

MIP @ SIECE

By Kevin Sanson

6-8 minutes

I recently presented at the Second Annual *Screen Industries in East-Central Europe Conference* (SIECE) hosted at Masaryk University in Brno, Czech Republic, on November 22-25. Panels coalesced around this year's organizing principle *Cultural Politics and Political Culture*, and examined the region's audiovisual production cultures in both historical and contemporary contexts.

For the first time, conference organizers also integrated a second event into each day's conference proceedings. *Theorizing Screenwriting Practice Workshop: An East-Central European Perspective* brought together scholars and writers to debate the shifting nature of screenwriting in the region's contemporary screen industries.





At the very least, then, the conference organizers—primarily a team of four from the Department of Film Studies and Audiovisual Culture at Masaryk—deserve unqualified commendation for seamlessly orchestrating what had to be a logistical nightmare: hosting two events scheduled over four days with nearly 50 scholars and writers traveling into Brno from various parts of Europe and the United States. At MIP, we can appreciate the pressures of pulling off a large-scale event with finite resources, and they made the process look effortless.

Behind-the-scenes ambition was coupled with an equally impressive agenda for the weekend’s discussions. Opening remarks made explicit what constituted the core concern for many presenters: the conference was formed with a mission to push scholarship on the region’s audiovisual industries into broader theoretical and methodological terrain. That is, the conference and the companion workshop were calls for scholars to branch out beyond common epistemological frameworks, like the region’s geopolitical history, and query local production cultures with a fresh set of approaches and paradigms. (A copy of the conference and workshop schedule is available [here](#)).

As with most scholarly interventions, redirecting the conversation was not a linear process with achievable targets easily reached within four day’s time. There is no clearly demarcated finished line for such a task. Instead, the process is

more nebulous and the end goal is more mercurial.

Some presentations, for example, remained well within familiar terrain: many analyses targeted macro-level institutions like nation-states, national markets, and national policy, and were resolutely focused on the cinema screen in traditional production and exhibition contexts. Likewise, the events of 1989 remained an important political backdrop against which to gauge continuities with and divergences from Cold War cinema.

At the same time, presenters abandoned this framework to raise a different set of questions. For instance, many presentations made impressive use of the archive to reconstitute production practices of the past. In doing so, they provided nuance to the region's audiovisual history, and more generally, demonstrated the (often overlooked) value of historical scholarship to media industry studies.

In fact, for those with an interest in historical media industries research, the conference showcased an impressive amount of work being done on the region, and it's well worth seeking out colleagues for further dialogue and potential collaboration.

Other presenters moved beyond the cinema screen to wrestle with questions about emergent technologies, creative labor, and media globalization. Similar to the historical work referenced earlier, these projects shared a grounded concern with everyday practices and lived realities but in more contemporary contexts. More specifically, they drew attention to the growing discord between national policies for the screen industries—increasingly rooted in creative industry discourses—and the imaginative

lengths to which local laborers must go to sustain themselves both creatively and financially. Questions were raised about the growing pressures creative laborers face no matter their national contexts. Conversations with TV writers from Warsaw and Prague showed how commercial concerns, multiplatform production, and shifting labor relations (i.e., the introduction of an American-style writers room) are refashioning their professional routines and responsibilities. MIP's new research initiative on creative labor explores many of these very concerns and we anticipate a more extended conversation about these issues in the coming year.

I've opted to sketch the conference and workshop proceedings in fairly broad strokes because its most powerful impact was a cumulative one, made possible as the differences in frameworks, methodologies, and theoretical orientations emerged over the four-day event. At its core, the debate fostered discussions about future directions and possibilities for scholarship on the region. Does the region's geopolitical history weigh too heavily on our approaches to the area's screen industries? How do we move forward without taking this geopolitical history for granted or losing its crucial specificity? What other frameworks, approaches, and paradigms address the blind spots or gaps in our knowledge of the region? What productive insights are possible from more micro-level analyses? How do we connect scholarship on the region to broader shifts in the global media economy so that studies on the region don't get "lost" in the region?

Since much of the work at the conference was invested in

studying production cultures, presentations also raised questions about the discipline as a whole. Methodology was a primary concern. How do we best study the production cultures that interest us? Are interviews an effective methodological tool? How do industry scholars embed themselves in production communities, and what does “embeddness” make possible? Can we call what we do ethnography, or is it something else entirely? And, finally, what responsibilities do media industry researchers have to intervene in policy matters, and how do we effectively make that happen?

Such questions deserve complex and multi-faceted answers. We didn't reach any easy conclusions in Brno, but wrestling with these issues throughout the long weekend energized those of us who attended and prompted meaningful conversations, even after the conference ended, about where we go from here.

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