

INDUSTRIAL GEOGRAPHY LESSONS

Socio-professional rituals and the borderlands of production culture

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'Building a Small Studio: Basic Concepts in Digital Video *feng shui*.'
(Trade article on how to organize production space, *DV*, 2001)¹

In film and television, space is more than simply a site, a mere physical location, or a material world where production takes place. It is also a highly codified arena for status ranking and a public-private rhetorical construct used by practitioners to reflexively make sense of both the creative task and the ever-changing industrial landscape. Consider in this regard producer and CEO Peter Guber's summary description of the industry given to hundreds of eager career trainees at a 'making it in Hollywood' panel presentation:

In the sixties, change was linear and incremental. In the eighties, change became spatial – and developed like a Polaroid picture. In the new millennium, change is like a stack of Polaroids – with everything developing all at once and on all levels. To make it now, you need a completely new set of skills.²

Guber's cogent metaphor of the shared, instantaneous development of a stack of Polaroids fits perfectly the business plans of both of the studios that he has run: Mandalay Pictures and Sony/Columbia. Both studios, after all, have made cross-platform multimedia 're-purposing' (that is, developing 'content' simultaneously for film, television, new media, video gaming, music, publishing and sports) an obligatory, corporate house rule. In what some have termed the 'post-network' age of television and the 'post-studio' age of film, ancillary markets, merchandizing and consumer applications are no longer after-thoughts or 'secondary' considerations in the creative process. Rather, marketing, distribution and merchandizing personnel are brought in at the earliest stages of script development, and work to pre-figure the final narrative and presentational form that

any 'primary' film or program now takes. But not all spatial allegories of industry are as organizational in nature. Consider super-agent Arnold Rifkin's formulation of space to the same aspirants:

I became very good at talking by phone. At knowing by the voice and intonation at the other end how good a project or a pitch or a personal relationship might be. Talking must be a part of an agent's skill set.... [But] when you finally get 15 minutes or an hour for a meeting, yes, show up. But then be clear: that it is your space. Take it. Hone it. Use it.³

Rifkin's career road-map, by comparison to Guber's, suggests that a Zen-like mastery is required of the sensitive, discerning, and finally decisive super-agent. Rifkin's earlier comments at the same event do show him to be aware of the necessary complications of the contemporary cross-platform multimedia imperative (i.e., the differences between film and television, for example), when he acknowledged that 'Movie Raisenets simply don't taste the same when you eat them at your house and watch videos'. Yet in elaborating the career proverb cited above, Rifkin lays out a model of agency packaging that is almost mystical in nature. Like a marshal artist, the true agent, we are led to believe, sifts through and touches the souls of his workaday phone contacts, but disarms all comers during high moments of appointed 'face-time'. With public allegories, anecdotes and truisms like these, Hollywood provides what are in effect institutional geography lessons for its apprentice players, mentees and wannabes alike. Some of these spatial lessons, like the current public relations boosterism in film/television trade publications surrounding issues of media 'globalization', are macroscopic in function, since they help orient and inform strategic business decisions about the nature and significance of synergies, conglomerations, anti-piracy practices and free-trade agreements. Other geography lessons, by contrast, are microscopic, and can be used to guide media career pilgrims through the often-contested corridors of human-corporate relations in a manner that is more therapeutic and developmental in nature.

This chapter examines the symbolic and material ways that the US media production cultures rationalize and sanction specific spatial practices and norms – a production geography as it were – for the production enterprise. The spatial organization and physical presence of a production unit (whether on location, in the studio or in post-production) has always been integral in coding, announcing and interpreting the significance of production. Utilizing Clifford Geertz's notion of 'local knowledge', the chapter describes the ways that the production culture reflexively makes sense of itself – to itself – through its systematic organization and interpretation of space.⁴ Methodologically, the chapter stands between, and at times synthesizes, two approaches that are typically seen as divergent: ethnography and textual analysis.⁵ Arguing that either approach fails to account for important aspects of spatial practice (with ethnography susceptible to vested

disclosures by industrial informants or, worse, disinformation; and with textualism typically blind to industrial and technological determinants), this chapter intends to map the critical spatial practice of production through the close examination of what I call 'deep industrial texts'. Many of these workaday or 'low' texts – visual icons, social and professional rituals, demo-tapes, recurrent trade and union narrativizations, and machine designs that *audiences and viewers never see* – circulate in a greatly delimited public sphere, but a public sphere nevertheless, as promotional and industrial artifacts and professional events. All of these 'deep texts', as I term them, precede and prefigure the kinds of film/television screen forms that scholars typically analyze, and all offer dense and over-determined interpretive schemas that serve to regulate and make sense of the meanings and significance of the spaces of production, and the spaces of culture.

In taking this approach, I intend to build on and respond to the important, recent work of both Nick Couldry (Couldry 2000a), and Anna McCarthy (McCarthy 2001), on MediaSpace. Couldry's *The Place of Media Power* is particularly good at demonstrating the flaws of postmodern theory, which tended in figures like Baudrillard (1983) to 'erase' space as a meaningful category. A close examination of the deep spatial texts from industry that I have referred to above underscores, to use Couldry's terms, media's 'complexification' rather than postmodernism's 'erasure' of space as a meaningful category. Far from offering mere simulations, industrial rituals and demo-tapes (the deep texts I consider here), betray an obsession with space and place, often reinforcing the notion that production spaces, far from being illusory simulations, are physical, tangible, robust and demanding. Whereas Couldry elaborates on the physical boundaries, symbolic boundaries, institutional edges and the journeys by lay audiences to and from industrial space, I take as my focus the faux- and modified public and private spheres that are constructed for professional community members *inside* or *within* those institutional boundaries and edges. McCarthy's *Ambient Television*, in turn, serves to unseat the traditional privilege assigned to the home and the domestic sphere by media scholars in accounting for television. She demonstrates, instead, how site-specific uses of television outside of the home and in social spaces transform and mediate audiences in ways that complicate conventional understandings of gender, class and consumption. Like Couldry, McCarthy works to explicate what might be termed the 'borderlands' of television consumption. The kinds of industrial, spatial and textual practices that I describe and analyze in the pages that follow similarly complicate the place of viewership and agency – but do so not from the perspective of the lay audiences, viewers or consumers that Couldry and McCarthy focus on, but rather from the perspective of professional media *practitioners*, who also daily manage, traverse and negotiate institutional borderlands from the other side.

Much of my work has focused on the critical-theoretical competencies and practices of media production communities. This has included the idea that media production technologies are 'critical spatial practices' used for status-ranking,⁶ that

media producers/encoders are also audiences/decoders (Caldwell 2000), and that production technologies, professional practices and industrial iconographies can be viewed as 'theorizations-in-practice' (Caldwell 1993 and 1995). The studies that follow show how recurrent professional rituals, the use of space, and exchanges of industrial texts and trade icons constantly negotiate what it means to make media, and what it means to form institutional alliances. They also dramatize what and how changes in economy, technology and public taste stand both as threats to career and corporation, and as forces that can be 'leveraged' by foresighted and resilient artisans. Workspaces and depictions of space frequently serve as terms used to rationalize, understand and make sense of change, or even the threat of change. Fully understanding this dynamic means following Foucault's (1983) and Lefebvre's (1991) calls to focus on the materiality and social use of actual spaces, rather than on space as an idealized or conceptual category. A close examination of a range of deep texts in production culture suggests that film/TV practitioners are as versed in deploying space as they are in producing the spectacle of two-dimensional visual images on film and television screens. Yet it is difficult to talk about the geography or spaces of production culture without examining what goes on within those spaces. Understanding the logic and function of these production spaces, that is, cannot be meaningfully done, without understanding as well the conventionalized social interactions and professional rituals that define these spaces.

Deep textual topographies

Self-representations: the digital sweatshop

As a starting point, it is useful to consider a recurrent kind of self-representation in below-the-line work worlds.⁷ Many demo-tapes cultivate the perception that the digital and post-production artisan labors alone, in the darkness, in anonymity; cut-off from human contact and driven to anxiety by long hours of desperation. A number of demo-tapes bring this spatial 'self-portrait' (i.e., of the digital artist/editor as a bunkered, solitary figure) to life. A flashing emergency light in the image, explosive effects on a synthesizer track and 'Do Not Enter' warning signs cue the viewer of 'ProMax's' Final Cut Pro equipment demo as a hand-held camera races through a security door into a basement-like room that houses a meager pile of computer hardware. A sign, framed in close-up, shouts what can only be a fantasy for the daylight-challenged worker in this subterranean work-world: 'Warning: Extreme Editing Ahead.' The frenetic but low-budget production values of the tape, however, show this to be far from evocative of ESPN's 'The X-Games'. The 'VIP' demo by Lightworks goes one step further, equating the frantic, shouting world of the aggravated male editor with anxieties over bladder control and urinary function. A rapid-fire voice-over succession of the lines 'Gotta go, gotta go, gotta go...' hound a traumatized editor shot in fish-eye lens. His predicament? 'Next time go Lightworks VIP.'

The non-linear manufacturer of Blue (a high-end post-production system that is 'format independent') furthers the mythoi of the editor as alienated man and tortured artist. In low-key, blue tinted nocturnal lighting, a lone man in an edit suite paces nervously under the repetitive chop of an overhead ceiling fan. An empathic male narrator steps through a litany of ulcer inducing pitfalls that haunt the user, including threats of standards incompatibility, equipment obsolescence and crushing loan arrangements needed to keep pace with the competitors that hound the post-house manager. Lingering shots of the sweating, twisted body of the (now) T-shirt clad editor – shown tangled in endless cables as he trouble-shoots – builds after three minutes to a crisis and major plot point. 'How do you know that you're not going to encounter time-consuming and annoying problems?' the narrator intones. The viewer confronts a tortured male face *à la* Edvard Munch's painting 'The Scream', as the voice-over prophet builds to a climax: 'How do you know you're not going to encounter *non-linear nightmare*' (emphasis theirs). The demo quickly cuts to a sunny room, accompanied by an upbeat techno-music track, where a smiling young woman effortlessly works the editing controls that manipulate the now-dead freeze-frame of the manic-man-with-nightmare. The not so subtle message of the tape: 'It's so easy to use – even a girl can do it.' Over and over, these deep texts and many others create a picture of alienated and isolated male trauma – usually unfolding inside lightless post-production bunkers – as the work-world status quo from which video editors (apparently) need to be freed. In these dramatizations, the relatively private sphere of professional artisan-technicians is theatricalized as a digital sweatshop; and this recurrent mythoi is then circulated to the broader (yet still delimited) public sphere of peers that circulates and evaluates demo-tapes.

Solicitation rituals/space

The television and media industries are defined by a Darwinian imperative to survive by gaining advantage and market share over rivals and competitors in a given market sector. Survival of any production company depends upon convincing prospective clients that the company stands as a cost-effective and cutting-edge setter or exploiter of trends. The flip side of this competitive jockeying presupposes an end state of decline, obsolescence or bankruptcy for competitors. Media production is by definition, therefore, a contentious world, but one, ironically, that depends upon the ongoing ability to forge flexible alliances for survival. Hence the need for picking up those partners that can fill your needs, and avoiding those that can shipwreck your future. Production trade shows – such as the National Association of Program Executives Convention (NATPE), the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) and ShowBiz Expo – function as bracketed moments during which time players in the field seek out partners for imagined 'synergies' of one form or another (with suppliers, clients, manufacturers, purchasers, syndicators, contractors, etc.). The NAB convention

in Las Vegas typically has over 100,000 attendees, and regularly offers events within this professional-communal setting aimed at soliciting partners out of the morass of potential competitors. These events, or special mixers, include contests to produce original video spots using equipment whose manufacturers offer personal cash and new equipment prizes along with a showcase for screening the winning productions at the convention. These are not pre-produced or canned sales or demo-tapes, but are in essence 'spec' art projects made by independent practitioners without the burden of an apparent cost- and product-obsessed client in sight.

One winner of such an award at NAB 1995 produced a rapid montage spot of life in the edit suite that loaded up layers of inane audio comments ('I'm thinking of something *organic*'... 'what about – *cactus*?... 'no, the other way'... 'we can't use it'... 'no'... 'how long is this going to take'...) shouted by the shallow and callous hangers-on (producers, directors, clients) that (apparently) live to harass post-production workers. The spot ends by showing an editor saying 'done' after smirking through the harangues from the above-the-line folks who can only retort, 'that's impossible'. A practitioner's self-fantasy of wizardry plays out here; a resilient motif deployed by technical workers since the earliest days of silent cinema and Méliès. Here, however, the pose also stands as a form of cynical and symbolic resistance aimed at overpaid and vacuous bosses. Such solicitation rituals look like opportunities for free-thinking, but they also work to wed artists-trying-to-shed-their-technician-identities to pieces of proprietary and costly production equipment.

One of the most elaborate demo-tapes cultivating the need to solicit career-saving partnerships is one by Lightworks for their VIP system. The demo sounds and looks initially like an episode from the television series, the *X-files*, but ends up feeling dramatically more like low-budget porn. The demo opens in the crowded hallway of a fairly large-sized post-production house. A brooding woman (an Agent Scully look-alike) struts toward the camera as two men try to calm her down. Her problem? Her production is over budget (on a 'big-budget doc') and her deadline ('she's got a drop-dead date of Friday') looks impossible to make. A weasely male off-line editor (a Dana Carvey look-alike) tries to attract her attention in the photocopy room ('I'm pretty quick'), by offering to edit it on an underpowered off-line system. She passes ('I'll blow a budget... or a blood-vessel'). An older man pretending to be fatherly, tries to console her with a reality check ('I'd like to help. But as your on-line editor, I can't do what's not in my vocabulary'). As the two men try to settle her down, in a soft sepia-toned lounge with leather furniture and abstract art off the hall, she erupts: 'I mean – this project is a career maker, or breaker. Hello Scott! I need some help here.' The two escorts exchange a succession of glances in close-up, recognizing non-verbally that they must acquiesce and refer her to a man with more power. As a swarthy young man discards his black leather coat, and enters the room in a wide, low-angle shot, the online editor ambivalently confides his secret to Lauren (the Scully look-alike): 'Meet Chris Carter – the hottest freelance editor

in town.⁸ At first curt, but then intrigued, Lauren listens to the mystery man, as he begins to reduce the altered state soap opera to a lengthy (but oddly out-of-place) tech-writer's monologue about the various benefits and downsides of on-line versus on-line editing. The generic transmutation in this demo does not just explain how one can save one's career technically, it also models the interpersonal and heterosexual mannerisms needed to solicit and tap into off-shore, freelance production potency. Here, Lightworks VIP poses as the strange new man in town.

Spaces for solicitation include pavilion-size corporate tableaux as well as the fictional worlds dramatized in moving image demo form described above. At major trade shows, like ShowBiz Expo and the NAB, key transnational media corporations, such as Sony, Panasonic and Quantel are given acre-size display floors that dominate the center of vast convention complexes. Sony recently channeled its thousands of attendees through as many as fifteen different sub-areas for Sony products and services, with massive video walls. Stretched across numerous monitors, satisfied partners and clients gave pseudo-religious, personal testimonies of devotion and gratitude to Sony: for rewarding one's small business; for responding sensitively and intuitively to the product and supply needs of end-users; and for developing, as the video walls confessed, personal, 'long-term relationships'. In a proprietary Sony arena, that was so vast that attendees were given road-maps to navigate by, these ubiquitous video walls underscored to newcomers a motif recurrent in other transnational corporate pavilions and displays as well: far from focused on the bottom line, Sony's partners and clients, as it were, comprised a close and intimate 'family'; one based on self-less appearing care and mutual trust.

Professional solicitation rituals also function at a third level beyond the fictionalized or allegorical space of demo-tapes, and the therapeutic family-building space of the trade pavilion. Production trade conventions are so big, in fact, that entire 'television networks' – like Testa Communication's 'Convention TV' – have sprung up to 'cover' and cablecast the limitless activities of these important moments of vast group consensus in the field. Many attendees with next-morning hangovers might identify such networks as the purveyors of the rote trade show and booth information scrolling on the closed-circuit hotel room TVs at the Las Vegas Hilton, the Sands or the Sahara. Yet Convention TV's aims, and logistical footprint, are much more prime-time. Complete with 'dawn to dusk' coverage, ENG crews 'capturing late-breaking news' 'on the floor' ('events' usually triggered by a stack of pre-planned corporate press-releases), and a three-camera studio operation with bantering news readers and anchor persons, Convention TV stages contests and on-air give-aways that it organizes as participatory and interactive parts of 'the convention experience'. Enjoining editors of the trade publication *Post Magazine* and the NAB 'to serve as judges' at one convention, Convention TV promised that a 'winner would be announced live', on camera and on the floor, 'at the Tektronix corporation booth'. Making media events of this kind also provides

other opportunities to cover and report them. ‘And our crews were there to catch all of the excitement’, the network plugged in a lead-in to a later ‘news-cast’. The winner, now caught on camera, gave an ‘aw-shucks it was nothing’ explanation of his prized contribution. ‘We just shot what happens in an edit suite during a worst-case scenario....We literally had only an hour to put the thing together before we hit the FedEx delivery....We just squeaked it in.’ Convention TV then cut back to the studio anchor for the wrap-up: ‘And that’s our show for tonight. We’ll be back tomorrow with a special highlight edition. I’m....Thanks for watching.’

These examples show just how focused trade groups are in cultivating what they consider to be essential forms of solicitation, networking and professional ‘hooking-up’. First, fictionalized and allegorical demo-tapes ‘project’ professional viewers into hypothetical scenarios that establish the high stakes involved in successfully building and managing human relations in the work world. Second, exposition pavilions provide what I would term ambient and ubiquitous media commentaries that narrate a potential buyer as he or she navigates the maze of sub-products within each corporate acre of the mother-brand – and this ambient narration is typically done in ‘real time’ via audio or video walls that electronically augment physical space. Third, on an even broader topographic level, convention television networks script, stage and then report and interpret the entire experience as news. The hypothetical ‘what-if’ future state of the demo-tape, the ‘here-and-now’ augmented present state of the pavilion, and the ‘there-and-then’ network mapping of the trade cohort’s recent past, therefore, together provide an over-determined temporal heuristic. These deep textual and ritual forms, that is, attempt to underscore the (vested) ‘meanings’ and ‘insights’ of the convention experience – along with the state of the production industry – in future, present and past tenses. In this sense, these conventions are not merely grand industrial singles bars, or personal columns, for corporate players with precarious profit margins or, worse, takeover prone debt. Yes, organizers stage and facilitate vast, shared trade events as necessary mixers for professionals who need to network and schmooze, but the deep texts and rituals that circulate in these spaces do something far more. As personalized guide books, they interpret and chart the cognitive meanings, the social significance and the economic logic of these trade spaces even as the practitioners walk the vast and disorientating physical floors of the exposition halls.

Cultivation rituals/private-public space

The film, television and digital media industries are characterized by an extreme stratification and division of labor, a pyramidal, top-down management structure, and winner-takes all business plans. Yet many of the favored industrial rituals act blind to the group-based contestation that inherently defines the production enterprise. Indeed, many deep texts and socio-professional rituals work (sometimes incessantly) to promote an antithetical idea: that the industry

is collaborative, personal and humane. To cultivate this perception, the industry makes an over-determined effort in press releases and trade publications to underscore the many critical 'private' moments and 'interpersonal' spaces that drive effective film/TV producing and content development. A second set of critical industrial practices work to bring those important moments of privacy 'out into the daylight', in enabling, social gestures ostensibly intended to 'help' others in the field. Given this impulse to make the private-public shows that the appetite for 'behind-the-scenes' information and 'secrets' is not unique to fandoms, gossip columnists, *Entertainment Weekly* or show-biz reports broadcast on *Access Hollywood*. Rather, the same appetite for 'useful' trade and career secrets circulates in the professional sphere, in the form of semi-public panels on 'how to make it in the industry', and in various mentoring initiatives and apprenticeship schemes.

Many experts and seasoned veterans in Hollywood, for example, frequently explain success with all of the rhetorical tools and themes that a motivational speaker or revivalist might use. 'Integrity', 'humanity', 'dedication', 'self-sacrifice', 'face-time' and 'personal vision' are all repeatedly lauded (in public rhetoric at least) as keys to getting ahead. Even those 'players' who might be infamous for years of budget-busting excess, bad-bet developments, derailed productions, colleague back-stabbing and corporate 'exit strategies' due to 'irreconcilable creative differences' regularly pose in public, oddly enough, as altruistic mentors and facilitators. Those offering 'to give something back' to the field, that is, frequently posture (or are publicly packaged) as seasoned veterans, guiding hands, wise sages and noble moralists. This acting-out (and demeanor overhaul) furthermore, frequently takes place in what might be termed 'half-way spaces' that exist between the private and the public spheres of the professional: guild halls, film festivals, cinematheque retrospectives, film/TV museums, summits and panels, industry conventions, trade shows and universities. Even a cursory glance at the material, physical barriers erected around the entertainment industry in Los Angeles (fortress-like studio walls, security details, body guards and cul-de-sacs) makes it imminently clear the extent to which business interactions are highly proprietary and bunkered away from those on 'the outside' by design. Cultivation rituals and mentoring activities in these half-way spaces, ironically, often pretend to bring the heretofore hidden secrets of the bunkered practitioner out into the light of day.

The NATPE Convention in New Orleans in 2000 employed a diverse range of intermediate spaces in which private workings from the highest levels of industry were 'performed' as semi-public events. These staged, self-disclosures (panels, keynotes and special events) were presented at the city's convention center and hotels, and were covered by the trade press, but could be seen and heard only by registered, fee-paying, professionals and buyers from the field. The keynote presentation by the organization's chairman provides some context for this process. The syndicated television producing and selling industry that NATPE represents had entered a period of great crisis and instability before the

convention. This state of affairs was caused in part by the impact of new technologies, newly cut-throat competition, government de-regulation and threats by many of the major syndication studios (who now openly questioned the value of the long-standing association) to pull out of NATPE altogether, in order to go it alone. Yet one would never have suspected this level of contention and business chaos based on the suave and comforting appeals to attendees in the audience by NATPE's chairman, or the rousing cheers that answered him when he stepped through what was essentially a multimedia pep rally for the state of television at the dawn of the new millennium. After an introduction, the curtains parted, the lights dimmed and a hi-resolution, wide-screen video un-spooled. As a rapid-fire montage of clips represented the history of the United States, a gray-haired African-American actor spoke with nostalgia:

I was there when Dr. [Martin Luther] King shared his Dream with the world...and I was there when Mark McGuire broke the home run record....Yep, I've seen a lot in my day. Thanks to television, of course.⁹

When the lights faded up, the chairman surmised, 'We think this PSA says it best'. He then vocally repeated the final graphic of the spot, 'Television: The World's Best View', and the syndicators in the audience – almost entirely white, male executives – roared approval. Now, this high-production value spot by the trade organization appeared a few weeks after the NAACP and other civil rights organizations had attacked the television industry, in press conferences and policy documents, for its exclusionary racial practices and for making programming almost entirely 'white'. It was not clear whether the nostalgic tear-jerker on the screen worked in this room because the executives in the audience longed for simpler and more stable times in television, or because they feared for the impact of yet another broadside (this one racial) against an already faltering industry. Yet this production was more than just a Geertzian self-reflection, a demo to be circulated internally inside the production and syndication culture. The PA announced that the tape was 'available in standard NTSC, DTV, and, we're proud to say, in HDTV [applause]'. *Television: The World's Best View* was also given freely to attendees and broadcasters for use as a 'public service announcement' to air back at their home stations. Such a transformation, from a demo (of the industry speaking to itself) to a PSA (of the industry allowing the lay public to hear the industry speaking to itself) carried both internal and external benefits. On one register, the deep text serves to calm self-doubts about the possibility of exclusionary and regressive practices; on another register, as a quasi-public text, the spot intends to underscore the long-term value of the trade organization's commitment to a race-free logic of the 'human spirit'. The meanings of deep texts are not fixed. They change according to the industrial, regulatory and cultural spaces in which they are allowed to circulate.

While most professionals in the various production cultures will usually pose as ‘insiders’ (whether or not they are), group marketing events like NATPE and the NAB are odd in that they offer opportunities for a large mass of attending ‘insiders’ to role-play as ‘outsiders’ or as aspirants to the field. One striking example of this impulse to theatricalize the intensely private sphere of the practitioner – and to re-segregate the field into graded categories along an insider-outsider spectrum – is something called the ‘Pitchfest’. At the NATPE Convention 2000, between 800 and 1,000 participants and attendees (professional program producers and buyers) served as ‘audience members’ in the syndication association’s annual Pitchfest. They watched as other producer/buyer attendees, ‘chosen randomly’, were asked to ‘come-on-down’ in front of the audience to pitch proposed projects (mostly television series) to heavy-hitter talent agents from CAA, Universal and the William Morris Agency.

After each number was called, shrieking and ecstatic independent producers came down to demo their pitching abilities on an elevated stage that looked not unlike the game show *Wheel of Fortune*. A large time-clock to the left marked down the few seconds each pitcher had to present their projects to a series of three Hollywood agents, who sat, chair-bound with dark suits and clipboards, to the right. The aspiring producers were given three minutes to make the hard sell (one minute to summarize the project; one minute to answer questions from the agents; and one minute to take suggestions about how to improve the project and presentation). Those that faltered, or fell far short of expectations were ‘gonged’ prematurely off of the stage by the agents. Pitcher no. 48, an African-American producer called Sabrina Lamb, uncorked what was to be a winning pitch for a show entitled *Kahlalu and Cornbread*. She began by singing and altering an old stand-by: ‘Day-Oh, day ay ay-Oh. My TV show needs a network home.’ Lamb cut from the lyrics then hollered ‘Kahlaluuuuu and Cornbread’ and licked her fingers emphatically, ‘umh, umh, umh’. She then sketched out the plot summary in short order:

A half-hour romantic comedy set in Brooklyn. It’s *I Love Lucy* meets *Ally McBeal* with Caribbean seasoning. [Audience howls.] *Kahlalu and Cornbread* is a story of Kim – a small-town southern gal and her adventures in the big city. Where she takes on life, love and law school. She gets a job in the Caribbean restaurant where she forms a love-hate relationship with the boss, turns-off the Law School Dean, and eats...bull...penis...soup! It’s [as if hollering from the fields] *Kahlalu and Cornbread*

With the audience in an uproar, and the emcee warning ‘that’s one minute!’, the agents then jumped in with attempted witticisms (‘What does he eat in the next episode?’) and suggestions for improving the pitch. ‘Q: What network? A: NBC, 8:00 o’clock, Thursday night.’ More applause. ‘Who do you see in the

lead? A: Lauren Hill and Chris Rock!’ Agent: ‘If you get Lauren Hill and Chris Rock, you’ll have a bidding war [pointing to himself and the other agents on stage] between Endeavor, CAA and William Morris.’

Winners were promised a trip to Hollywood, face-time with studio and network executives and the chance pitch their show and see it to developed for prime-time. Yet, after a hard day of selling on the convention floor, there were cracks in the general euphoria and adrenaline in the room. Although the names of CAA and William Morris were tossed around conspicuously, the agents themselves were not household names. The power and ostensible experience of the white-men-judging-in-dark-suits was sometimes suspect as well. One agent compared the uniqueness of pitch to the many that he had heard ‘over the years’ – a career which turned out, oddly enough, to be a mere two years as an agent. Many of the pitchers, in fact, seemed to have had more years of experience in the media than the agents, even if that experience may have been in the lower castes: independent production or regional broadcasting. Yet the aura of, and lure of access to, ‘Hollywood’ bewitched even these seasoned professionals, who at times appeared as no more than desperate outsiders. The fragile nature of this façade, based on an artificial cultural geography, finally began to break as the emcee and judges paused to allow last year’s winner to appear on stage. Intended to underscore the substantial and valuable nature of her experience in Hollywood, last year’s winner instead drifted off into a rambling litany to do with the ways that her trip had actually been a failure. Her meetings were not with real players, her pitches were not bought, and her winning project from last year’s Pitchfest was never developed. All of the participants on stage smiled in denial. Last year’s winning malcontent was eventually pulled from the stage, and the ecstasy of pitches and possible ‘discoveries’ continued unabated. Even if the actual results of this large group performance by professionals accomplished little in the way of actual or new TV programming, the Pitchfest itself clearly fulfilled an important and affirming symbolic function for the trade organization. Identities and hierarchies were broached and bartered out in the ‘open’ in a way that reaffirmed a long-standing cultural geography in the United States; one that places Hollywood in the big leagues, and broadcasters in the heartland as the farm system for talent.

As with the ‘how to make it’ events and semi-public panels intended to mentor new-comers, public pitchfests (even for professionals) construe the powerful in moments most candid. These ‘super agents’ and judges are, apparently, merely sensitive and caring lay colleagues willing to share secrets, and provide the kind of ‘face-time’ never possible in the overpopulated, agent-scarce, world of Studio City and Hollywood. But all of this pitching, mentoring and sharing of secrets also functions like gossip traditionally has in neighborhoods. It functions, that is, as a way to create solidarity, community and a (perhaps false) sense of empowerment through ‘insider’ trade association and knowledge about ‘how things are really done’.

Maintenance rituals/spaces

To get to and participate in the solicitation and cultivation rituals found at industry conventions like NATPE and NAB described above, many media practitioners journey from their regional offices to such places as Las Vegas or New Orleans. Once business relationships are solicited and initiated, the strategic importance of repeat business means that large media corporations must work hard to create the spaces and social interactions necessary to 'maintain' those clients. These spaces for relationship maintenance are as important for 'below-the-line' personnel as for executives. Sony Broadcast regularly stages subsidiary events around larger trade conventions for this purpose. At NAB in Las Vegas, Sony invited camera operators and potential Sony buyers to participate in an annual retreat and 'shoot-out'. These activities were filmed one year, and then edited into promotional videos that were circulated the following year at NAB.¹⁰ One result was a demo-tape for Sony's new 'Betacam PVW-537' broadcast ENG camera, that looked (sans Clint Eastwood) and sounded (complete with haunting whistling) earnestly like a spaghetti western directed by Sergio Leone. A deep, gravelly male voice spoke the rugged poetry of camera-operator bonding, over long shots of the western landscape:

Below the solitude of the last spring snow...Down through the rugged
canyons carved by time...Came men and women of a special breed.
Known to shoot first and ask questions later, they came for something
wild – and they found it – in Las Vegas!

The video then cuts to the bright lights of Vegas, as limo-borne cameramen (using the PVW-537, of course) cut through the city-scape at night. This segment ends with soft-core images of screaming, bikini-clad women shooting through nearby waterslides as a keyed graphic zooms toward the viewer: 'Going Wild in Las Vegas: The PVW-537.' Littered throughout the technical discussion of the new camera's features that follows, are other examples of what these technicians might call 'eye candy'. The net effect of the tape, however, is to show Sony benevolently inviting regional cameramen to Beta-test their latest cutting-edge rig from helicopters, limos and horses provided at the shoot-out and retreat. The promotional video as a whole, however, suggests that male bonding and partying (with those you share a technical affinity) is as important to maintaining user-ship, as are any purely technical descriptions of product. *Going Wild in Las Vegas* provides a troubling image of the aggressive (rugged, tough, mastery) and masculinist (moving, mounting, going wild) ideology of what is apparently an ideal camera operator in the business and marketing plans of multinational corporation Sony.

Other ritual spaces used by practitioners, however, reverse this spatial dynamic and direction of travel. Several conventional practices, that is, have Muhammad (the networks) 'going to the mountain' (the business affiliates) rather than vice versa. Three highly publicized industrial 'pilgrimages' help the

networks maintain their precarious relationships with key partners – advertisers, the press and the affiliates respectively. The annual May preview and presentation of the new Fall programming season to advertising agencies in New York – called ‘up-fronts’ – has become an obligatory high-point and organizational target in the calendar for each of the six major television networks. Shortly after the up-fronts, and then later in the year at syndication markets, the networks reach out to affiliates and independent stations in meetings intended to secure local broadcasts for the coming year. Finally, each December in Pasadena the television industry reaches out to provide ‘inside’ access to the activities and programming strategies of the major networks. These television critics’ meetings provide human contact and access to new shows, but they can also touch the lives and stroke the egos of the press. Television journalists are a cadre that has always had an uneasy relationship with the networks and the studios. Critics and reviewers are sanctioned as journalists to cull and dredge through both the good and the bad of programming during the year. Yet they are very much dependent on the studios and networks to gain access to the very stars, shows and personnel that make this back-story possible. Critics’ meetings serve the networks, therefore, as a carrot, rather than a stick, an incentive used to cultivate a climate conducive to positive critical reception.

In some ways, these journeys out of the executive suites and studio walls in Hollywood and Century City are faux-pilgrimages – intended to symbolically honor the subjugated (those dependent on the Hollywood pipeline). With affiliate anxiety over the benefits of affiliation always in doubt; with fickle critics in position to financially kill or renew series; and with advertisers always threatening to jump ship to other networks and media forms when superior ratings are found elsewhere – these pilgrimages are really attempts at reconciliation. The success of the network ‘family’ depends upon effectively communicating concern for the business associates and advertisers normally dispersed across the country. While press conferences are part and parcel of these maintenance rituals, so too are a graded, hierarchical system of parties. UPN, for example, faced with precipitously declining viewership only a few years into its launch as a network (and trade rumors about the job insecurities of UPN executives Valentine and Nunan), worked overtime at NATPE 2000 to keep its local broadcasters on-board for the coming season. UPN threw a lavish invitation-only party for its affiliates and partners, with ample catering and an exclusive concert performed by the group B-52s. Higher floors in the Hilton that week hosted even more exclusive network and corporate parties. Lower floors and suites hosted cash bars and generic and obligatory association receptions sponsored by those less anxious to seek reconciliation or to cultivate and maintain new business relationships. The harsh economic situation in the syndication industry became so bad by January 2002, that all of the major Los Angeles studios (Columbia Tri-Star, Paramount, etc.) had pulled out of the NATPE convention floor entirely, ‘as cost-saving measures’. What they booked, instead, were entire floors and suites in nearby luxury hotels. In this way, the majors

shifted sales away from the leveled, democratic chaos and the bazaar-like nature of a convention-floor television market. They now focused on more personal forms of relationship-building, deployed perks and managed the graded hierarchies inherent in more exclusive parties, meetings and receptions. From a political-economic perspective, these changes in industrial and marketing behavior have come alongside increasing corporate conglomeration that has forced many independent stations and 'mom-and-pop' syndicators out of business. The trade culture shift – from the more democratic interactions of a convention floor (a horizontal scheme based on multiple points of access) to the individuated solicitations of the hotel suites (a vertical scheme based on exclusivity) – mirrors an ongoing constriction of diversity, competition and content in the syndication industry as a whole.

Monitoring rituals/spaces

The solicitation, cultivation and maintenance rituals described above all work in public relations to build consensus, solidarity and a sense of commonality, and by so doing cover over the anxieties that threaten productive corporate relations. Other workaday rituals in television, however, work in antithetical ways by producing and instilling anxiety in the community of production professionals. The process of 'giving notes' occurs when an executive or producers sends suggestions to directors or writers about how to 'improve' the direction of an ongoing project, program or series. While such incursions by 'the suits' into the aesthetic domain rankle most directors, the process has a far more fundamental function. The now ubiquitous ritual of giving notes underscores the sense that the proprietary and private world of the studio and soundstage is actually very much in doubt; monitored as it is daily by an amorphous but ever expanding ensemble of seldom seen but always present producers, executives and their assistants. Production personnel internalize this sense of being watched, much as the prisoners of Bentham's 'panopticon' are disciplined by the continual threat (real or imagined) of always being under surveillance; a sense that many inmates internalize. Curse the notes if you will, but you are being watched and evaluated.

Other monitoring rituals always keep the production space and enterprise from stasis and balance. Many independent program productions involve the daily reconciliation of costs spent versus projected budget estimates. The obligatory production and post-production meetings during works-in-progress also inculcate the personnel with the sense that the project is always 'incremental'; that their future is always tied to successfully meeting projected benchmarks throughout the shooting schedule. Most independent program productions also contractually tie financial disbursements to the necessary approval of each major stage in the production by executive producers, or studios. Television ratings, like box-office, have also become an ever-present monitoring ritual – terra firma for all competitors, for accurate viewing numbers and demographics

are the basis for rationalizing the success or failure of a show or series. For this reason, endless ways are devised to spike or hypo ratings across the country. The high season for this kind of ritual interchange occurs three times a year during 'sweeps weeks', where viewer numbers are codified as the basis for ad rates for the months that follow.

Other monitoring rituals spin out from these kinds of ever-present forms of ritualized surveillance. Each May and June, after the Fall season has been unveiled for advertisers and affiliates, bets are taken on which network programming heads will roll first. This sense of an 'executive revolving door' ritual further underscores that fact that despite all of the over-determined attempts to build consensus among industrial participants, the daily spaces of the production and producing worlds are characterized by great instabilities and anxieties about duration of employment. Inculcating this impending sense of inevitable temporariness works perfectly to legitimize the vast system of 'contract' rather than employee labor that has come to be known as the Hollywoodization of North American business.

Spatially, monitoring rituals unsettle the ostensibly private and proprietary nature of studio and production space. Studio and soundstage walls evoke walled off privacy. But note giving, ratings, endless in-progress production meetings, daily budget reconciliations, incremental production funding and disbursement, and the executive revolving door all betray just how 'porous' those proprietary walls are. This porosity – providing a one-way vantage point to those controlling both the bottom-line and the possibility of project green-lighting – serves to discipline the community of production in cost-effective ways.

While maintenance rituals appear to extend the private and proprietary executive suites out into a semi-public space for purposes of affiliate or client reconciliation, monitoring rituals tend to keep the possibility of reconciliation always in doubt. The complicated network of contract labor that defines Hollywood knows just how precarious their futures are and will be.

Contestation celebrations/spaces

All of the industrial ritual spaces examined thus far can be understood by their placement within a model of socio-professional formation and affinity. That is, they articulate fundamental tensions between industrial forces of consensus, commonality and inclusion, on the one hand; or, they serve as industrial forces of dissensus, instability and exclusion, on the other. As contentious and divisive industries, broadcasting and cable in the age of digital and deregulation count the pre-merger life-spans of many corporate players in months and years rather than decades. It is within this climate of ever-increasing instability (for both career and corporation) that regularized, annual trade or industrial gatherings somehow serve to celebrate a common purpose and identity.

With over 110,000 participants annually, the NAB convention in Las Vegas discussed thus far looks like a grand, group hand-holding exercise. In actual

fact, behind all of the consensual hype about consolidation and ‘convergence’, the NAB is actually a brutal marketplace, peopled by thousands of vendors, companies and manufacturers intent on eclipsing and/or bankrupting their competitors. Early adopters battle late adopters. Patent holders threaten and selectively licence to highest bidders. Because of its legion of product models, complimentary gifts, demos, special effects and hype, the NAB might be construed, à la Bakhtin, as a ‘carnavalesque’ moment of celebration. Yet the smiling corporate competitors stand side by side and hawk damning theorizations about enemy technologies and the shortsighted plans and practices of competitors. Together these workaday barbs and diatribes comprise a set of behaviors that makes the convention more like a bloodletting coliseum than a carnival. The NAB liberally expends public relations energy leading the cheers of an industry by announcing, year in and year out, that it is helping to forge a common future. In fact, this rote public relations optimism of the NAB about a common industry, seldom conceals the yearly absence of many former industrial players that went bankrupt, were hostilely taken-over, or simply made obsolescent.

The trade media infrastructure covering such shows, helps provide a sense of rationality, fairness and order, thereby suggesting that even technical competitiveness helps forge a common future. The studio anchors of Convention TV, for example, repeatedly and regularly reassert their ‘expertise’ and ‘objectivity’ between stories from the floor: ‘Our reporters and production personnel are experienced professionals. Bringing you the news with integrity. Keeping you informed and up-to-date.’¹¹

This kind of rhetoric appears to level the field fairly, as the networks cover the latest ‘digital effects’, ‘curl packages’ and ‘corner-pinning’ graphic technologies, but as formal and scientific – rather than proprietary – breakthroughs in the field. Yet Convention TV’s on-air tactic of constantly reasserting its ‘integrity’ tends to have the same impact as a used-car salesman who feels the need to say repeatedly that he is honest, and that there is no need to worry, to an anxious or suspect buyer. The blatant promotional and marketing motifs that spike the network’s flow of convention news, further places the façade of a level playing field, of agreeable affinity, and of common cause in question.

Whereas as the NAB serves to stage, celebrate and civilize the grand contestation between equipment and technology firms, the NATPE market serves to celebrate and civilize the contestation between warring first-run syndicators, buyers and broadcasters, for both domestic and foreign markets. Behind the glitz, models, cameo appearances at the show by prime-time stars like David Hasselhoff from *Baywatch*, or Ray Romano from *Everybody Loves Raymond*, or Pamela Anderson from *VIP*, lies the ulcer-inducing high-stakes game of ‘clearing’ enough broadcast markets to successfully launch or keep a show the following year. File footage from past conventions show just how contentious this world under-the-surface is. Images of the ‘highly successful’ and ‘legendary’ syndicator Sandy Frank, at work in a market pavilion, show

him barking out orders at his frantic assistants to get buyers and program reps 'here, immediately!'¹² Exasperated station buyers describe how they would finally 'cave-in' to Frank because he was so physically aggressive and 'obnoxious'. A younger Frank, in his prime, is shown with his hands around the neck of a startled buyer, threatening to strangle him. His retorts, cockily, to an interviewer: 'It's trench warfare out there (on the sales floor). It's either kill or be killed...[Frank physically grabs a buyer by the throat]...So I go for the jugular vein, like this!' This celebration of kill-or-be-killed sales militarism, might simply be explained as a result of one syndicator's self-promotion as an abrasive personality. But other examples of file footage from 1994 show the kinds of institutional 'cracks' that tend to break open when a single trade organization tries to embrace segments of the industry that are clearly at odds with each other. One local station buyer goes ballistic in a tirade directed at the encroachments of a major syndicator from Los Angeles: 'I'm sick and tired of you coming in here and taking over my business. You are in the supply business, and I'm in the broadcasting business. Don't barter away advertising slots in the shows I buy. That's my business.'¹³

Although trade panels usually include a range of vested interests, staged together to show common cause. This volatile panel, however, could not possibly mediate the fundamental differences in roles. In the past, syndicators sold first-run series to local stations, which then were allowed to sell advertising time in the show to recoup their profits. At this point in history, syndicated program producers themselves had begun to preemptively sell some of the spots in advance, well before shows were ever delivered to local broadcasters. By encroaching on a client's turf in this way, sellers were not simply raking-off someone else's profits in advance, they were seen (by broadcasters) to be stabbing their loyal long-standing 'partners' in the back. File footage from the market shows how much NATPE acknowledges this contestation and vitriol. Yet the organization also promotes something that is more crucial to the effective operations of any 'fair market' – a more orderly image of rule-governed, proficiency, equity and rationality.

With the future of first-run television syndication increasingly in question, the National Association of Television Program Executives produced a feature-length video, entitled *The Legends of Syndication*, in 2000 to help orient newcomers to the syndication industry, to explain the logic and practices of syndication, and to provide an oral history of the many (now aging) 'stars' of syndicated selling. More than simply a history of the 'traveling salesmen' who go from independent station to independent station to sell first-run syndicated shows, *Legends* provides particularly good insights into the ethos and self-perceptions of syndicated personnel. Story after story focuses on hardships of the early days. Old-timers note that 'long before video projectors and power point presentations', they had to lug '100s of pounds of heavy 16mm projectors and reels' in order to make a broadcast sale. Veterans speak of vast rural distances covered, and hard-sells made despite excessive evidence of sweat and

fatigue from the obligatory AV gear, which they carried into everything from formal pitches at TV stations to presentations made on 'dairy farms' to station owners who lived there. Executives reminisce about their original sales territories (southern Indiana, Ohio, rural Nebraska) in a montage of visual maps of those remote areas which slide through the image. One ex-salesman, after having lied about not being underage, boasts of braving a blizzard by foot in order to get to the first sale of his career. A succession of syndicators in the production offer their best anecdotes, of missed appointments, odd coincidences and quirky behaviors by competitors and clients.

The themes and motifs in this material create a composite self-portrait of these practitioners, as hardy, tough-traveling, confident and aggressive competitors. Pioneers who stuck with the task long enough to have advanced to executive positions in management and entertainment. The below-the-line folks in Sony's shoot-out initiative described above celebrated a tough form of raw masculinity as a foundation for proficient camerawork. And this is perhaps logical, given that film/video field production is physical labor. But these (now) above-the-line syndication executives also create a self-portrait with many of the same sorts of traits. Viewers might consider programming to be the result of an abstract sequence of decisions, but behind television (according to these archival tapes and oral histories by practitioners) lies physical and emotional struggle, doubts and fortitude. Perhaps the most gripping scenes on *Legends* involve a dramatization and re-creation of the abduction, robbery and near murder of one syndicated salesman. The segment is shot in the best tradition of reality television (it is a dead-on clone of *America's Most Wanted*) – complete with look-alike actors, fake hand-held cameras, slow-motion footage, a dissonant synth track. The segment includes repeated loops of the criminal reenactment, all of which are inter-cut with the pensive but knowing headshots of the sales veteran telling his story. The story arc builds to a climax, and viewers learn that the salesman proved so persuasive to the abductors (he offered to exchange his credit cards for cash if they took him back in his hotel room), that he was spared the fate of several previous victims who had been abducted and killed a few days earlier on these same roads in Ohio. The message of this reenactment, made by practitioners for practitioners, was that one syndicator was so good at persuasion and selling that he convinced even his 'hijackers' not to kill him. So goes the moral about a syndicator with (as the tape by practitioners for practitioners terms it) 'with nerves of steel'.

Monitoring rituals betray the ostensibly walled and proprietary film/TV production worlds as, in actuality, 'faux-private spheres'. Competitive celebratory rituals like NAB and NATPE, by contrast, transform the semi-privacy of a gated trade show into a 'faux-public sphere'. The Las Vegas and New Orleans convention events might look like the bracketed-off, in-between border spaces of Bakhtin's 'carnavalesque' (i.e, the NAB like Mardi Gras) or of Victor Turner's liminal rituals (NATPE like a Papuan sing-sing). In actuality, however, these huge socio-professional events are contestatory tournament sites, staged in artificially

walled off and sequestered public spheres. In competitive, celebratory rituals like these, corporations drag out their proprietary content, technologies and vaporware in order to hype or overwhelm the competition into genre, standards or programming obsolescence.

Conjugal celebrations

In the contemporary, de-regulated mediascape, corporate conglomeration has increased and accelerated in the last ten years. The original promise of the 500 multi-channel market was that diversity of programming would guarantee diversity of viewpoint, opinion and aesthetic taste. It was also to have provided for a far more democratic landscape for media consumption. The scores of new corporate players that entered the growing multichannel market since the early 1980s, however, have re-aggregated into but six giant multinationals. This renewed acceptance of (or appetite for) vertical integration has been fueled by a set of broad cultural and political changes. But it has also been sanctioned and symbolically legitimized through the recurrent staging of industrial 'conjugal celebrations'. Mergers are announced and pitched to the trades as synergistic 'win-win' marriages between lonely but growth-hungry corporate components. The Time-Warner/AOL merger, for example, was self-consciously pitched by the mega-corporations as a 'marriage' of two diverse but now eager partners: the geek-caricatured hi-tech boy's club of AOL with the Hollywood insider pretense of Time-Warner. Merging CEO's posed in culture-specific clothing (at press conferences, Time-Warner executives donned the shirt-sleeve, casual look of computer culture; while AOL execs adopted the business attire of the film industry). The trades then mapped out the intermingling of practitioner cultures that had been set in motion. This same critical interpretation (the marriage of strange bedfellows motif) ran through the trades when financially ailing Yahoo.com snagged Hollywood executive and 'insider' Terry Simel. Simel left the major Los Angeles studio for the bay area to serve as Yahoo's suitor and savior (he was deemed a master of management, well versed in old media, rather than dot.com, wisdom) in April 2001. By the time the grand Time-Warner/AOL conglomerate began to drag itself down in the financial markets in 2002, and angry stock-holders asked for the heads of the executives, the trades invoked the darker side of the conjugal paradigm. These circumstances had now become contentious 'divorce' proceedings. The failed corporate marriage (according to financial analyst Merrill Lynch, which had earlier hyped the marriage), now brought the earlier myth of broadband convergence to a premature and sorry end.

Like press conferences that announce and justify corporate mergers, award shows by the various professional organizations and guilds also create spaces of industrial cohabitation. That is, award shows bring together in the same giant space (which is usually televised) long-standing sparring partners who suspend their competitive relations or who leave aside their 'irreconcilable differences'

to participate in a common event. Regardless of what various professional production communities are like in real life, conjugal celebrations serve to spotlight the existence of bounded 'communities' comprised of practitioners. Through television, these same industries and professional groups usually grant lay audiences a keyhole view of the community. Even if it is a virtual stage on which the televisual eye gazes, the net effect is of a singular monolith or unity that can cheerfully laud its elites. Unlike contestory celebrations (staged for practitioners by practitioners), conjugal celebrations and awards events over-produce an aura of consensus for a broader, non-professional public. This staging for a popular or lay consciousness, shows the industry to be extending its borders out into culture. But it also shows just how well the industry controls access to those borderlands – through limited electronic keyholes to the event-worlds, via show business reports, etc. Less focused on exclusion or on streamlining the marketplace, conjugal celebrations theatricalize industrial practice for the public, and attempt to promote 'quality', 'vision' and common cause as industry-wide business principles.

Therapeutic rituals/spaces

A series of factors – contract labor abuses, long hours, technical obsolescence, alienation from factory-like production conditions and ageism – have taken their toll on perceptions of media management practice. As a result, new types of business consultants have begun bringing into corporate institutions, practices and exercises that are more 'therapeutic' in nature. A concern with human and career development has become almost as important as product development, at least for some companies that consider themselves progressive. Retreats, team-building workshops and even sabbaticals have emerged on the radar of management experts, although many would still voice the sentiments of the John Travolta character in the film *Come On, Trust Us*: 'I'm not sure what a retreat is....I think it's a religious thing.'¹⁴ The Las Vegas 'shoot-out', cited earlier, included a 'retreat' where camera operators from around the country were brought together to mix and mingle in a rugged wilderness setting. But retreats are also offered for executives, and not just technicians; and are sponsored by corporate employers, and not just third-party vendors, like Sony.

From a structural and conceptual point of view, retreats promise above-the-line and producer personnel the chance to 'escape' the claustrophobic confines of the offices and executive suites in Los Angeles and Century City in favor of the group sessions, mud-baths and clear air of, say, Palm Springs. Retreats also presuppose and strategize how to allow media players or professionals (in standard parlance) to 'step-outside-of-the box', to 'brainstorm' and to make creative decisions; all of which function as industrial allegories for psychologistic concepts like 'finding ones inner child'. A less obvious goal or result is that retreats (which sometimes are synonymous with 'team-building exercises') also provide an apparent escape from the contentious 'division of labor' that under-girds most

studios and soundstages. By turning a cadre of office-bound executives and producers into participants in a group therapy session, media corporations also intend to create an industrial space that allows for intimacy and re-birth. Retreats work, obviously, in a manner far less sinister appearing than the panopticon-effect attending the monitoring rituals discussed earlier. While monitoring rituals constantly underscore the presence or possibility of surveillance, therapeutic rituals are far more deceptive. For while the official demeanor of a retreat is enabling, the discussions and brainstorming that take place in a retreat also proceed under effaced forms of surveillance or documentation. The therapeutic spaces of retreats look far more benign than the conventional practices of note-giving. But both ritual forms always circulate within the constraints of the corporation gaze and/or its sponsorship. Compared to the corporate retreat, dealing with responding to network 'notes' probably simply produces more overt forms of cynicism and on-set bonding than it does a tan. One set of spatial practices is organized on a top-down model (note-giving); the other on a ground-up model (retreats and team-building exercises). Both allow commercial organizations to process additional information in a way that keeps the company more flexible (or more unstable) in the face of change.

Retrospective memorial/space

Other ritual spaces regularly staged by practitioners include the 'homage' or 'retrospective memorial'. At NATPE 2000, the dying but 'golden age' patriarch, Sid Caesar, was feted in the market's keynote event. With an elaborately edited, large-screen montage, with testimonials, and then standing ovation, the association pitched Caesar as if he was the single most important figure in television history. Immediately following this near-religious homage to a visionary patriarch, the event organizers called out (and thus linked him to) what NATPE considered to be today's front-line players in contemporary television: Bill Maher, host of *Politically Incorrect*, Robin Givens, Jerry Springer and a host of also-rans from the very margins of early prime-time and daytime television. This group was marshaled on-stage to discuss the current state of television. But in updating the audience as to how television had changed since its golden age, one thing became painfully clear. With Jerry Springer and Bill Mahr ostensibly carrying on the tradition of Sid and the golden age, the current state of US television programming is, obviously, in big trouble. History is regularly 'performed' by institutions as a way of establishing credibility and legitimacy. The 'exhibitionist history' performed with a straight face here, worked to grossly 'over-produce' the trade association's significance.¹⁵ By retrospectively attaching and glomming the troubled syndication association on to an earlier period of high-consensus, the organization was actually revealing its weakness and instability. By 2000 the US television syndication business was in trouble. To counter such troubles,

the institutions that represent professional media cultures work hard to establish their own distinctive 'genesis narratives'. Intended to boost member morale and justify present directions, however, this particular re-creation of history and syndication's genesis (including Sid Cesar's disoriented early morning talk, after the red-eye flight from LA), made it painfully clear just how far syndication had fallen from live anthology drama; and how far the syndicated sellers of *Baywatch*, Jerry Springer and Judge Judy, gathered in Louisiana, were from New York or Los Angeles.

Conclusion

A cultural geography of the production culture cannot be charted by reference to physical spaces alone. A rich and complex set of deep texts (made by practitioners for practitioners) circulates and helps orient users to the work-worlds and career spaces that workers confront. These deep texts are coexistent with the spaces themselves and serve as user-guides and road maps for practitioners. They also help rationalize the socio-professional rituals that inhabit and define production spaces. And this situation means that any effective topography of production must also include and integrate an analysis of the specific socio-professional rituals, events and interactions that are deployed in those spaces. A summary survey of the deep texts and industrial rituals described in this chapter reveal at least three areas in which the cultural significance of this geography can be noted:

(1) **Narrativization/war stories** Inevitably, industrial rituals in the production culture work by 'narrativizing' the context for rituals, meetings, conventions and networking. The narratives operative in deep texts establish idealized stories of the origin of various trade groups; they help to script group professional events that follow their circulation as texts; and they help practitioners to decipher trade events as they unfold. A cursory summary of the themes employed in these deep text narrativizations, show a systematic pattern of assertion and denial. Recurrent plot themes promote the idea that (a) the trade task is about creativity, when it is not; (b) the trade task is regionally or locally specific, when it is not; (c) the trade task is physical, muscular or masculine, when it is not; and (d) the trade task is about moral integrity and the human spirit, when it is not. These stand as textual themes – institutional self-portraits as it were – through which practitioners convince themselves about the significance of their work.

(2) **A taxonomy of social spaces** More than simply cognitive meditations that help build and maintain morale (which is an essential component for career longevity in any craft), these narrative contexts and arcs help demarcate a graded taxonomy of social spaces. This taxonomy can be placed on an institutional map of the production culture, comprised of concentric rings, whose boundaries are meticulously managed. These concentric zones can be summarized (from the innermost region to the outermost border) as follows:

- The highly *proprietary private sphere* of the pitch and the high-level development meeting; a studio/network inner-sanctum, as it were. To the:
- The *therapeutic private space* of the corporate retreat and the team-building workshop. To the:
- The *faux-private space of the workplace*, studio and soundstage, wherein constant discursive interventions (like note-giving and production meetings) by management create instability and anxiety through implied surveillance. To the:
- The *faux-public space*, or the *sequestered public sphere*, created at professional trade shows, conventions and meetings where ostensible contestation and celebration is staged for professionals in the community. To the:
- The *semi-public space* of advertiser up-fronts, fall preview meetings for affiliates, professional awards shows and press junkets where a place for access is extended to intermediaries for the public. Critics, journalists and television are allowed to ‘cover’ the industry in these highly controlled ways. These practices tend to sanction audience consumption from a specific, regulated vantage point. The public-nature of these ‘stages’ (ocular or virtual key-holes) is typically over-announced or over-marketed in public relations. The aura of consensus and perception of common cause that results frequently covers over severe contestation and dissent within the guild, the association or the trade organization in question.
- Finally, *contact zones for mentoring and recruitment*, emerge at moments in which those with ‘insider’ knowledge venture out to half-way spaces to share personal insights on ‘making it in the business’, ‘how the business works’, ‘how to pitch’, ‘how to take a meeting’ and ‘how to start a career’. These contact zones provide one of the few points of human contact, and promise to help aspirants achieve more effective ‘skill-sets’, but they exist at the furthestmost ring of the studio/network maze.

With the ‘insider-outsider’ binary as the central ideology marking these zones, *travel or movement* between zones emerge as the key moments – or demonstrations – of industrial performance and professional competencies. As a result, many of the deep-texts and socio-professional rituals examined in this chapter are in fact ‘primers’ on how to ‘cross-over’ the various concentric borders outlined above.

(3) **Reflexivity** Perhaps most interesting in these graded, proprietary zones of relative proprietorship and exclusivity is the fact that industrial culture works hard to symbolize and represent itself to itself by emulating and performing the kind and styles of ‘content’ that film and television audiences see at home or at the theater. Demo-tapes, trade show events, pitch-fests and other forms all show that technical and delivery communities also emulate on-screen ‘content’ cultures as well. In this way a practitioner’s competence (his or her accumulation of cultural and aesthetic capital) can be used to leverage projects, partner with affiliates and influence clients. Demos look like soap operas, or westerns, or film

noir. Pitch-fests cultivate stage presence, Stanislavski, and Aristotelean poetics. Video equipment manufacturers use ‘visits’ (real or virtual) by higher cinema auteurs like George Lucas to explain their engineering aims to production staff in the lower castes (industrials, commercial, infomercials). Corporations employ product models, modern art and eye-catching set designs to physically demonstrate technical performance. Spokespersons and heads of NATPE, the NAB and SMPTE pose in a, sometimes, awkward attempt to find a presentational style the mirrors the mission of their associations. In these ways, the private, off-screen, production and distribution communities create spaces for themselves in which they can masquerade as the (higher-caste) on-screen content worlds (in prime-time and theatrically) that they normally defer to and work for.

Through these practices, practitioners close ranks to weather change. By circulating highly reflexive forms among themselves, practitioners do not simply learn new things. They also work to convince – and to acknowledge to themselves – that their distinctive value to the industry lies in some unique specialty of their guild, or craft or trade association. This constant reaffirmation of trade distinction is more than just a turf battle. It helps market the relatively hidden guild, craft and proprietary worlds to various publics as unapproachable and unassailable. Just like ‘the industry’ as a whole. Socio-professional communities produce content spectacles for their own consumption, and organize semi-public spaces and events to manage that consumption. This tendency can at times evoke the quality of a secret society, one that possesses the alchemy that everyone else wants, but can’t ever quite get to. The graded industrial contact zones of the production culture, therefore, are not controlled lock-step by bunkered executives in studio sanctums. A large coalition of practitioner communities – held loosely together by a sense of willed affinity and an unstable economic climate – work together to guard their own turf as well as the key access points to adjacent zones. This boundary maintenance helps ensure that all comers – insiders, outsiders, apprentices, mentees and the curious public – have the proper deference and respect. Mystique and profits both depend upon the vigilant management of production space – and especially its borderlands.

Notes

- 1 *Feng Shui* is the ancient (and now modernized) Chinese art or way of organizing living space and architecture. *Feng Shui* focuses on designing a room or building according to the most optimal arrangement of life-forces (yin and yang, light and dark, directional orientations) that bear upon or permeate any space. *DV (Digital Video)* is a trade publication for digital cinematographers, editors and post-production artists. This article, authored by a ‘video systems designer’, seeks to help orient user-practitioners to design-of-space issues that are important but often overlooked in the daily work worlds of production companies (see Henage 2001).
- 2 Peter Guber is CEO of Mandalay Pictures in Los Angeles, and former President of Sony/Columbia Studios (Guber 2001).
- 3 This comment is from Arnold Rifkin, an agent, and formerly of CAA (Rifkin 2001).

- 4 Clifford Geertz discusses his studies of 'the understanding of understanding', or 'hermeneutics', in *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (Geertz 1983: 5, 10).
- 5 The ethnographic fieldwork for this chapter was done at a series of professional conferences and trade shows for various production groups. These included research at the following industry conventions: ShowBiz Expo, Los Angeles (1997), NAB, Las Vegas (2000), NATPE, New Orleans (2000), Siggraph (the professional society for computer graphics and animation) (2001), NAB, Las Vegas (2001), and SMPTE (Society for Motion Picture and Television Engineers), Pasadena (2002).
- 6 These studies of production space as a critical practice were presented in John Caldwell, 'Probe Technology, Push Programming, and the World: Boy's Geography Lessons' (Caldwell 1998).
- 7 'Below-the-line' refers, traditionally, to all of the crafts and trades that work on a film/video production, but that are not given credits 'above' or before the title of the film or program. 'Above-the-line' functions (producers, writers, directors) are credited before the title and are equivalent to the executive or management ranks in traditional industries.
- 8 Yes, 'Chris Carter', as in the name of the very successful show-runner and creator of the *X-Files* series; a designation that leaves no doubt as to the demo producers' model for emulation.
- 9 This PSA, produced in 2000 by NATPE, is titled *Television: The World's Best View*. I viewed the screening of the PSA at the event, and examined a BetacamSP version of the tape as the basis for the discussion above.
- 10 This promotional video from Sony Broadcast was entitled *Going Wild in Las Vegas: The PVW-537*, was produced in 1991, and distributed in the years that followed both at the NAB and through sales and regional operations of the Sony Corporation.
- 11 From Convention TV's 'off-air' videotape at the NAB convention. VHS, Testa Communications, 1995.
- 12 This market footage of Sandy Frank, from the 1980s, is included in 'The Legends of Syndication' video, compiled by NATPE in 2000.
- 13 This footage is from a panel on the syndication and 'barter' business, filmed at the NATPE conference in 1994.
- 14 *Come On, Trust Us* was produced and distributed in 2000.
- 15 The notion of 'exhibitionist history' is examined in *Televisionality*, while the theorization of the 'over-production of history' is found in Mimi White, 'Reliving the Body, Over and Over Again: Popular Memory in Homefront and I'll Fly Away' (White 1997).

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