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Recognizing “Industry”

by NITIN GOVIL

Consider the field of Media Industries scholarship. A common origin story tells of a postwar divide between the diagnostic approaches of American social science and the Frankfurt School’s theories on media standardization, but the breadth of historical and anthropological inquiry into the media industries actually exceeds this polarity. Over the past few decades, new approaches have been employed, with roots in older paradigms. While ethnography, audience studies, and narrative approaches remain prominent in industry studies, we have also seen important work on the structural effects of global media domination and cultural histories of production studios informed by archival research. There is also a tradition of scholarship informed by a critique of neoclassical economics, highlighting labor, regulation, and the geographies of media production. For example, work on cultural industries and cultural economy retains the critical edge of social theory to understand contemporary industry transformations. “Creative industries” work focuses on the economic value of creativity in media economies, with an eye toward transforming industry policy and practice. “Production studies” sheds light on the practices of self-characterization through which cultural laborers situate their work within larger formations. Acknowledging the structural transformation of work under neoliberal regimes, media scholars have increasingly emphasized the movement between transnational sites of industrial activity. This has focused attention on global and local networks of distribution and circulation.

Despite their diversity, these signature methods and ruling paradigms are often divided according to macro-micro, formal-informal, and structure-agency typologies. The structure-agency dichotomy has been particularly influential. With a general orientation toward the regular rather than the singular, a focus on durability rather than impermanence, many industry research styles foreground the structural. For example, political economy and media sociology tend to focus on the relationships between media infrastructures and state and market institutions. Understanding industry as a social force is productive because it sensitizes us to the links between the inequitable distribution of economic resources and cultural domination. This kind of study tends to focus on more formal enumerative structures, which helps to explain why the national is a key metric in industry policy studies and other forms of structural analysis. “Micro” approaches like media

ethnography, in contrast, tend to focus on the person, bringing sociality and agency to our understanding of industry. Focusing on embodiment, subjectivity, and dramatic interaction, approaches like ethnography restore the older sense of *industry* as “a form of doing.” Enumeration is critical here, too, but micro approaches offer a more textured sense of aggregation, with attention to cultures of counting and an understanding of numbers as performative, semiological, and empirical.

Textbook pedagogies ossify differences between ways of studying the media industries, which leads to a perceived incommensurability between qualitative and quantitative work, empirical and interpretive methods, and institutional and textual analysis. Such easy antinomies have loosened given the general acknowledgment of the value of interdisciplinary and collaborative work. For example, although they were once caricatured as pitting the affirmative against the critical, cultural studies and political economy are now more likely to be seen as allied approaches, complementary rather than divergent.

Despite their diversity, lurking at the heart of many approaches is an attention to social and economic practices that happen within media industries rather than the activities and competencies that are constitutive of “industry.” One of the entrenched yet underexamined presumptions of Media Industries Studies, it seems to me, is the obviousness of its object. After all, most studies proceed from a general understanding of what an industry comprises, with a tacit sense of its boundaries and capacities. However, instead of taking industries as pre-given and stable formations, Film and Media Studies might take up a more foundational conceptual challenge. What are the provisional forms, sites, and practices that constitute media industries? What are the social, textual, political, and cultural infrastructures and interactions assembled under the sign of “industry”? What are these formal and informal processes of assembly, and how do exchange practices move in and out of industry status? In other words, how are industries “made up”?¹ A lesson from the Indian film trade is instructive here.

Prakash “Pappu” Verma is an affable character, happy to chat about his leadership of the Indian Movie Stunt Artist Association. Ranjani Mazumdar and I have been conducting interviews at the association’s headquarters in the Bombay suburb of Andheri, gathering material for a book on the Indian film industries.² We interviewed Pappu in his second-floor office; in the hall below us, a loose assembly of daredevils were gambling, smoking, and otherwise passing the time. Card-carrying members all, their physical congregation enacts and reflects their commonality. *Association* refers, then, to an institutionally bounded site, the formal sociality of assembly, and the experience of collective affinity.

Established in 1959, the Indian Movie Stunt Artist Association is one of more than twenty craft and labor unions represented by the Federation of Western India Cine Employees, an umbrella organization that represents more than one hundred thousand film and media workers, including writers, editors, cinematographers, sound recordists, costumers, hairdressers, makeup artists, and film extras or “junior artistes.”

1 For more on this process of “making up,” see Bhrigupati Singh, “Introduction to ‘Unsettling Cinema’: The Problem,” *Seminar* 525 (2003): 12–17.

2 Nitin Govil and Ranjani Mazumdar, *The Indian Film Industry* (London: British Film Institute, forthcoming).

The association, like most trade unions, advocates for wage fairness, improved work conditions, and insurance, unemployment, and retirement protection. How does such a group understand its activity, and how does it frame its authority? How is the association constituted? In response to our inquiries, Pappu provided us with the organization's governing document.

As a written order, the constitution of the Indian Movie Stunt Artist Association contains procedures for setting subscription dues, rules for the expulsion of members, and compensation in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, or death. There are procedures for negotiating the going rate for the loss of a limb, incapacitation, and death, and rules for the distribution of retirement and death funds for all those workers not employed in the special high-risk categories of helicopter, car, swimming, and water-skiing stunt work. Section 4 of the constitution codifies age and height requirements for entry into the association, linking physical quantification with professional qualification, part of the stock in trade of these craft unions.

Although this document lays out a number of rules and regulations, such governing formalities only partially dictate everyday obligation. So, for example, the constitution contains an exemption on the height and age requirement for sons of current members. In section 40, which describes the duties of the treasurer and the distribution of resources, the typewritten sentence "funds will be disturbed" has been crossed out in pen and replaced with the handwritten phrase "funds will be disbursed." This interoperability of governing procedure and everyday practice is exemplified by the constitution's attention to money, which it defines as "cheques, promissory notes, bills of exchange, and hundies." Dismissed by a nineteenth-century British colonial legality committed to preventing indigenous forms of exchange, *hundies* are trade and credit instruments that still support an informal infrastructure of microeconomic transactions.

Translation between the various "monetary genres" defined by the constitution can become contentious, attesting to the granularity of exchange.³ For example, in 2002, when a number of Bombay film producers started paying craft association workers by check, part of a broader project to rationalize the film industry through the use of "white" money rather than "black," the members of the Indian Movie Stunt Artist Association mobilized and demanded cash payment. When push came to shove—and there was plenty of shoving to go around—the stunt person's remuneration didn't align with new forms of accounting. It turns out that rationalization is something of a risky business.

The uneasy alignment of informal transactions and formal industrial rationalization is a consequence of the Indian film trade's recognition as an "industry" in the late 1990s. Historically, the Indian state has had an ambivalent relationship with the film trade, committing to punitive measures like entertainment taxes and censorship rather than supporting expansion and profitability. By conferring official "industry" status on the film business in 1998, the government opened new institutional financing channels, thereby linking Indian media capital to the global economy. Recent scholarship

3 For a history of monetary genres, see Mary Poovey, *Genres of the Credit Economy: Mediating Value in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

has seen industry recognition as a turning point in the corporatization of the Indian media.⁴ In particular, the institutional reconfiguration of Bombay cinema represents a significant shift in the relationship between the state and the film industry.

Before 1998, Indian cinema had been seeking recognition as an industry for decades. Of course, there had been historical structures in place, like producer-star systems, production and exhibition dynasties, and various efforts at corporatization. By conventional standards, commercial Indian cinema was an industry, defined by the built environment and distributing productive capacity through a division of cultural labor. However, industry status always seemed elusive, relegating Indian cinema to a kind of “not-yet” Hollywood.

A lack of formal enumeration produced the enduring idea that the Indian film trade suffered from a reflexivity deficit. As early as the 1920s, British colonial authorities and Indian film trade organizations focused attention on the politics of enumeration, understanding statistics as the administrative mechanism for greater managerial efficiency and centralized control. Yet in 1928, the Indian Cinematographic Committee would bemoan “the almost complete dearth of statistics and reliable information” required for “a proper understanding of the real position of the trade and the best methods for improving it.”⁵ Similarly, in a February 1935 speech organized by the then new Motion Picture Society of India, M. Visvesvaraya noted:

The great need of the industry is reliable statistics[,] . . . the yardstick by which every industry is measured. To get a correct idea of its condition, one must know such facts as the number of cinema theaters, the number of producing establishments, capital invested, value of machinery and raw materials used, profits earned, numbers employed in the industry, wages paid, the number of persons attending the theaters in a week, and other similar particulars. Reliable information under many of these heads is wanting at present.⁶

Western opinion reflected this enumerative uncertainty. In reviewing the first systematic study of the Indian film industry, Franklin Fearing, of the University of California, Los Angeles, noted “the lamentable fact that this gigantic industry in India and elsewhere knows practically nothing about its product or why people use it.”⁷

In the Indian film trade, various practices produced disparate sets of numbers that only occasionally combined to convey an overall sense of “an industry.” Although there were structures that accrued to the everyday activity of production and distribution, it was as if the diversity and informality of film practice could not be aggregated into an industry in the modern sense. Enumeration was central to this sense of

4 See, for example, Adrian Athique, *Indian Media* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2012); Tejaswini Ganti, *Producing Bollywood: Inside the Contemporary Hindi Film Industry* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); Aswin Punathambekar, *From Bombay to Bollywood: The Making of a Global Media Industry* (New York: New York University Press, forthcoming).

5 Government of India, *Report of the Indian Cinematographic Committee, 1927–28* (Calcutta: Government of India Press, 1928), 14.

6 M. Visvesvaraya, *Present Position of the Motion Picture Industry* (Bombay: Times of India Press, 1935), 4.

7 Franklin Fearing, “Books and Journals of the Quarter,” *Quarterly of Film Radio and Television* 6, no. 1 (1951): 100. Fearing’s review considers Panna Shah’s *The Indian Film* (Bombay: Motion Picture Society of India, 1950).

aggregation, but burdened by chronically unreliable data, the film trade was thought to operate more like a casino. To count as an industry, the film trade would need to learn to count in a specific way. This rationalization of enumeration would enable Indian cinema to cross the threshold to become an industry.

The problem of enumeration is compounded by the hugeness of the numbers themselves. In a country of 1.25 billion people, some 6 million work in film-related fields, most without a guarantee of permanent employment. More than seven hundred films are made annually in twenty languages, and almost seventy thousand films have been produced in thirty languages since the early 1930s. Billions of tickets are sold every year in India, and countless more overseas. The conventional thinking was not only that industry recognition would confer a more stable economic status on the Indian film trade but also that international finance would follow the implementation of new accounting practices. Shepherded by a state eager to recruit foreign direct investment, Indian film finally achieved “industry” status.

However, just because a threshold has been reached doesn’t mean that other ways of recognizing industry need to be forgotten. In the Indian case, “industry” was achieved rather than presumed, processual rather than preordained. Following this logic, can we depart from understanding industry simply as a form of production and focus instead on the production of “industry” itself? What might it mean to understand industry as a conceptual construct that does the work of drawing and illustrating connections among diverse ways of knowing and doing? In moving beyond an understanding of industry as a metaphor of containment, we might break through the enumerative and enunciative constraints that structure much media research.

In *Epistemic Cultures*, an insightful examination of expertise in the sciences, Karin Knorr-Cetina asks us to “[look] upon scientists and other experts as enfolded in construction machineries, in entire conjunctions of conventions and devices that are organized, dynamic, thought about (at least partially), but not governed by single actors.”⁸ This focus on variability in knowledge practices once considered locked up inside the black box of scientific action offers an intriguing analogy for the study of media industries. How can we introduce indeterminacy into the study of industry? Can we be emboldened to think beyond media industries as institutional settings that precede or contain forms of sociality and experience? We need to broaden the range of practices that count as industrial. So let’s begin with a more dynamic sense of industries as social and textual arrangements, sites of enactment, and other dramaturgies of interaction, reflection, and reflexivity.

While it is a formal document, the stunt artist’s constitution suggests a makeshift arrangement, not least because it imagines a political economy based on the indeterminate status of money. Here, industry is re-recognized: not as a preexisting structure of calculation but as a way of figuring things out. If enterprising daredevils are willing to bet life and limb on such a provisional conception of industry, what do we risk in taking the plunge? *

8 Karin Knorr-Cetina, *Epistemic Cultures: How the Sciences Make Knowledge* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 11.