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Television Writing and the Screen Idea System

Introduction

Where do ideas for television series come from? How do writers, producers and broadcasters settle on the ideas to pursue and what are the stages and challenges in developing ideas into series for the screen? One would think that questions like these about the choices of practitioners and the nature of production were central to film and media studies, yet limited attention has been given to the creative process of developing and producing new works of fiction, let alone to the study of these in television.

One method that can prove useful for addressing such questions is, I argue, a Screen Idea System framework. This chapter introduces the Screen Idea System framework for the book, which builds on an understanding of the writing and production of television as a complex interplay between individuals, a domain and a field. The book links theories from film and media studies, approaches from the emerging area of screenwriting research, with concepts and models from the field of creativity research, insisting that one always needs to take what could be called ‘the many P’s in production’ into account when analysing the emergence of new scripted series. Creativity scholars argue that when trying to understand the nature of creative work one has to include the Process, the Product and the Press and the understanding of the Person, with ‘Press’ referring to the environment in which the creative work takes place. This is the so-called ‘four Ps’ of creativity (see, e.g. Rhodes 1961; Mooney 1963).

Approaching the writing and production of television drama from this perspective, the chapter addresses how to understand this interplay as a system where individuals with a specific talent, training and track record...
propose new screen ideas as variations on the existing trends, tastes and traditions in a domain, which then have to be regarded as being of high quality and appropriate in order to be accepted by gatekeepers with a specific mandate for production. A special focus of this chapter is the collaborative processes of television writing, analysed as the work of ‘thought communities’ who go through different stages in a problem-finding and problem-solving effort when moving from an original idea to a final product.

**Studying television writing and production**

While film and media studies do not have a tradition of extensive case studies of the nature of creative work, other fields of scholarship have taken a greater interest in the nature of artistic and cultural production. Sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Howard Becker have written extensively on the field of cultural production and on art as collective action or ‘art worlds’ (e.g. Bourdieu 1993, 1996; Becker 1974, 1982). Sociologist Leo Rosten and anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker were among the first to conduct production-oriented studies of the American film industry (Rosten 1941; Powdermaker 1950).

More recently, studies coming from a ‘production of culture’ perspective have focused on how creative work in the cultural industries is the result of complex patterns and collaborations rather than a clear result of one person’s vision (e.g. Peterson and Anand 2004), and this collective perception of cultural production also marks other cross-disciplinary publications and current studies of the nature of work life in the creative or cultural industries (e.g. Negus and Pickering 2004; Deuze 2007, 2010; Hesmondhalgh 2007; Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2010). These scholars are not alone. Coming from organizational studies, researchers like Paul DiMaggio and Paul M. Hirsch (e.g. DiMaggio and Hirsch 1976; DiMaggio 1977) have been investigating the structures in the cultural industries for quite some time, while others have been looking more specifically at film and media production, for instance, Helen Blair analysing work conditions in the film industry (Blair 2001, 2003).

Whereas the collective nature of most cultural production and the work processes in different cultural industries have interested researchers for a number of years, few studies combine this interest with the development of a specific product or the nature of the product itself. As noted in a sociological study of different processes of art making ‘from start to finish’ there has, for instance, always been ‘a blind spot in the sociology of art: any discussion of specific art works’ (Becker et al.