Learning from the History of the Field

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Abstract:

This essay reviews some of the early work on the study of media industries, emphasizing the historic precedents for media industry studies that more recent research sometimes neglects or even forgets. It briefly identifies some classic studies that should provide foundations for current research. While new developments in media industries are continually introduced, the essay argues that new research approaches should at least acknowledge (and perhaps even draw insights from) these historical precedents.

Keywords: Film, Globalization, Historiography, Political Economy

Once upon a time, it was rare to find much interest from cinema scholars in research on the film or media industries. Indeed, times have changed. Media industry studies has been recognized as a viable and somewhat popular approach to the study of media, despite lingering issues relating to its definitions, scope, and motivations. The large number of Society for Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS) scholars who identified with the Media Industries Scholarly Interest Group when it was formed in 2011-2012 is just one indication. But the proliferation of studies that fit under this umbrella is another encouraging sign. While not necessarily in the “mainstream” of cinema or media research, the number of studies related to media industries has increased consistently over the last few decades.

This is not to say that the field of media industry studies is new. Indeed, a great deal of work has been done in the past that also fits under the media industry studies umbrella. One may not know that, however, when reading much of the recent research or many theoretical discussions of this approach. In fact, it is rare to see references to a number of classic studies that might be considered predecessors of current media industry studies.

It might be useful to provide a few examples. While the focus here is on the US film industry, similar examples could be cited for other media and other countries. A number of classic studies of film production, distribution, and exhibition in the United States emerged during the 1930s and 1940s. Howard T. Lewis’s work in *The Motion Picture Industry* (1933) and Mae Huettig’s excellent research in *The Economic Control of the Film Industry*² focus mostly on economic factors motivating Hollywood, including trends such as concentration and monopolistic practices. Written by an industry insider, Benjamin Hampton’s *History of the American Film Industry from Its Beginnings to 1931*³ provides interesting behind-the-scenes stories of the emerging film

business. Peter Bächlin's *Histoire Economique du Cinema*⁴ is another example of economic analysis of film conducted during this period.

Moving into the 1950s, Michael Conant's *Antitrust in the Motion Picture Industry*⁵ is a clear and insightful analysis of the details and consequences of the Paramount decrees for the industry in the years following the 1948 Supreme Court decision. Meanwhile, Hortense Powdermaker's *Hollywood, the Dream Factory*⁶ looks at Hollywood from an anthropological perspective, revealing quite a lot about the business of film in the United States. A key text from the 1960s is Thomas Guback's *The International Film Industry*.⁷ This was one of the first studies of film by a media scholar employing a political economic perspective; it drew attention to the role of the state in Hollywood's international activities, clearly showing us that globalization of the US film industry is certainly not new.

Guback's work in particular could be helpful in responding to one of the questions posed to board members by the *Media Industries* editors when they solicited these essays: "Media production, distribution, and consumption are increasingly an international affair. What are the ramifications of this globalization process for the study and practices of the media industries?" We know that global markets are vitally important to the current transnational entertainment conglomerates that dominate the US film industry, which have been enticed even further into foreign markets during the last few decades. Guided by neoliberal economic policies, the ongoing deregulation and privatization of media operations have opened up new commercial channels and greatly expanded programming and advertising markets. A thorough accounting of these developments may benefit from some of the earlier studies mentioned above.

For instance, the international distribution of US cultural products, especially films, extends back to the early twentieth century. Hollywood has nearly always looked beyond the United States to expand its markets and increase profits from its products. And at least since the 1920s, the US film industry dominated much of the global film business (even though the US may not have been the first global force in the world cinema business). The development and proliferation of technologies such as television, both satellite and cable, as well as video technology such as VCRs and DVDs, enhanced and expanded international film markets. As discussed below, different types of experts, from academics to industry analysts, have offered widely differing explanations for this dominance. Indeed, Hollywood's power is a complex mix of historical, economic, political, and cultural factors.

Beyond cultural explanations, historical analysis reveals Hollywood's initial commercial orientation. While other countries may have been developing film as art or propaganda, from early in its history the American motion picture industry developed as a profit-oriented, commodity-based enterprise. Several scholars have documented the US film industry's rise in global markets during WWI and the maintenance of that dominant position through the mid-1930s.⁸ Kristin Thompson points out that not only was the US film industry able to export films during and after the war: new distribution procedures also led to the establishment of offices in various countries.⁹ World War II, which decimated European industries, strongly reinforced the US dominance of global film markets because, again, US products were plentiful. In addition, through its activities after the war, the US government assured the industry's continued power. Guback's study provides information specifically on how that process worked in Western Europe. Overall, the US film industry benefited immeasurably from the historical circumstances that allowed for the continued American production and distribution of films during these global conflicts; being tied to a conquering nation that became *the* world economic and political

power also contributed. Previous work on the international markets for film thus provides an essential foundation for considering the contemporary globalization process.

Of course, other studies could be cited as providing important foundations for the study of the film industry today. Interestingly, most of the studies before the 1960s cited above were not conducted by media scholars. As cinema and media studies grew in the 1970s and 1980s, scholars such as Thomas Schatz, Tino Balio, Douglas Gomery, Gorham Kindem, and others gave more attention to the industrial policies and structures of the film industry. All of these scholars have provided a historical context that could contribute valuable insights for future media industries research. We need to be sure that we introduce these studies—along with other work that explores the history of media industries—to graduate students working in this area and acknowledge them more often in our own research and theoretical discussions. In other words, we need to be aware of the history of our field as well as the history of the media industries.

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 - ² Mae D. Huettig, *Economic Control of the Motion Picture Industry* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1944).
 - ³ Benjamin Hampton, *History of the American Film Industry from Its Beginnings to 1931* (1931; New York: Dover Press, 1970).
 - ⁴ Peter Bächlin, *Histoire Economique du Cinema* (Paris: La Nouvelle Edition, 1947).
 - ⁵ Michael Conant, *Antitrust in the Motion Picture Industry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960).
 - ⁶ Hortense Powdermaker, *Hollywood, the Dream Factory* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1950).
 - ⁷ Thomas Guback, *The International Film Industry: Western Europe and America Since 1945* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969).
 - ⁸ For instance, see Kerry Segrave, *American Films Abroad: Hollywood's Domination of the World's Movie Screens from the 1890s to the Present* (Jefferson: McFarland, 1997) and Jørgen Ulff-Møller, *Hollywood's Film Wars with France: Film-Trade Diplomacy and the Emergence of the French Film Quota Policy* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2001).
 - ⁹ Kristen Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment: America in the World Film Market 1907-1934* (London: British Film Institute, 1985).

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