

# What Kind of 'Market' Are Film Labor Markets? A Prospective Literature Review

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*Document Version*  
Final published version

*Publication date:*  
2009

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*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Mathieu, C. (2009). *What Kind of 'Market' Are Film Labor Markets? A Prospective Literature Review*. imagine.. CBS. Creative Encounters Working Paper No. 27

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Creativity at Work:

# What kind of 'market' are film labor markets? A prospective literature review

*By Chris Mathieu  
January 2009*

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## What kind of 'market' are film labor markets?<sup>i</sup>

### A prospective literature review

#### **Why the interest and what do we know about labor markets and careers in film?**

As Blair (2001) notes, interest in economic, organizational, labor market and career developments in the film industry stands in inverse relationship to what we actually know about them. One reason for the great interest is that the developments in the film industry are assumed to be at the forefront of trends towards highly flexible, highly specialized, highly contingent, global sourcing project-based production that will spread to other sectors (Christopherson & Storper 1989; DeFillip & Arthur 1994; Storper 1994). In other words, the organization of production in the film industry allows us to peer into conditions that will become more pervasive in the future, as Jones & DeFillippi (1996) also argue. However, what is identified as a probable future is not very well understood. Blair (2001: 149) argues that contentions about the future of employment and production emulating present circumstance in film

production may not be unfounded, but are vaguely comprehended beyond surface appearances, “these contentions are posited concerning an industry on which, especially in the UK, negligible economic or labour research has been conducted.” This paper seeks to take stock of what we know about career and labor market factors and dynamics in film industries, seeing where and how the ideas, theories and findings in the studies produced to date coalesce on and contest central points of how film labor markets operate. Taking this a step further, proposals are made about how it might be possible to produce more comprehensive hybrid theories or explanations, and which critical areas require more research to fill in strategic gaps in our understanding.

Labor markets contain two types of things: actors, collective or individual, and contextual factors. Labor markets are skeletally defined as the process whereby buyers of labor (employers) purchase labor from sellers (workers/employees). From economics the following definition of labor market is offered, “The process by which workers and employers are brought into contact, and wages and conditions of work are decided” (Black 2002). From a sociological perspective, “In a labour market, human effort (or labour power) is made into a commodity, which is bought and sold under terms which in law are deemed to constitute a contract” (Scott & Marshall 2005). Two processes are of primary interest when looking at labor markets. The first is how buyers and sellers come into contact with each other. Once contact is established a second central issue in this process is working out what qualities and quantities will be exchanged. From the employer’s side (frequently called the *demand side*) this usually comprises of rates of pay or financial compensation and other financial and material (sometimes also symbolic) benefits, and security and length of tenure. From the worker’s side (frequently termed the *supply side*) this usually comprises of how much time, effort, and skill will be expended, possibly also what quality of result is agreed to. The contextual factors largely set the balance of power between the partners in this process and can comprise laws, customs and traditions from previous encounters (institutions) or current and

foreseeable conditions such as amount of a particular type of work and workers available, how organized workers and employers are to increase bargaining power (Tilly & Tilly 1994). As is well established, (Tilly & Tilly 1994) all labor markets experience ‘segmentation.’ Segmentation is the process by which larger labor markets (which only theoretically exist) break down into smaller, narrower, more restricted markets based on narrower selection criteria. Market ‘impediments’ or barriers are factors that lead buyers and sellers of labor to restrict or refrain from making offers on the labor market. Much labor market and career theorizing and research aims at discerning what factors impact how the encounter between buyers and sellers takes place. This paper looks at labor market and career issue from the three analytical perspectives associated with the definitions of labor markets outline above, that of employers, employees, and contextual factors as well as outcome studies (the latter two having received most attention in the film literature to this point).

From the workers side, a five-level conception of factors influencing or taken into account in career development is presented. Careers are made in relationship to factors, considerations or variables from several dimensions. Though in practice factors from these dimensions rise, decline and interact in what appears to be a mishmash or haphazard fashion, analytically it is useful to disentangle these factors and dimensions. In the following an attempt is made to separate factors related to careers in film in terms of five levels, and specify the labor market and career-relevant factors on each level. Probably the most significant difference in examining factors in terms of levels with regard to the film industry is that contrary to classical research or theories on career, the *firm* or *organizational* level is limited here, as the project-based nature of the film industry makes firms relatively peripheral to careers in film production (though they are central to film production, distribution and marketing, and *certain* occupational categories in the film industry). This difference can be summed up as the difference between who works *at* film companies (as an employee) versus who works *for* film companies (on a contract or contingent basis on a given

project). What occasionally functions from the employee's side as a collective intermediary between the individual and employers are networks or what Blair (2001; 2003) calls semi-permanent working groups, as well as unions.

Also from the supply or employee side, the theoretical construct of 'career' can be used to examine labor market operation. In this paper the term 'career' is used merely to connote a series of work or occupational episodes or experiences (Arthur, Hall & Lawrence 1989). In this sense a career can be comprised of formal employment, unemployment, unpaid work, self-employment, various types of paid and unpaid leave, as well as the traditional way in which career has been perceived as an escalating progression from one related level of employment to the next. As discussed below, this is a 'weak' as opposed to a 'strong' definition of career.

The paper begins by discussing contemporary approaches to career and researching careers as a means of understanding how occupational structures operate and change, and how individuals move through structures of work, entrepreneurialism and non-work activities based on a variety of variables from the individual to the global level. A six-step model of employment attainment is then presented, as the degree of contingency of employment in the film sector is high for most occupational categories and employment seeking is a constant concern and activity to most in this industry (i.e. getting into the next project). The table that allows us to analytically separate career-related variables into five levels is then presented with a provisional specification of important variables at each level. This table is informed both by the literature in the field on film and more general studies of work, as well as by spreading responses from initial interviews with persons working in the Danish film industry. Finally, the international research on career and employment in film industries is presented and will eventually be linked together to give us an overview of what we know about careers in film industries.

As film production regimes (Mathieu & Strandvad 2008) are embedded in local (national, regional, city) industrial institutional settings, what is transferable from studies of one context to another always has to be critically assessed. This is the reason for speaking cautiously about film industries, rather than a monolithic film industry. However, empirical findings from one regime can at least be used to pose the question, ‘does it work the same way here?’ – i.e. we can use the theories, concepts and methodological strategies to investigate local conditions. As with most of empirical reality, so much is going on that in order to make sense of it, we need to break it down, separate it and place it in relation to models of processes – in other words, take the concrete and place it in the abstracted and generalized to see how things might fit together and where the gaps are.

### **Approaches to career**

Jones & Dunn (2007) amplify Barley’s (1989) call to make career studies a cornerstone of organizational and institutional analysis and lament that it hasn’t materialized despite enticing prospects to use career as “the means for understanding complex and important social phenomena” (p.447), not the least being the operation of labor markets. Careers are a phenomenon that can allow us to see and gauge other more fundamental and comprehensive changes as they ‘link persons to institutions through organizations and occupations’ (Jones & Dunn 2007: 437). Discussing the early insights of Hughes (1936, 1958), Jones & Dunn argue that careers show the movement of people across offices and statuses as “a person’s career unfolds in a sequence of roles in occupations and organizations, placing the individual in temporal and spatial context” (439).

Jones & Dunn identify two general approaches to career – what they call ‘property’ and ‘process’ approaches. Property approaches focus on the content of careers, most evidently the practices and statuses associated with them.

Methodologically, “Scholars who view careers as property employ cross-sectional or a series of static comparisons of specific time periods” (Jones & Dunn 2007: 439). The process approach emphasizes the “sequences of roles” (p.440) and changes in the occupants who play such roles that unfold in an institutional context. Methodologically, process orientations utilize longitudinal studies that allow one to examine the relations between roles and changes in the types of incumbents in these roles over time, paying less attention to the actual content of these roles. Examining how careers are made from the property approach gives us insight into what jobs or occupations are available or created at a given time, what types of individuals with which types of backgrounds and human and social capital move into these, how relations between jobs and occupations are configured, the role and fate of statuses associated with jobs and occupations and at the general level, how individuals and institutions are linked.

Evetts (2000) suggests that career should be investigated in terms of the *analytical dimensions* of culture, structure and agency. Cultural dimensions include ideologies and cultures and their component belief systems, attitudes, values, norms and practices. Structural dimensions include structures and processes that are relatively stable and regular (such as career ladders, pay scales, occupational relations, etc). These dimensions, which Evetts calls ‘systemic’ (p.58) are supra-individual, and in Durkheim’s (1982) terms present themselves as social facts,<sup>ii</sup> or institutions at varying levels from the family up to even the global level. Thus they can inform behavior either by being internalized due to their symbolic power or socialization, or confronted externally through everything from the informal cues given by those one interacts with up to informal and formal rules or codes that are known to be widely accepted and enforced as cultural factors, or present themselves in more concrete forms and patterns based on previous action or conduct which open or limit opportunities for action or conduct (i.e. the existence of established occupations, training channels leading into occupations, and vertical and



horizontal relations between occupations in production processes). These systemic dimensions structure or ‘inform’ action to an extent via constraint or facilitation in certain ways rather than others. Agency dimensions include the actual choices and strategies employed by individuals, combining self-knowledge (i.e. preferences), personal habitualized practices, and knowledge of external circumstances. The concept of ‘strategy’ becomes the nexus where personal preferences and knowledge of external conditions meet. Quoting Woods (1993), Evetts (2000: 63) writes “The concept of ‘strategy’ has been central in interactionist research since ‘it is where individual intention and external constraint meet. Strategies are ways of achieving goals.’”

In contrasting my analytical placement of factors on five levels with Evetts’ approach, cultural and structural factors can be seen at each of the levels, along with various forms of agency, from individual to collective, involved in creating, reproducing or altering the cultural and structural manifestations that appear at each level. However, looking deeply into Evetts framework, agency becomes the level of action or conduct, navigating an environment of structural and cultural conditions.

Another approach, similar to what Jones & Dunn call the ‘property’ approach to career focuses on the *primary characteristics* of careers. In reviewing the ‘changing nature of careers,’ Sullivan (1999) contrast the traditional ‘stages’ approach to careers, which posited that careers comprise of a progression from one level to the next, where each step or stage entails increases in wages, authority, skill and status. Such progression usually took place within a single or a couple of firms over the course of one’s working life. In other words, from this perspective careers entailed hierarchical escalation usually in an internal labor market (Osterman & Burton 2005). In stage or progression models, stability, predictability and preparation based on knowledge of the next step (on part of the worker and firm that promotes the worker) are the norm.<sup>iii</sup> In contrast to this traditional conception, Sullivan borrows Arthur & Rousseau’s

(1996) concept of ‘boundaryless career.’ ‘Boundaryless careers’ are characterized by high degrees of mobility (i.e. instead of intra-firm mobility via internal labor markets, workers return repetitively to external or open labor markets for their next position), identification with one’s profession, skills set or occupational colleagues rather than a given firm, constant knowledge-seeking and skill development, inspiring work over pay increases, and personal (rather than firm-based) responsibility for one’s career development (Sullivan 1999:458). Thus, the boundaryless career is much the mirror opposite of the traditional stage or progressive career – as it is characterized by instability, discontinuity, non- (or at least not uni-) directionality, unpredictability, external as opposed to internal labor market activity, transition over occupational boundaries when needed, a focus on knowledge and skill rather than position and seniority. In boundaryless careers we see a continuous preoccupation with ‘marketability,’ as the chronic condition is returning to open labor markets to acquire one’s next job. The boundaryless career still posits relatively stable firms or employers, making length of stay in a given job a matter of mutual agreement, though the concept also entails a psychological or dispositional shift on the part of workers towards a heightened desire for mobility. In this sense we can speak of a mutual, on part of employers and employees, disposition towards the use of open, external labor markets. Boundaryless careers are inextricably linked to contingency in labor markets.

*Contingency* is the basic feature of film labor markets (Menger 1999). Contingency entails that, at least for certain occupational categories or groups of workers, chronic return to open, external labor markets is a *structural requirement*. In other words, for certain occupational categories, stable employment is not an option. This is the case in many project-organized branches. Under such conditions very few (core) workers are employed under stable conditions in firms, and the vast majority are brought in on a contingent, project-by-project basis. Employment theories that highlight contingent work often divide the workforce into core workers who have stable and comfortable

employment conditions, while peripheral workers are subject to tenuous and less-favorable employment conditions. Megner (1999) however points out that studies that highlight contingent work usually focus on low-end contingent work, and points out that there are also high-end sectors, such as consulting and within the creative industries, with high skill, high waged work that operate on a contingency basis. Such work is examined by Platman (2004) in her study of 'portfolio careers.'

Another basic way of approaching career is through 'person-oriented approaches' as opposed to 'variable oriented approaches' (Bertaux & Thompson 2006; Hermanowicz 2007; Cairns et al. 1998). Person-oriented approaches holistically strive to account for the subjective, spatial and temporal factors that impact career developments, placing as Hermanowicz (2007:626) terms it "careers-in-context." Context in this approach can be explored primarily subjectively, as Hermanowicz does in looking at how context informs consciousness in terms of situated identities (2007: 631ff.), but also in order to explore and uncover more objective conditions and how these may or may not operate via subjective awareness, as Bertaux also does. The primary benefit of the person-oriented approach is that it allows meaning into the analysis, which is usually structurally excluded from variable oriented approaches. While meaning isn't everything (Martin 2000) it helps us understand not just individual choice and action (Evetts 2000) but also how variables associate. Inquiring into subjective meaning "places agency on an equal footing with culture and structure and connects micro and macro levels of analysis by viewing the individual as a constitutive force in how work is shaped and how it shapes those engaged in it" (Hermanowicz 2007: 640). As will be seen below, the person-oriented approach is very much a peripheral approach in studying career and labor market in film, where more structural approaches predominate.

*Strong and weak definition of careers.* The weak definition merely uses the term career to cover a series of working-life related episodes that can include wage work, entrepreneurial or self-employment, education and training, or un- and under-employment or leaves (compensated or uncompensated, voluntary or non-voluntary). The strong definition uses career as an analytical or explanatory concept with a normal or median content and development or trajectory which is used as a baseline to track individual conformity to or deviation from this norm, or track the transformation of given types of careers (i.e. in retail sales, management, engineering, physicians, etc) over time. Characteristic of this is Wilensky's (1961: 532) definition of career as "a succession of related jobs, arranged in a hierarchy of prestige, through which persons move in an ordered (more-or-less predictable) sequence." While the strong conception speaks in terms of 'related,' 'arranged' and 'ordered sequence,' the weak definition submits only to the idea of sequence in temporal terms, positing that the positions moved through need neither be from job to job (unemployment or self-employment are possible) nor in a given sequence, orderly fashion or ascending progression.

### **A generic model of the employment-acquisition process**

Below I present a generic six stage process of acquiring employment/contracts. In other words, a breakdown of the processes central to the operation of labor markets. This is a very rudimentary model developed for heuristic purposes. Not all stages are used in all cases, and the process can be commenced and terminated at different stages. Likewise, one can have several processes at various stages going on simultaneously. In other words, one does not need to complete a cycle before commencing another, nor does a cycle need to be pursued to the end - it may be terminated at any given stage for several reasons. Likewise, the developments in one process cycle can impact others (i.e. having two opportunities that overlap the same time period forcing a choice, or previous commitments ruling out other opportunities at the same time). One

reason for bringing this model in here is to remind us that the sequential attainment of work-related episodes is an active process, both in terms of moving from one stage to another, but also that a range of activities and considerations are carried out in each stage both by the employment seeker as well as others. This is a conceptualization of what this process looks like in abstract form.

This generic model comprises of the following stages:

**Preparation - Search - Awareness - Evaluation - Negotiation - Execution**

Though focus below is on the supply-side processes of the generic model, the same can be used to look at demand-side activities. Briefly, from demand-side, preparation entails assessing needs for labor, search is the open or restricted processes whereby candidates are brought into consideration, awareness becomes the process whereby employers and potential employees become aware of each other's 'offers,' evaluation is the process whereby capabilities and price are evaluated, negotiation becomes the process whereby the details of the contract are worked out and execution is carrying out one's contracted responsibilities.

Below, the supply-side of the process is unpacked in greater detail.

*Preparation* for employment. This stage comprises the acquisition of the formal and expected credentials, skills or abilities required to obtain the intended work one aspires to. Preparation may take the form of formal education, autodidact learning, or various forms of apprenticeships. This stage is normally used only when seeking work for the first time or to transition into a new occupational category. In other words, this stage is frequently bypassed when seeking work within the same or a lower, or non-skilled occupational category.

*Search* for opportunities can be an active, passive or door-shutting process, initiated and carried out by one-self or others (for example an agent, friend or

colleague). Searches can take place through various media – human (contacts), print or digital.

*Awareness* is the stage at which the existence of specific opportunities arrives at the prospective employment seeker. This may be predated by awareness to other individuals (logically those offering employment, but also those formally or informally charged with searching for opportunities on behalf of an individual or acquaintances who may be closer to those offering employment – Granovetter's weak ties). Awareness logically precedes the next step – evaluation.

*Evaluation* may entail a further information acquisition phase as well as evaluating the positives and negatives of a specific opportunity in regard to a multitude of factors, such as status, who one will work with, financial remuneration, whether this opportunity will open or close doors to other opportunities, how family relations will be affected, etc.

*Negotiation* covers negotiating the terms of the opportunity, ranging from unconditional acceptance of an offer to rounds of legal negotiations between councilors for various parties resulting in detailed contracts.

*Execution* entails carrying out the activities specified in the negotiation or the offer.

These stages may be implicit or explicit, undertaken by one individual or representatives (distributed among actors). Again, these stages are not comprehensively linear, merely necessarily sequential.

## **Factors influencing careers in film – the five levels**

As argued above, factors and types of considerations impacting careers in film can be divided into five basic levels: the societal, the industry, the network/associational, the individual-occupational, and individual-personal/private. Again, what is particular about the film industry is the relative unimportance of the *organizational level* per se, as firms as career vehicles for most workers in this industry are paradoxically central as contracting employers, but peripheral to career development due to the widespread contingent contracting process. Each level, with illustrations drawn from film relevant contexts is elaborated below:

### *1. The societal setting*

At the societal or national level several types of factors are important. One type of factor has to do with political and social stability, with particular reference to the personal security of individuals and groups. The most flagrant factors of this type are ethnic and ideological persecution of the type that led to an outflow of primarily Jewish film workers from central and Eastern Europe during the 1930-40s to Western Europe and North America, and the McCarthyism purges that drove film workers out of Hollywood, either abroad or to other sectors of employment or unemployment. As filmmakers often function as intellectuals and social critics, when political tides turn against these groups they are frequently driven into exile or underground (Naficy 1998; 2001; Andrei Tarkovsky and Joseph Losey would be examples of famous filmmakers who could be called a political-artistic refugees, Tarkovsky from the USSR, Losey from the US). On the opposite end of the spectrum, attractive political and social conditions can exercise a pull effect. Macro-economic conditions also play a role, and can range from expansive to depressed with the personal and industry implications that this range of conditions entail. Welfare state provisions, ranging from existent to no-existent and from general to selective can also impact one's mobility considerations. Educational opportunities and

the selective encouragement for individuals with particular ascribed and acquired characteristics to educate themselves for and work in various roles and various industries also impacts who is trained for mobile and immobile positions, as well as who is culturally permitted and encouraged to move.

## *2. The industry setting*

Systematically reviewing previous research on career and labor market factors in film reveals that what we know has to do primarily with Hollywood, that other industries are under-studied from this perspective, and that certain topics are rather well covered with others remaining uncharted territory. Little attempt has been made to draw together what we know into a connected and vaguely comprehensive theory of career in film, other than to point to the profound impact of *contingency*.

Presented in catalogue form (with representative but not an exhaustive list of studies) the following topics have been covered in studies of Hollywood or North American film industries: the classic studio system (Bordwell & Staiger 1985; Staiger 1995); networks (Faulkner & Andersen 1987; Jones 1996; Jones, Hesterly & Borgatti 1997; Sorenson & Waguespack n.d.); knowledge (Jones & DeFillippi 1996); discrimination (Bielby & Bielby 1992, 1993, 1996; Lincoln & Allen 2004, Zuckerman et al 2003) project-based production (Faulkner & Andersen 1987; DeFillipi & Arthur 1998); interaction patterns and creative effectiveness (Simonton 2004; Delmestri, Montanari & Usai 2005); role-based coordination and skill learning (Bechky 2006), signaling and assessing competence (Jones 2002; Elsbach & Kramer 2003; Lincoln 2007); reputation work (Zafirau 2007); flexibility and 'vertical disintegration' (Christopherson & Storper 1986; Storper & Christopherson 1987; Storper 1989; 1994); the economic geography of Hollywood, i.e. dense agglomeration of specialized firms (Scott 2002); technology and remote collaboration (Palmer, Dunford, Rura-Polley & Barker 2001) and the role of brokers (talent agencies) in 'packaging' teams for projects (Bielby & Bielby 1999)



The following topics have been covered with specific regard to European film industries:<sup>iv</sup> production networks and firm agglomeration in Paris (Scott 2000) and London (Gornostaeva 2008); flexibility in the UK (Blair 2003, Blair & Rannie 2000); project-based organization (Blair, Grey & Randle 2001); interaction patterns and creative effectiveness (Alvarez, et al 2005; Delmestri, Montanari & Usai 2005); networks and embeddedness (Blair, Culkin & Randle 2003); labor process (Blair 2001), gender issues (Dean & Campbell 2003) and stable production units (Blair 2001).

Many of the issues, such as flexibility, project organization and networks hang together, either in an endogenous relationship (flexibility is attained via project organization) or as a response to structural conditions (i.e. networks increase in salience to secure work in 'flexibilized' contingent, project based production situation).

### *3. Networks – supra-individual, sub- and trans-industrial*

If we accept the basic premises of the project-based, flexible specialized, quasi-market based description of the film labor market, the classical role of firms and internal labor markets as the primary career vehicles is by most accounts replaced by networks and network governance. Jones focuses greatly upon the role and operation of networks, both in her work on the film industry and broader theoretical writing (Jones & Lichtenstein 2007). Blair (2001, 2003) accepts the significance and role of networks, but based on her empirical work she finds another significant supra individual constellation operative in the British film industry, which she refers to as semi-permanent work groups (SPWGs). These are far more consolidated and mutually obliging than networks (Blair 2003: 686-688). Both networks and to a lesser extent SPWGs may span across industries, that is to say they may transcend from the film industry out into adjacent industries such as TV, theatre, filmed advertising, etc. Positions

in both networks and SPWGs vary in centrality and power though membership evidences a degree of mutual benefit, affect or respect.

#### *4. The individual occupational setting*

Individuals are part of networks and occasionally represented by agencies or brokerage organizations. Though mutual acceptance of belonging or membership is required, making both phenomena supra-individual, a basic premise is individual – largely voluntary engagement. One’s individual fate is in some ways tied in with the positioning of one’s agent, agency, network, union or semi-permanent work group in the overall stratification of like actors in the industry field. Other factors are more individual-centric at this level, such as where the individual is in his/her career (new entrant, established, transitioning) as this impacts both investments and prospects that might bind one to a given trajectory as well as the presence or absence of a fear of ‘falling’ to a lower level or future opportunities if a radical alternative than conventional paths are pursued, where one is with regard to a possible broker (agents, agencies, sponsors, heads of departments, the DFI), how one’s individual capacities fit in with developments in the industry, commitments, connections and versatility in obtaining work in related industries (straddling), skill in selling/promoting oneself or putting together or influencing projects that open opportunities for oneself. Ultimately much of this is run through the subjective, multidimensional category of ‘reputation’ (Zafirau 2007), and exhibits types and degrees of embeddedness – how one is structurally attached and bound to individuals, groups (including networks) and organizations that or work or occupationally related.

#### *5. The individual personal-private setting*

At this level we see degrees of commitment to specific ideals, movements, people, groups, and organizations such as family, friends, home environment, as well as to workgroups, colleagues, arenas or venues in which one works or

aspires to work. Work on individual dispositions found in Blair 2003; Blair, Culkin & Randle 2003; Blair 2001.

In a series of articles based on German theatre workers (actors) Eikhof and Haunschild (2006; 2007) argue that at least some workers, “artists,” in creative industries behave in unique manners.<sup>v</sup> They argue that “artists” have such extreme needs for creative self-expression and find the outlet and arena for this in their work that they arrange their live in a distinct manner, “bohemianism” in order to be able to pursue their creative ideals. Eikhof & Haunschild (2006:234) argue that “Most artists understand themselves as bohemians, living a lifestyle that is distinct and distinguished from the rest of society, especially the bourgeoisie and business.” For bohemians, life and work were to be melded into a work of art itself, which elevates the status of art over private and familial life (Eikhof & Haunschild 2006: 236-238). Work for these individuals becomes the hub around which one’s life, in terms of interests, activity and time-use revolves, and deeply invested with passion, commitment and personal identity. Thus, Eikhof, Warhurst & Haunschild (2007) openly question whether conceptions of ‘work-life balance’ derived from portrayals of work and life as separable and “balanceable” (p. 326), and even if so a normative bias towards less work and more life, are accurate and normatively satisfactory. Eikhof, Warhurst & Haunschild (2007) see the need to view work as running the gamut from having ‘debilitating effects’ on life (p. 326) to “a source of satisfaction and self-fulfillment” (p. 327) and thus rightly take a principal and comprehensive place in people’s lives.

### **Previous research on employment in film: what kind of market is it?**

The issues dealt with above, focusing on the person-centered approach to career focus on ‘supply-side’ factors. Most of the studies on hitherto on employment in film focus on demand side parameters, leading to the question ‘what type of

market is the “market” for film labor?’ Essentially the primary matters under discussion are, what is the general nature of labor market segmentation in film industries, and what mechanisms other than considerations of price and quality are in operation?

What troubles or intrigues some researchers on film labor markets is the issue of *repeat collaboration*, as, when it reaches degrees that significantly exceed what could be expected in calculations of pure market based interaction, it is indicative that considerations other than price and quality and broad searches for work and employees are in operation here. Below we will explore a few studies that focus on repeat collaboration, why it is significant, and how it is theoretically and/or empirically explained.

Most research touching on career, labor markets and employment in film focus on processes and conditions under which employment is obtained rather than charting either generic career trajectories (i.e. how ‘normal’ careers are built via a succession of jobs or skill acquisition) or how occupations tend to lead into each other and relate to one another. A few scholars use career as the primary key to orienting their studies of the film industry, notably Candace Jones (Jones 1996; Jones & De Fillipi 1996; Jones & Walsh 1997) and Helen Blair (Blair 2001; 2003; Blair, Grey & Randle 2001).

Jones and collaborators apply the ‘boundaryless career concept’ (Arthur 1994; Arthur & Rousseau 1996) to studying career processes in film, where careers “move across rather than within firms” (Jones & Walsh 1997: 59). Thus, the primary locus and mechanism whereby careers in film are built are networks, rather than firms (as in internal labor markets – see Osterman & Burton 2005) as Jones and Walsh point out above, or open, competitive external labor markets.

This latter point, the ‘marketness’ of the process whereby the persons contracted to carry out various functions in film production find each other or

are placed in a working relationship with each other is investigated by Zuckerman (2005). Zuckerman argues based on quantitative, historical data on paired collaboration in Hollywood feature film production from 1935-1995 (comprising both the height of the studio system era and the contemporary 'flexible specialization' [Christopherson & Storper 1989] era) that collaboration patterns during the 'market' flexible specialization era belie what we would expect for outcomes from a classical market, but also under the studio system (2005: 31), when one controls for such factors as more opportunities to repeat collaboration due to more individuals participating in more films. Zuckerman (2005: 32) thus concludes that "little seems to change" with regard to repeat collaboration despite the transition from a firm to market based system. Zuckerman explains this in terms of markets being more structured than previously or widely conceived<sup>vi</sup> due primarily to restricted search processes based on (essentially limited substitutability) beliefs that few or no better collaboration partners exist, leading to "(over-)commitment" (Zuckerman 2005: 33) to one's former collaboration partners. However, Zuckerman notes that this is only a reasoned hypothesis and that "there is much room for future research that helps to identify the mechanisms that produce repeat collaboration through the market" (2005: 33).

Bielby & Bielby's (1999) work focuses on how another central industry feature – the role of talent agencies (as brokerage organizations) impacts career outcomes, or in more general terms, 'how mediating organizations segment the labor market for a professionalized contingent workforce' (1999: 65). Network belonging and enlistment of brokerage agencies can be seen as individual level action (this will be dealt with below) though it can be argued that both network ties and brokerage organizations structure (see the quote above about segmenting) and are structured at the industry level, though both networks and brokerage organizations can transcend given industries. However, agencies or brokering agencies can play their roles in a couple of different way. As Bielby & Bielby (1999) examine in the Hollywood case, agencies 'package' whole groups

of the individuals they represent – writers, producers, directors and actors – into a team or unit that is then presented to a studio (p.67). In this manner the agency usurps one role associated with the producer in Denmark – hand selecting at least the key individuals (heads of departments) who then select the rest of their teams. This can be contrasted with an agency selling in individuals onto individual projects. This can be seen as an industry level variable as to whether packaging or individual level selection is the norm, which then impacts at which level employment seekers need to be active (i.e. impacting their standing within their agency, or pushing their agents or personally gaining entry on an individual level).<sup>vii</sup>

Another topic that has received a bit of attention at the industry level which directly impacts hiring and career outcomes is discrimination. Following on their study of TV screenwriters (1993), Bielby & Bielby (1996, 1999) have examined gender, ethnicity and age and career dynamics among Hollywood screenwriters finding evidence of cumulative disadvantage for underrepresented groups. Lincoln & Allen (2004) examine what they call ‘double-jeopardy’ the combined effect of being female and older and find that female stars fare less well with age than their male counterparts, starting from a position of advantage over their male counterparts when they are young with ‘star-power’ dropping precipitously with age (their trajectories cross already around age 25 for the post WWII cohort). Zuckerman et al (2003) have also investigated age discrimination in Hollywood.

Moving to a more general theoretical level of the American film industry, Jones & Walsh (1997) apply dual economy theory from labor market analysis, with its contention that careers in the primary or core section of the industry will differ from those in the secondary or peripheral section of the industry. Though this theory is developed to analyze who is found in internal contra external labor markets with relation to firms, Jones & Walsh apply this dichotomy to an occupational community. While things like union and professional association

rules and membership play a role in establishing the outer boundaries, qualitative assessments and reputation play the central role in adjudicating placement on the core - semi-periphery - periphery labor markets (which is more of a continuum than a tripartite categorical division). Jones & Walsh's empirical data consists of a network analysis of recurrent relationships in the US film industry. From their component analysis they find that the industry is highly integrated - 98% of the participants "potentially have either direct or indirect access to one another" and that the industry is "characterized by boundaryless careers; only 19% (159) of participants with multiple film credits worked exclusively for one firm" (Jones & Walsh 1997: 65). They also identify, a core, primary elite labor market associated with working for the majors, with higher pay, high prestige, challenging project and exhibiting high individual and team skill which comprises dense and cohesive tight-knit community, with these conditions dissipating as one moves towards the semi-periphery (the minors) and the periphery (the "fly-by-nights") (pp. 66-67). However, combining the two types of analysis, Jones & Walsh (1997: 67) draw the conclusion that the labor market is highly stratified, but not rigidly segmented, "Due to extensive inter-firm movement of subcontractors, rather than two segmented and non-overlapping labor markets as dual economy theory suggests, one labor market exists within the film industry community." However, when they track mobility between core and semi- and periphery based on initial industry position, they find strong continued segregation, suggesting a 'to the manor born' logic - that is to say those who initially or early get into the elite core tend to remain here, and those on the outskirts remain there.<sup>viii</sup> Their concluding contention is that the stratification and asymmetries found in the film industry are produced without the operation of internal labor markets, and suggest community processes (preferential hiring) and social capital as significant mechanisms.

Blair (2001; 2003; and Rainnie 2000) presents theoretical critiques of Christopherson and Storper's 'flexible specialization' analysis of Hollywood

and empirical research on the UK film industry. She primarily challenges the atomistic and context-independent conceptions of film labor markets arguing for the relevance of both networks and connections, but also the above-mentioned SPWMs. Blair also argues that different types of ties are significant at different junctures. On the point of initial breaks to get into the industry, Blair (2001: 158-159) finds strong ties – family or friendship – to be the primary way (56% of her respondents) of getting into the industry, with many coming in at unskilled positions (i.e. runners). Getting in and getting on in the industry require different types of social capital. Collegial networks become important in securing on-going work, after family and friends open the initial door. This is especially true due to the ‘cascading’ recruitment process that Blair describes, whereby heads of departments are contacted by producers or production companies, and then filling the ranks of the department (as the producer or production company deems necessary) is then done by the head of department.<sup>ix</sup> In this sense the head of department acts as recruiter and manager, with the production company as the formal employer. According to Blair this recruitment and employment system “also tends to preclude grades within departments getting jobs without being known by, or recommended to, a head of department” (Blair 2001: 160). In her 2003 article she shows how this recruitment process leads to semi-permanent work groups which move from production to production as roving bands with the head of department as their leader and key to employment. This situation provides greater employment security, means that individual workers are not cast out into an open external market at the end of each project (as it is the head of department who secures work for his/her group), and that mutual feelings of solidarity and obligation develop whereby taking work offered that would jeopardize the ongoing relationship by getting out of sync with the group (i.e. individually working on other projects that overlap with group projects) is avoided (Blair 2003). Functionally SPWGs allow the head of department to take work with the peace of mind that s/he has a group that will work and perform to satisfactory levels. For the other members of the group this form of working means that they also



can work in a climate of familiarity, and avoid having to drum up work individually.

With regard to the UK film industry, Blair (2001: 167) speaks of a ‘craft-like model’ of production that appears to be a potentially open market for services, but is in fact and practice filled by social and cultural pre-fabrications (based in part on preferences, in part on structures, in part on happenstance). In arguing against both atomism and dual labor market theory (see Jones & Walsh 1997 above), Blair (2001: 167) contends that there is “a continuity and group orientation within the labour market which a core and periphery analysis does not reveal.”

Though some of what Blair finds in her studies could be interpreted in term of transaction cost analysis – that the more consolidated and durable chains or work groups reduce transaction costs for producers/production companies, heads of departments and group members (i.e. in terms of search costs and quality assurance), this is far from the whole story of what leads to the formation and durability of these entities. The main question is what is causally effective in such situations (as well as whether or not this can be known) – individual or evolutionary economic rationality in terms of transaction cost reduction, or the social and social-psychological dispositions and mechanisms such as affect, cultural appropriateness, institutionalized understandings and group formation behind initiating and perpetuating groups and relations, rather than pursuing individual strategies. More than information moves through networks. Assurances and affection, senses of what is right, reasonable and appropriate, as well as sentiment and rationality are developed and exercised in networks and groups. Personal and social bonds may trump or restrict economically rational search, negotiation, hiring and managerial processes.<sup>x</sup> What labor market, career and performance studies of the film industries miss is a central point that emerges from managerial and organizational case studies of filmmaking – that is that this is a highly

‘personalized’ and person-centered branch – contact and relations between individuals is intensive, personal and multi-dimensional (Bechky2006; Blair 2001, 2003). This highly intensive, intimate and personal nature of work and interaction contrasts starkly with the atomized, individualized, rational conception of the external labor market that is posited to operate in film industries. These studies show that the film labor market is thicker in cultural and social terms and more filled with groups and constellations than the classic market image affords. It probably isn’t off base to posit that working with others even due to contingent factors recasts or updates preferences and affinities – with the most recent working relationship being the one that is strongest as it is the socially closest and freshest, as well as the most up-to-date information-wise.

### **Concluding discussion and a research agenda for future work**

Research up to this point has indicated via studies of repeat collaboration held up against models of pure market or random interaction, that cultural and social factors operate strongly. The primary question remaining is discerning what mechanisms produce these effects. Here it is proposed that empirical studies of actual search, hiring/contracting and negotiation practices, focusing on the subjective considerations of concrete actors in real contexts offers the best way forward in answering these questions. Attention should focus on who moves individually who moves collectively, what disbands and what remains connected under what conditions. Uncertainty and contingency set the stage and greatly impact the context. However, the means by which actors on both supply and demand sides act and interact is open to individual variability and individual and collective learning and social and cultural influences.

A partial research agenda for the future would therefore include:

- More subjective approaches to career and labor market activity.
- More individual or person centered approaches that comprise enough cases to discover the underlying mechanisms and institutions that charting a number of career histories can unearth (i.e. patterns that might not be at the discursive disposal of interviewees – á la Bertaux1995; Bertaux & Thompson 2006).
- Studies of the actual search, recruitment, hiring and negotiation processes (formal structures and informal processes) to discover what proximate factors impact these processes and employment outcomes.
- Multi-level approaches that incorporate how factors at various levels of complexity or spheres impact employment and career histories.

In sum, the ‘market’ for labor in film industries exhibits many of the same features as other labor markets – segmentation, a stratification or polarization into high ends with a focus on premium talent and low ends where cost and volume of labor supply are most significant, discrimination and cultural and personal preferences on part of both buyers and sellers of labor, the variable role of state policy, the existence and significance of workers unions and employers agencies, and the role of social ties and networks in securing labor and employment. However, the constant need to resecure work, sometimes as often as every second or third month is of overriding importance and impact not jus the frequency with which the above mentioned factors operate, but also to a certain extent their nature. In order to more comprehensively understanding how the labor market in film industries operate, we need to also examine how production in the industry takes place, that is to say how work is carried out, managed and organized when executed. The labor market and process of production are probably intimately integrated, and thus to understand one, on has to understand the other in detail.

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<sup>i</sup> Maybe a better formulation would be "what type of market(s) operate in film labor market(s)."

<sup>ii</sup> Durkheim (1982: 50) writes: "When I perform my duties as a brother, a husband or a citizen and carry out the commitments I have entered into, I fulfill obligations which are defined in law and custom and which are external to myself and my actions. Even when they conform to my own sentiments and when I feel their reality within me, that reality does not cease to be objective, for it is not I who have prescribed these duties; I have received them through education. Moreover, how often does it happen that we are ignorant of the details of the obligations that we must assume, and that, to know them, we must consult the legal code and its authorised interpreters! Similarly the believer has discovered from birth, ready fashioned, the beliefs and practices of his religious life; if they existed before he did, it follows that they exist outside him. The system of signs that I employ to express my thoughts, the monetary system I use to pay my debts, the credit instruments I utilise in my commercial relationships, the practices I follow in my profession, etc., all function independently of the use I make of them. Considering in turn each member of society, the foregoing remarks can be repeated for each single one of them. Thus there are ways of acting, thinking and feeling which possess the remarkable property of existing outside the consciousness of the individual."

<sup>iii</sup> As with most research and theorizing about working life before the 1970s, these stage or progression theories focused exclusively on male working life. Female employment patterns were ignored (Gallos 1989 *Handbook of career theory*)

<sup>iv</sup> Asian, African and Latin American and Caribbean film industries are not investigated here, which is of course a gross omission, but the mutual impact of these industries and the Danish film industry (which is the empirical focus of the research that this paper will eventually provide the setting for) is negligible compared to the European and trans-Atlantic influence.

<sup>v</sup> Eikhof, Warhurst & Haunschild (2007) argue that certain aspects of the behavior seen among theatre artists is relatively common among other workers in other branches as well.

<sup>vi</sup> While Zuckerman believes we have reason to rethink our conception of the market, he also argues that we have reason to rethink how and what outcomes we expect from firms regarding the use of their human resources, especially with regard to experimentation and shuffling (2004:33-34).

<sup>vii</sup> As far as I know in Denmark agencies do not play this packaging role, though the DFI does play a soft packaging/brokering role, though this is not part of its manifest mandate.

<sup>viii</sup> More of a class system than market logic?

<sup>ix</sup> This form of hiring probably partially stems from directors and producers not knowing who is out there in all the small areas, nor can they evaluate their skill, so they defer to a chain of responsibility – to small fiefdoms called departments.

<sup>x</sup> One of the central problems of not just recruitment, but leading and managing productions is accusations of favoritism and non-rational, non-dispassionate adjudication in conflicts. This was observed in a filming process where the line producer was accused of always supporting the production assistant in conflicts and situations where things went wrong due to the fact that he liked her and always used her, and thus was biased and couldn't see things objectively.

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