Globalization through the Eyes of Runners: Student Interns as Ethnographers on Runaway Productions in Prague

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Abstract:
This essay discusses the possibilities for collective ethnography in media industry studies, drawing on my own research into production cultures in the Czech capital of Prague and a European Union-funded project that I head alongside Petr Bilík. This EU-funded project aims to facilitate the career development of film studies graduates based outside of Prague, and develop closer links between academia and the city’s media industries. In academic terms, the project provides us with a chance to reconsider theories of the globalization of media production by observing the operations of global production networks locally and “from below.”

Keywords: Czech Republic, Globalization, Production, Labor

In 2012 and 2013, approximately 100 Czech Republic-based students were given the opportunity to work as assistants on the set of domestic and international film and television productions, in production offices, or in cultural policy institutions. While on the job, they conducted participant observations, and kept field diaries. By way of preparation, they were taught about production studies to ensure that they were sensitive to the key dynamics of production cultures; this would allow for a comparative analysis of their field notes as well as providing them with the basics of general ethnographic methods. They also received a living allowance and were assigned a paid supervisor to ensure that the educational purposes of job shadowing were fulfilled and the students were not mistreated. In follow-up seminars, they developed coding schemas and analyzed the field notes in order to identify important issues related to the mediation processes that take place in globalized production cultures: tensions and inequalities within transnational production teams, knowledge transfers and the distribution of creativity, changing career patterns, and so on.

Twenty-four years after the end of the Cold War, the media industries of East-Central Europe are struggling to respond to the dissolution of both the state-controlled economies and their previous organizational structures, and to develop strategies in order to compete internationally. The profession of the producer, in particular, needed to be re-established.
because from 1945 to 1990 the state itself functioned as the head producer, which is to say that often, untrained personnel improvised their role based on knowledge they captured from visiting professionals. Today, local production companies still lack long-term strategies and medium-term script development plans; they live a hand-to-mouth existence made possible by the revenues that each production generates. Both private and public television channels have underestimated the importance of developing or adapting new formats, especially in the entertainment field. Nevertheless, regional productions have attracted significant domestic audiences, especially in the Czech Republic and Poland, and some local facilities, such as those in Prague and in Budapest, have attracted US, Western European, Russian, and Asian productions.

In the mid-to-late 1990s, Prague earned a reputation for production quality rather than affordability. Larger projects were attracted by the prospect of experienced crews, the fourteen-stage Barrandov Studios, and historical locations that could seemingly stand in for any city or period in European history. A decade-long boom ended in 2004 when a right-wing government refused to match the new financial incentives that were being offered by competitors such as Hungary. In 2003, Prague generated 178 million dollars from foreign productions, twenty times more than domestic productions. By 2004, however, foreign investment had dropped to an estimated 60 million dollars. In 2009, a new law offering a 20 percent rebate was passed. This brought Prague in line with neighboring countries and thereby initiated a new wave of international productions, with projected spending of 200 million dollars in 2013. Since 1990, around 140 foreign feature films and TV series have been shot at Barrandov Studios. Of these 140, sixty were US productions, including Mission: Impossible (1995), The Chronicles of Narnia: Prince Caspian (2007), and Child 44 (2014).

Local production-service companies have helped to attract foreign productions to the Czech Republic. As go-betweens seeking to develop Hollywood-like working conditions within a culturally alien environment, these firms became key channels for knowledge transfer. Interviews that I conducted show that these exchanges mainly involved organizational knowledge relating to the division of labor, pacing, problem-solving, ethics, and communication; even below-the-line workers stressed that they learned managerial, rather than technical, skills. Production managers function as cultural mediators of these transfers. As David Minkowski, the American-born head of film production at Prague’s largest production-service company, Stillking, stated:

It’s easier to take somebody who is young, flexible and speaks English and train them than it is to retrain or reeducate the older generation. [...] In the areas of accounting, production management, coordination, assistant directors, [...] locations, you can train people who don’t have any experience and you can put them in positions of authority and if they are the right personality and have the right internal skills, they can learn it quickly. That’s what was really missing. Essentially it was the management layer, because that’s so important. Financial, organizational, all that stuff. That’s probably eighty percent of what we do. [...] Now, after twelve years, my job is easy, because basically Czech production managers do everything, because they have those skills.

Minkowski’s account of generational and cultural change illustrates the kind of volatile, learning-centered multinational environment that our interns enter. Their immediate superiors are usually Czech production managers in their late twenties or early thirties who have been
trained by experienced American producers and crews rather than at film school. If older 
Czechs with experience from state-socialist times are indeed present, they usually occupy 
marginal positions, with the notable exceptions of those in costume departments and art 
departments. This generation was either pushed out of the business in the late 1990s or had to adapt to the dynamics of what’s now called a “boundaryless career,” moving from one project to another. Department heads within international production teams are mostly American and British; those on non-American productions may be from other countries. Lower-level 
crewmembers are usually Czech.

The production-service business is distinct from domestic production in that it involves bigger 
budgets, higher salaries, and better technology. Impacting runaway production, however, are 
distant external decision-making centers; a changing Czech rebate program; overseas studio 
heads and financiers; and competition from cities like Budapest and Berlin. For this reason, 
information flows between groups and individuals in highly fragmented fashion, making it 
difficult for interns to ascertain the real reasons why decisions are made and who is making them. In the absence of industrial macro-analysis skills and supplementary field research in the 
form of interviews with mid- and high-level players, students struggled to see past the social 
rituals and power relations of individual departments and thus found it difficult to “cross scales” between micro- and macro-structures of global media production. They also failed to identify significant distinctions and hierarchies in the apparent chaos of this environment.

The former was typically experienced by interns placed in costume departments, probably the 
most spatially enclosed, feminized, and, in terms of symbolic and economic capital, marginal of 
departments. Minkowski contends that this is the hardest department for him to deal with; it is 
the only one that has not transformed and is still staffed by the older generation. Students 
tended to immerse themselves in a peculiar social micro-world populated by costume supervisors and makers struggling with personal anxieties and professional insecurities. The 
students’ diaries focused on this department’s internal dynamics and its members’ views of others. Here, globalization was seen to have underscored the sense of exploitation, segregation, and discrimination that this department had historically seen itself encountering. The isolated nature of the costume workshops regularly became a site of nationally-based mistrust, and of secrets, misunderstandings, and humiliations. Costumers submit to a strict spatial politics. Members are assigned a restricted area in the department, and are granted limited access to the set. In contrast, an intern working on a prestigious Asian production reported that higher-ranking crew members would drop by whenever they felt like it, and would even demand to have their everyday clothing altered free of charge. In response, Czech costumers complained, gossiped, quietly mocked, and even circumvented their American superiors while at the same time sought to confirm their status as hardworking but underappreciated creative professionals. Interns in costume departments tended to present the gloomiest pictures of transnational production and often lost sense of the broader industrial and creative contexts of the project. Nevertheless, they demonstrated the greatest insight into the cultural specificities of a professional subgroup.

The opposite was true of runners. Their work life oscillated between scurrying across 
departments, offices, and production sites, and experiencing periods of enforced idleness and 
listening on walkie-talkies to the incessant flow of communication. They oversaw numerous 
spatial and social boundaries and monitored the movement of key personnel across them. Unlike costume department interns, their long days were filled with ever-changing social
interactions and unpredictable tasks. From the outset, their job description and status (which involved changing between total outsiders and regular team members) were unclear; they were forced to demonstrate their indispensability by requesting work, anticipating crew members’ needs, and by responding in a swift and flexible manner. They usually accepted that they were paying their dues in a culture of “deferred career gratification.” 16 In principle, it was much easier for these interns to access higher-level team members, including assistant directors and foreign producers; however, the more introverted interns quickly felt marginalized or excluded. Consequently, several quit. Interns who worked as runners were not immersed in a single workspace characterized by internal politics. Instead, they developed loose alliances that crossed professional and national boundaries, thereby confirming this position’s reputation as a temporary entry-level role, one that might lead to other professions but which offered few guarantees of career development. Their field notes tended to be vague and scattered, reflecting both their manifold experience and uncertain professional status. Transnational teams gave interns a fast track to the top international professionals,17 albeit to ones who perhaps would never return to Prague and would therefore not provide their mentees ongoing and much-needed support.

Overall, the project has shown that group-based ethnography offers innovative opportunities for academic-industry collaboration, and for teaching students about media industries. The project is nonetheless an ethically and methodologically risky undertaking insomuch as it is reliant upon untrained collaborators and an ethnographic authority that is split between interns in the field and an analyst in the classroom. Thus, it challenges traditional concepts of fieldwork, allowing for multi-focal descriptions of global media production. Consequently, the project facilitates the development of a revisionist, “provincial” perspective on global capital’s interaction with local creative labor. Last but not least, given that it also involves job shadowing, this kind of collective ethnography may well help media studies to survive in a time of austerity towards the humanities.

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1 Petr Szczepanik is Associate Professor at Masaryk University, Brno, and editor of Iluminace (www.iluminace.cz). His most recent book is Canned Words: The Coming of Sound Film and Czech Media Culture of the 1930s (in Czech, Konzervy se slovy, 2009). He has also co-edited Cinema All the Time: An Anthology of Czech Film Theory and Criticism, 1908-1939 (Michigan Slavic Materials, 2008) and Behind the Screen: Inside European Production Culture (Palgrave, 2013) (with Patrick Vonderau). He is the principal coordinator of the EU-funded project FIND, which uses student internships at production companies to combine job shadowing with ethnographic research of production cultures.


3 Here I am discussing just one possible research route that is opened by this project; others include issues of production cultures in public service TV, writers’ rooms, documentary film, cultural policy practices, etc.

4 Those companies and institutions were not accustomed to offering unpaid internships.
A core group of interns also took part in a seminar on the ethnography of media production held by Georgina Born at Masaryk University in fall 2012.

The project team is always conscious of the ethical and political implications of internships, and tries to be sensitive to the needs of both interns and media professionals. For recent criticism of the exploitative aspects of internships see Ross Perlin, *Intern Nation: How to Earn Nothing and Learn Little in the Brave New Economy* (New York: Verso Publishing, 2011). For examples of anti-internship activism, and attempts to articulate principles for ethical internship in cultural industries, see *Carrotworkers’ Collective (blog)*, accessed September 5, 2013.


Between 2009 and 2011, I conducted twenty semi-structured interviews with producers, production managers, art directors, and other professionals involved in international production in Prague. This research was funded by the Czech Science Foundation (grant no. P409/10/1361) and the Fulbright Foundation.

Interview conducted at Barrandov Studios, May 15, 2009.


Several interns have been hired on international productions.

**Bibliography**


