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

16 These comments on the nature and dark side of trade writing come from analysis of a wide set of video production trades in the USA, and from discussions with a seasoned trade writer, who asked that his identity remain anonymous (for perhaps obvious reasons), in Bellflower, California, 8 May 2004.

17 One industry publicist told me that the first lesson she learned when she started working in publicity was from an editor who warned her to prepare for the widely held view 'that all publicity was lying'. Comments made to the author, UCLA, Los Angeles, 16 May 2008.

18 A company's new programming language, computer code or proprietary technology, for example, may be presupposed or legitimized by the 'helpful' suggestion list being 'educationally' offered to the field. In essence, trade analysis functions as product placement.

19 See Cristina Clapp, 'Editor's corner: the conversation', *Videography*, April 2004, p. 4.

20 See John T. Caldwell, 'User-generated, worker-generated, producer-generated content', in Bennett and Strange (eds), *Television as Digital Media*.

writer's task to that of Harry Caul in Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation* (1974), since the writer's task involves eavesdropping on and deciphering industrial secrets.¹⁹ Clearly, the trade publications are very much in bed with the industry, in a relationship defined by how and when proprietary information will be leaked. Yet a flood of new, unauthorized *worker-generated* 'surveillance' and criticism of studios, producers and companies now churns across the blogosphere.²⁰ To combat the destabilizing threats of crew workers leaking unauthorized stories or secrets from locations or sound stages, the studios and networks now mount initiatives to 'counter-leak' their own preferred behind-the-scenes narratives. Corporate handlers and publicists also lead journalists around by the nose at press junkets, tightly orchestrated set visits and incestuous annual story-sharing courting rituals such as the meetings of the Television Critics Association. Journalists and trade analysts can, of course, write independently and critically; but studios make the consequences of such an action quite clear, threatening the loss of the very industrial access upon which continued writing depends. There is no subtlety here: if you write and analyze independently, you pay the price. This situation clearly colours the 'authenticity' of behind-the-scenes information. It also shows how territorial and exclusionary the genres of corporate 'theorizing' can be.

Hollywood accounting. In the film and television industry most economic information, budgetary numbers and financial reports can be productively understood as lies. This principle is otherwise known, and widely acknowledged, as 'Hollywood accounting'. In this scheme, studio overheads always conveniently expand to absorb revenues so that productions never officially return 'net profits' to contractual participants, partners and investors. Long before the dotcoms and the Enrons, Hollywood had spun numbers and cooked its books because, like the high-tech sector, much of its product pipeline had always been virtual, and its market prospects risk-prone and speculative. Accurate financial information and specific series and production budgets are closely held, proprietary and largely inaccessible to scholars. Only actual court cases and contract litigation can bring accurate numbers to the light of day, and this rarely happens. I regularly have to challenge my graduate students on the confidence with which they cite location reports, audience numbers or profit projections from *Variety* or *Hollywood Reporter*. What would happen to our research if, instead, we took these financial representations to be habitual tactics: stylized genres of cultural and economic leveraging, deployed to steer contract negotiations and investments through public posturing? The nature of Hollywood accounting means that scholars can only gauge the economic and logistical theorizing assertions in film and television development by 'reverse engineering' from the screen text back to institutional practices.

Industrial gossip and tracking groups. Talent agencies have long circulated 'tracking reports', intended to keep all of the agents and their assistants in the company 'on the same page' and aware of what is going

21 Traditionally, gossip and buzz about screenplays and potential new film or television projects circulated informally around LA through telephone conversations and casual meetings between those with enough clout to acquire or greenlight a film or television series. The off-the-record and unobservable nature of these discussions meant that a narrative 'grapevine' ruled the development pipeline, and it was controlled by privileged executive and agency 'insiders'.

22 BaselineFT's FilmTracker service is only the most recent way in which those in charge of film and television content control what is developed. In essence, the online FilmTracker service controls which scripts are gossiped about and how; and – more importantly – who participates in generating the resulting buzz. BaselineFT's FilmTracker Tracking Service, <http://www.filmtracker.com> [accessed 20 May 2005].

23 'Totally unauthorized', <http://www.filmhacks.blogspot.com> [accessed 20 May 2005].

on elsewhere in the building and the firm. These written in-progress scorecards merely formalize the kinds of gossip that have long made screen content development a collective, buzz-driven, process. But beyond this, off the radar of most scholars and critics, is the pervasive practice of cross-industry 'tracking' and 'tracking groups'. Such groups collectively monitor and evaluate any and all production ideas and creative content that circulate long before they finally reach a film or television screen. Screen studies are, in effect, analyzing a production environment that already obsessively analyzes itself. But we seldom acknowledge this, nor consider the opportunities that this analysis of analysis might provide.²¹ Agency and studio tracking continues to take place through exclusive online services and communication back-channels – much to the consternation of writers and producers who would rather get a fair and unbiased reading of a script only after they pitch it to a studio or network.²² At one point, the Writers' Guild of America (WGA) counterattacked the heavy-handed control and exclusivity of producers' tracking boards by adding a link to a screenwriters' website that 'tracked' the reputations – good and bad – of producers across town. Once word spread, this rebuttal board created howls of protest from producers who claimed that it was 'unfair' for screenwriters to take cheap shots at producers, especially under cover of anonymity. Many producers found their reputations besmirched when screenwriters told tales of how producers had exploited and abused them. Screenwriters puzzled over the angry reactions. For years, producers, agencies and networks were secretly evaluating, criticizing and rejecting the work of screenwriters through tracking done 'under cover of darkness'. When screenwriters began sending 'feedback' the other way, the executive world of producers threw a fit. Other websites, including 'Totally unauthorized' and 'Defamer', have taken up and broadened the WGA's counter-studio ethos by posting online damning, anonymous, behind-the-scenes stories about producers.²³ Tracking boards, whether (managerially) from the top, or (anarchistically) from the bottom, serve as collective forms of critical deliberation and evaluation about the screen. Traditionally, those at the top have managed this industrial theorizing process. Today, screen content sinks or swims as a consequence of the multi-source theorizing gossip circulating around it through storytelling back-channels to which, until now, very few have had access. Some corporate tracking boards are now available to scholars for hefty fees; while quasi worker counter-tracking boards are, like BaselineFT's FilmTracker, open to anyone with online access.

Collapsing distinctions between creative content and marketing. For years, interviews with writers, directors and producers have focused on issues involving the creation of films and television series. Marketing was largely disregarded as an ancillary corporate activity largely off the radar of 'the creatives'. However, with the decline of media mass market economies of scale and the current hyperactive practice of multimedia repurposing, the distinction between the 'primary' entertainment

experience onscreen on the one hand and marketing on the other has become blurred. This is arguably because no single media platform in the new conglomerates is now capable of financially ‘carrying’ a project solely with its limited media-specific (film vs television vs cable vs DVD vs online vs videogame, and so on) revenues. This new reality affects both the financing and the distribution of screen content. On the financing side, all primetime US television series and feature films are now financed by amortizing costs across multiple media formats and distribution venues. At the same time, on the distribution side, each iteration of a new film or series must now obsessively work to ‘cross-promote’ and market the other multimedia iterations of the same show. The WGA strike, conglomerate posturing and National Labor Relations Board rulings in 2007-08 exposed the extent to which the ostensible ‘creators’ of primetime content were also directly involved in creating online marketing content for the network and the studios. Twenty years ago, to say that marketing had merged with creative content might have suggested two minor industrial practices: product placement and infomercials. Today all films and series market other versions of the same films and series in various franchises and brands. Fake blogs and websites by studios and networks only seem to work if there is considerable critical, theoretical and economic investment in creating complex, challenging onscreen narratives that fans want to deconstruct in a multimedia environment. In effect, for fan and scholar alike, the screen text has turned itself inside out. Marketing is at the heart of corporate theorizing, since profitability now requires visibility above the multichannel clutter via the construction of critical distinction for a title – a task once performed by critics – well before a film or series hits the screen.

All screenplays are also business plans. This is an oft-repeated adage. Because film and television are so capital intensive, a script also functions as a financial prospectus, a detailed investment opportunity and a corporate proposal. Specifically, any screenplay or project developed for primetime television or for a feature film today generates considerable involvement at the earliest story sessions and producers’ meetings on the part of personnel from the firm’s financing, marketing, coproduction, distribution, merchandising and new media departments or divisions. Such preproduction analyses seek to ensure that any new project will create income-producing properties (reiterations of the original concept) that can be consumed via as many different human sensory channels as possible. That is, story ideas will be developed as diversified entertainment properties that can be: seen (as cinema, television and pay-per-view); heard (as soundtracks, CDs and downloads); played (as videogames); interacted with (as linked online sites); ridden (as themepark attractions); touched (as mobile phones and pod-casts); and worn (as merchandise). Little is given the go-ahead for production unless there are compelling prospects for financial success in each or most of these (now integrated) market areas. A systematic ‘story

economy', therefore, characterizes both the front end (preproduction and production phases) and back end (distribution and exhibition phases) of any film or television project. On the front end, each written scene (characters, settings and actions) presupposes very specific material resources, logistical needs and budgetary resources. Production managers then step in systematically to 'break down' scripts and scenes into cost-effective shooting schedules (usually with scenes shot out of sequence to minimize the number of locations and actor calls needed). Script breakdowns also result in a line-item budget allocation for labour, technologies, material costs and locations. An elaborate boilerplate form of economic analysis greets each script considered by a major studio, production company or network. Off-the-shelf software now makes this process of calculation (script breakdown, budgeting and scheduling) a task that can be performed by rote and with disinterest. At the back end of the story economy, each scene presupposes very specific end-uses that can be tied to the economic prospects of different demographic markets, and simultaneous or sequential distribution 'windows'. In a sense, the company or network that evaluates and develops pitch and story ideas weaves the 'imagined narrative world' of the screenwriter-as-author together with an 'imagined financial world' of the screenwriter/producer-as-entrepreneur.

One way to crack these integrated, closely held, theorizing practices (narratives as business models) is for scholars to gather systematically, map and analyze the many ancillary and repurposed screen artefacts – electronic press kits, film trailers, demo tapes, network promos, studio previews, broadcast interstitials, 'making-ofs' and branding tapes – that churn around and reference the ostensibly 'primary' screen text before, during and after the release of a film or series. These 'para-texts' or 'ephemeral texts' do not simply represent systematic extensions and permutations of the featured screen text; they also function as explicit critical interrogations – albeit staged and overdetermined ones – of the primary texts.

Collapsing barriers between producers and consumers. Those who design sets, write scripts, direct scenes, shoot images and edit pictures also participate fully in the economy, political landscape and educational systems of culture and society as a whole, even though scholars tend to disregard producer/audience flipflopping. Above-the-line producers, directors and executives are especially good at intentionally confusing the audience/producer split. In a contentious production meeting, arguments that the audience wants this or wants that trump all others – at least if the person saying it has enough institutional power to ignore evidence to the contrary. Television creators dialogue with viewers via mobile content and 'snack TV' for handheld 'third screens'.²⁴ At the same time, online blogs 'by' series characters help viewers solve plotline mysteries before sending them back to the next episode. Finally, production personnel circulate publicly in consumer culture, and few film and television professional organizations shy away from public

24 With television viewing and box office declining, many entertainment providers began developing content that could be efficiently dispersed to mobile phone users. The use of mobile phones for film and television consumption follows concerted industrial efforts to find and harness a 'third screen' in the viewer's hands. This is sometimes referred to as 'snack TV'. The television and the personal computer are deemed the other two screens.

25 In August 2006, I was asked by a marketing staffer at Columbia Tri-Star if I could provide film students willing to produce 'their own' unpaid 'amateur' videos for YouTube that would have the effect of marketing the studio's forthcoming 'professionally' produced feature film.

exposure. Many industry associations and production guilds have 'speakers' bureaux', 'educational divisions' and publicized internship opportunities'. Other companies cultivate and interact with the public through timely media events, or by cosponsoring local quasi-Sundance film festivals. Colleges host alumni meetings in LA for industry networking (that is, fundraising) and mount 'Alumni in Hollywood' issues of alumni magazines. Far from LA and New York, film and television professionals circulate as short-term artists in residence, while film and video equipment companies, star directors of photography, editors and directors travel widely to participate in regional production workshops and technical demonstrations. All of these producer-as-audience initiatives work to merge audience identification with industrial identity, and to make industrial theorizing more accessible to scholars than in the past. The widespread network/studio practices of planting fake personal videos by supposed 'fans' on MySpace and YouTube in order to virally market forthcoming features, or of harvesting antagonistic personal video 'mashes' on the same sites as part of anti-marketing campaigns, underscore just how much the line between producer and consumer has become blurred.²⁵ Producers generate faux-amateur content, buy and distribute amateur content professionally, provide online learning in film and video aesthetics, spin blogs and online discussions, spoil ostensible secrets by stealth marketing, defame competitors, pose as fans, reward fans – and *are* fans. Scholars do not have to work very hard to locate these forms of worker and industrial theorizing, since they provide the very mechanisms through which producers dialogue with audiences in the many 'contact zones' that now connect the two sides.

These six examples undercut some popular clichés about screen production, the first of which is surely William Goldman's classic taunt that 'nobody knows anything in Hollywood'. As indicated above, industry professionals know a great deal about the industry, the screen and screen culture, and spend considerable time, money and effort complicating, elaborating and commoditizing that industry knowledge for the trade and the public. What the industry does not know quite as well, however, is what the audience will ultimately do in response to its distributed titles. This is why studios over-produce and over-market titles, so as to increase their chances of success in the face of the over-supply of multiplatform and multichannel choices. This approach 'builds in' and rationally accommodates the inevitable failure rate in distribution; and also spurs endless theorizing justifications to bosses, stockholders and the trade press about what went 'wrong' or 'right'. It may be argued, in fact, that the degree of industrial 'theorizing' about the audience increases, alongside industry's marketing research, in direct proportion to the rise in audience unruliness and choice.²⁶

In addition, the practices outlined here cast doubt on the notion that there is a clean, unequivocal 'inside' to the screen industry to which

26 See Henry Jenkins's definitive account of audience 'unruliness', in *Convergence Culture* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2006).

scholars must gain access in order fully to understand 'what is actually going on'. My fieldwork suggests that one can only grapple with the seemingly endless layers of cultural and institutional mediations that manage movement from the 'outside' to the 'centre'. It is, in any event, entirely unclear whether such a centre actually exists: arguably, the mediating layers *are* the industry. Finally, these practices here suggest that screen scholars should consider the possibilities and problems of human subjects research when analyzing screen phenomena. This goes beyond the question of power *vis-à-vis* subjects (whether one 'studies up' or 'studies down'). In screen production cultures, human behaviours and personal disclosures are systematically choreographed and preemptively staged for public analysis. Clearly, we need to integrate other mid-level ethnographic perspectives and tools within macroeconomic and microtextual methods if we hope better to understand this slippery, conflicted institutional terrain. Such methods would acknowledge the rich and instrumental roles that material culture, social networking, trade artefacts and socioprofessional rituals play as strategic corporate and economic business practices that 'author' screen texts.

Three correctives come to mind. Firstly, the kind of close, suspicious, systematic textual analysis mastered in film studies provides a useful way to study these institutionalized forms of 'behind-the-scenes' disclosures – on terms other than their own. Secondly, unsettling as it might be, we need to develop better ways of bringing media professionals to the table. After all, the media industries themselves are research-driven enterprises, with workforces that value graduate degrees and professionals who now enter academe and launch media departments regardless of whether or not they are welcomed by critical media scholars. This kind of dialogue would enable us to discern areas of common and divergent interest, but would also provide at least a minimal opportunity to compare our assumptions and findings with those of the industry. Sometimes our insights about the screen are profoundly different from those of the industry; at other times we celebrate 'discoveries' that industry deems rather banal and self-evident. Thirdly and finally, adding industrial perspectives to screen studies is not a one-way street. The vast literature from industrial film history needs to be considered by those sociologists and anthropologists who are now turning to the study of media production. After all, for over half a century film historians have systematically, and with scant acknowledgement, tilled much of the very terrain with which contemporary media industries researchers and media anthropologists are now concerned. Reframing research is all very well, but there is no need to reinvent the field entirely.