

# THE CREATIVE PRODUCER- THE BUSINESS OF ART OR THE ART OF BUSINESS?

By Robin Macpherson

If we think, for a moment, of screen producers as being like publishers, in the sense that they bring to the attention of publics the work of other creative authors, whether or not they play an active creative role in shaping the work. And if we consider that producers, like publishers may operate as a one-person firm or occupy a highly specialised position within a large institution, then we can easily see how similar the complex of values and forces and structures that condition the work of the publisher are to those that condition the work of the producer. They are both operating within a specific field which is part of the larger field of cultural production, a field which deals in the production and exchange of symbolic objects which, while exchangeable for material value, cannot be reduced to a material process. Similarly they are both practices which involve a high degree of implicit as well as explicit knowledge in the sense that both require the exercise of sophisticated social and cultural perceptions and values in order to successfully identify what is called 'talent', to distinguish between originality and replication and to sense as yet latent demand for potential but unrealised products, to judge the likely aggregate market for those products and make decisions about the appropriate cost of production to ensure a viable rate of financial return and the overall cost/benefit in symbolic and cultural terms as well as economic.

If we undertake this mental comparison we are of course engaging in a theoretical abstraction of the processes, knowledge and practices that screen producers and publishers hold in common as concrete expressions of a more generic function within the field of cultural production.

In this paper then I want, very briefly and inadequately, to employ Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of the relationship between the domain of education and the particular professional *field* which constitutes one, but only one, of its many 'publics'. In particular I want to explore how, in certain circumstances, the *habitus* which normally provides the context and principles by which the specific practices and knowledge of a field are imparted to its apprentices can be displaced by more immediately 'rational and conscious' formulation of what Bourdieu terms 'the production of practices'.

In passing I should say that I suspect this approach could usefully be applied to a much wider range of practices than those of the Producer but that is what I am personally and professionally most concerned with.

The definition of *habitus* that is perhaps most useful here<sup>1</sup> is “the types of social practice and behaviour that agents inherit during the various stages of their socialisation, and that inform their further interaction with their social environment” (Deer, 2003) or more prosaically it means ‘feel for the game’, ‘practical sense’.

The ‘habitus’ of the producer, as in every other field, is constituted out of a range of continuing interactions with the explicit and implicit knowledge, practices, values etc. which are part of the definition of the field of cultural production generally and the screen sub-field in particular. If we can locate any starting point to this interaction it begins with the first stirrings of an explicit concept of what a producer does, as distinct from say director, cinematographer and so on. Perhaps for a child or an adult today it will come from a film or television programme featuring the film-making business. By the time that child enrolls on a University degree she or he may already have played the role of a producer in a school or community-based video project and may already have some familiarity from her media studies course with the division of labour in film and television production. At some point she will make a choice to pursue the acquisition of skills, knowledge and so on that will ultimately be exchangeable for external legitimacy as an emerging producer.

To date the processes by which that practical sense of self-as-producer has been explicitly shaped and directed within the educational field have been subject to the relatively autonomous activity of the educational field’s own practitioners. Whatever pedagogical model we adopt - for example the ‘practitioner-educator’ who perceives him or herself to be transferring direct experiential knowledge or the self-defined ‘academic’ who considers him/herself to be mediating or facilitating an externalised body of knowledge that can be codified and documented in text-books, exercises, interactions with professionals and so on - the terms, values and priorities that are operationalised in teaching and learning ‘producing’ remain substantially within the control of the educational field. Much more so in the case of producing than, say, cinematography or editing but also more so than in medicine, law or architecture. It is significant for our purposes that these latter occupations have professional bodies which consecrate, not just the explicit knowledge deemed to be a prerequisite of entry to the profession, but also a range of values, histories and relationships to other publics including the dominant economic players including the direct purchasers of their professional services or products. In very broad terms these bodies might be said to articulate the theory of what it is to be a Doctor, Lawyer or Architect. More than that these professional associations themselves constitute an internal ‘public’ to which both members and other ‘publics’ appeal whenever there are issues pertaining to the quality, quantity, emphasis and so on of education and professional training. As we know them these are well established, relatively autonomous and largely self-regulating professions which in turn regulate the production of their

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<sup>1</sup> Drawing on Deer’s insightful and stimulating paper on Bourdieu and Higher Education.

practices within the educational field. Amongst many other functions, then, these professions are able to mobilise discreet counter-weights to specific attempts by one or other of their external 'publics' to alter the terms of their autonomy.

Now this is not to say that in the field of screen production there are not many elements of knowledge, practice and so on that are reproduced and are derived from fairly explicit codifications of what producers do. Case studies, biographies, master-classes, producers guidelines, manuals on low budget producing and a host of other source material provide the 'below the line' material of producer teaching. But significantly there is really no-overarching philosophy, handbook or set of principles by which producers-in-waiting are guided or more accurately, by which educators are guided in their inculcation of producers as cultural and social far less economic agents. As educators we have been largely left to our own devices to construct frameworks for teaching producers.

For a variety of reasons (we don't have time to delve into this too deeply here) the activity of screen producing has remained largely un-theorised, in the UK at any rate, in the sense that the practices, values and understandings which constitute the 'habitus' of the producer in relation to the field of film-making have been allowed to remain largely unspoken and uncoded. In that sense educational institutions have remained largely autonomous and have been able to engage with 'industry' on bilaterally negotiated terms. The exact terms of exchange of cultural for economic capital have thus been at the discretion of those involved in negotiating specific relationships. By this I mean that inscribing certain practices of producing in exchange for recognition, sponsorship or other forms of assistance has been at the discretion of the institution.<sup>2</sup>

Here, however we can again employ one of Bourdieu's useful insights concerning those particular historical moments at which direct and explicit interventions are made by a particular external field into the relatively autonomous field of its Education counterpart. Bourdieu proposes that in certain "social and economic conditions of possibility" the existing legitimacy of the educational field and its relative autonomy can be challenged by one or more of its external publics.

"It is when the perfect attunement between the educational system and its chosen public begins to break down that the 'pre-established harmony' which upheld the system so perfectly as to exclude all

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<sup>2</sup> As an aside it is interesting to note that there was a time when organised labour also had a recognised position in mediating the exchange of individual cultural capital for economic capital, represented by a union ticket and in the other direction, i.e. individual economic for cultural capital, in the 'exceptional' union agreements of the Granted Aided Code of Practice and the Workshop Declaration.

enquiry into its basis is revealed" (Bourdieu & Passeron (1977), p.99 in Deer, 2003)

Now we are entering an era precisely in which one 'public', which for convenience we will collectively term 'industry', together with another, which we will term 'Government', are working relatively consciously to articulate a model of 'the good producer' from which can be derived an associated programme of education and training and development. This renewed interest in the role of education and training is a reflection of a perceived if not real crisis in the performance of producers as defined in relation to one particular kind of legitimacy - economic success. These particular 'publics', assisted by a compliant press - are able to monopolise public discourse about the nature and value of producers' activity precisely because there is very little in the way of a competing, expression of the producers role emanating from anywhere else, and especially not from the academy.

Now we must always be wary of naming these 'publics' as Industry-with a capital I, Government and so on as if they truly were homogenous, autonomous wholes. This naming obscures the complexity and contradictions that make up their own particular fields so that, for example, the Producers Association, while it may 'act' as a unified agent in certain contexts, is also a diverse coalition of widely varying producing practices. But as ever there are dominant views which become the crystallised expression of the coalition and which can in turn be mobilised by, for example, factions of Government. The part of Government particularly concerned with the relationship of the screen field to the wider field of the economy is at this point far more prominent in consecrating prospective screen educational practices than the part of Government involved in promoting social or cultural diversity.

Similarly 'Education', in pursuit of renewed external legitimacy which in turn will unlock material resources, is pulled towards defining its practice-teaching in relation to what it perceives to be the dominant model of legitimacy. Now in this respect the producer and producing is the weak spot. (Actually so too are writers and writing but we don't have time for that now).

The fields of writing and directing have a broad set of 'publics' providing forms of legitimacy to which they can appeal and thus reproduce within and beyond education a more heterogeneous set of values that can embrace the popular and the difficult. The field of producing, precisely because it is so poorly theorised and narrowly understood is less able to resist being appropriated by a rather narrowly economic agenda.

**What might that theory look like?**

Remarkably little is written in the standard textbooks or DIY manuals on film-making about precisely those elements which constitute the hardest but also the most creative part of being a producer. Yet producing is, I would argue, about reconciling the demands of the cultural and economic fields and, ultimately, taking responsibility for those choices and their consequences in material, symbolic and personal terms. Dealing with writers, directors, performers, financiers, agents, co-producers, regulatory bodies is just as critical to the success (however measured) of films and programmes, as scheduling, budgeting, financing, contracting, managing and marketing. Promoting the vision of a project or director which challenges the conventional wisdom of what is marketable (but which may anticipate a latent demand yet to be expressed) is, arguably, at least as important in the cultural short term and the economic long-term as bringing existing market wisdom to bear on writer or director.

The creative industries, as we know, operate on the intersection of innovation and standardisation. 'Like x but different and better' is the mantra of film and television, and producers are the agents who are employed or employ themselves in seeking out that which is sufficiently different but sufficiently similar.

Many practice based film courses, would appear to identify the pre-production, production and post-production phases of film-making as the primary context in which to train/educate producers. This reflects, in a pragmatic way, the student demand for and institutional emphasis on realising completed films as the central component in teaching directors, cinematographers, etc. their range of skills and developing their creativity. This is the fairly natural consequence of a technical, skill, resource based model of film practice teaching which attempts to replicate the linear chronology of the film-making process. It has many strengths and, for producers, can offer a simulation of the demands of film-making in those phases. But as education goes it is largely education in production management, an often necessary but not a sufficient skill in being a producer.

The exigencies of production itself represent a small part, in overall terms, of the real life of the creative producer and the life cycle of the creative product. Indeed the successful creative producer should be spending less and less time being a hands-on or line producer and more and more time being a developer and champion of creativity, a finance-raiser, a deal-maker and a resolver of the conflicts between all of the foregoing.

The skills and aptitudes and insights required to achieve this are not unrelated but certainly distinct from those of a successful line producer. It is far too easy to define a good producer as someone who can deliver what is required, on budget and on time and to set out to train an officer class who have sufficient inter-personal, motivational, administrative and entrepreneurial skills to supply the needs of film financiers or television executives. To be fair the 'commissioning classes' want more than this -

they want producers who can root out new talent, source new ideas (or at least new versions of old ideas) and innovate in delivery, particularly where this reduces unit costs of production.

But what the collective, institutional structures of the film and television field are understandably not particularly interested in and may not even tolerate as an explicit expression of the producer's habitus is the notion of him or her as a cultural and social entrepreneur as much as an economic one. As a skilled negotiator who reconciles the competing claims of institution and author and arrives at a solution which is an acceptable bargain between both sides but, if sides must be chosen, is capable of pursuing the interests of work and author and audience over those of the institution.

This is all very well as a polemic on behalf of the producing classes but what does this mean for what and how we teach?

It means that teaching producing has firstly to be about cultivating the ability to identify, develop and once articulated, protect the creative vision of authors and, in their crystallised form, projects whilst simultaneously attempting to maximise their exploitability in the marketplace to but not beyond the point at which the very difference or originality of that vision is fatally compromised. This means cultivating would-be producers' own understanding of their tastes, values and motives such that they can be very clear to themselves and to others what terrain they can/can't and will/won't operate upon.

Secondly to be able to explore and reflect upon the range of possible relationships, contexts and constraints - the field(s) - that producers operate within, our educational strategy must be to offer some kind of simulation of those environments. We need to do this so that the would-be producer can begin to internalise the practices and discourses of the producing field and thus negotiate their contradictions. The producer within, say, a large independent production company developing network drama series for ITV is, despite many skills and aptitudes in common, navigating a distinct set of practices and values to someone operating in the European co-financed authored documentary or the patchwork financed, medium budget feature. Those distinct environments offer different challenges and rewards and will, ultimately, be more attractive to some than others. While the average undergraduate or postgraduate may feel they know already where they want to be and where they will fit, in reality they have little opportunity to test that belief.

One of the roles of Education, as a distinct field with a definite but negotiated relationship to the various publics and interests it serves, is to provide a space for sustained critical reflection on the practices of just those fields to which it may supply new practitioners. In the field of screen production practice, however, the legitimacy of that reflective process is even more fragile than in the field of media or cultural studies because the

relationship of 'theories of practice' to the 'practice of practice' is marginal and, in the case of producers, practically non-existent.

If the creative producer, in that part of their role which is helping to consecrate the creators of cultural products and enlarge the market for their work, is here very much like the publisher of future classics as opposed to immediate best sellers, then Bourdieu's description of the adventurous publisher is apt:

"a 'bold talent spotter' who will succeed only if he is able to sense the specific laws of a market yet to come, i.e. espouse the interests and demands of those who will make those laws, the writers he publishes." (Bourdieu 1993: 100-1 )

By contrast we are relatively well equipped to defend the autonomy of directors because we can draw on theories of the artist and of authorship which can be deployed to ensure that directing is not reduced to immediate short term success in maximising creative 'yield' but permits a concept of the director's development over longer cycles of success. The 'work' (which is in any case much more visible) of the director is measured on a number of discrete parameters which allow, for example, economic success to be distinguished from creative success in the short term. The challenge for media practice educators is to construct an equally robust framework in which to inculcate the creative producer.

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