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## Dying of Encouragement: From Pitch to Production in Hollywood

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<b>Citation</b>	Russell, Rupert Henry. 2013. Dying of Encouragement: From Pitch to Production in Hollywood. Doctoral dissertation, Harvard University.
<b>Accessed</b>	April 17, 2018 4:09:10 PM EDT
<b>Citable Link</b>	<a href="http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:11158240">http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:11158240</a>
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## Dying of Encouragement: From Pitch to Production in Hollywood

### *Abstract*

Social scientists have long held that the media has a profound effect on modern societies. However, the cultural production of motion pictures and television shows has largely been neglected as a topic of inquiry. The following dissertation seeks to fill this lacuna in the current research by offering a systematic, comprehensive, and comparative analysis of the industry known colloquially as “Hollywood.” Specifically, this dissertation seeks to uncover the matrix of causal processes that filter the infinite array of potential television shows and motion pictures to the chosen few that are selected for production. This process is known as “development and green lighting.” Drawing from 110 interviews with writers, directors, producers, agents, managers, studio executives, network executives, financiers, and assistants who had been involved in the development and green lighting process, I explore not just decision making but the social milieu within which those decisions were made. Over the course of three chapters, three distinct social processes are examined in turn: institutional scripts (“Formulas”), status (“Stars”), and social capital (“Relationships”). Throughout the thesis, a new approach to cultural production is carried out, based on an inductive methodology where micro-level social processes are examined in the context of macro-level struggles over legitimacy, power, and resources.

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## **Acknowledgements**

I wish to thank Orlando Patterson for six years of mentorship: for helping me transpose my Anglophone sensibilities to the American market place of ideas and for providing guidance, support, encouragement, into every intellectual avenue I have pursued while I have been enrolled as a graduate student at Harvard. I also extend my deepest appreciation to Jason Beckfield and Christopher Winship for their feedback and insights throughout my work on this thesis. I have appreciated enormously the freedom my dissertation committee gave me when I moved to Los Angeles to explore the labyrinth and their support of my chosen line of inquiry.

The dissertation would not have been possible without the participants in the project. They gave me both their time and their contacts. This dissertation would have been impossible without such support. This dissertation was also made possible by the National Science Foundation and the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences at Harvard whose funding allowed me to immerse myself in the field in California.

*To Mum*

*Chapter 1*

***Introduction***

\*

**“It’s a Tough Business”**

In the summer of 2011, an aspiring screenwriter had been hounding an agent at the Above the Line Agency in Beverly Hills to read his screenplay. But the agent wouldn’t return his calls. So finally, in an act of desperation, he sent the screenplay and his laptop in a briefcase to their offices addressed to the agent. Security became suspicious of this unsolicited package and called in a bomb squad. The office was evacuated and the entire block was sealed off. His briefcase – with his screenplay and laptop inside – was detonated. “I feel sorry the guy’s stuff was blown up,” the head of the agency, Rima Greer, admitted, “it’s a tough business.” (McKinley, 2011)

**“Nobody Knows Anything”**

Sometime in 1981 another aspiring screenwriter, Chuck Ross, decided to perform a little experiment. “Would the people in today’s Hollywood recognize a great film if it stared them in the face?” he asked himself.

In the late 1970s, the classic *Casablanca*, starring Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman, had regularly topped the best-ever-film rankings from the critics and public polling alike. On its release in 1942 it won Best Picture, Best Screenplay, and Best

Director at the Academy Awards. It was a brilliant movie that everyone remembered and loved.

So Ross pulled out a copy of the screenplay and made two minor changes. He changed the name of one of the characters and the title of the screenplay to *Everybody Comes to Rick's*, which was the title of the book it was adapted from. The studios don't accept unsolicited screenplays (in case a writer who once sent their beloved script to the studio lot would later recognize a detail of his probably-never-read-script in one of their pictures 20 years later and sue them for copyright infringement); they only receive them from agents. So Ross went to the Writers Guild of America and got a list of all 217 registered talent agencies. He promptly sent his barely modified version of *Casablanca* to every single one on the list.

Eighty-five read the screenplay and got back to him. Only 33 agencies – a fourth – recognized the script as *Casablanca*. Most of the responses were light hearted. “Have some excellent ideas on casting this wonderful script, but most of the actors are dead,” one agent from John Crosby and Associates wrote back. Only three agencies wanted to take the script to the studios, but only two as a motion picture. “It sounds like it would be very good for TV,” one agent at Seiden & Associates told him over the phone. Another eight noticed a similarity to *Casablanca* and gently suggested that he make his a little more original.

The rest rebuffed him, ignored him, or wanted to re-work it. “Never send a screenplay unsolicited again!!!!” was a fairly typical response, this one from the Larry Karlin Agency: “I gave you five pages to grab me – didn't do it.” Alan Nicolette, assistant to Ansley Q. Hyman, had these criticisms: “Too much dialogue, not enough



exposition, the story line was weak, and in general didn't hold my interest." Paul Dekeyser at John La Rocca & Associates added: "I regret to say that we will not be able to help you with your script. I strongly recommend that you leaf through a book called *Screenplay* by Sid Field, especially the section pertaining to dialogue." Ross then went and asked Sid Field himself what he thought of the dialogue in *Casablanca*: he "loved it." (Ross, 1982)

The legendary screenwriter William Goldman who penned *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* famously said that in the movie business, "Nobody knows anything." (Goldman, 1983) What he meant was that you could never guarantee a hit movie. You could have a killer premise, the biggest star, the hottest writer, and the most visionary director with a huge budget and an even bigger marketing campaign and still produce a flop that nobody wants to see.

But Ross's experiment points to a second meaning of "nobody knows." That they don't know anything about movies - at all. That they are making decisions not based on a knowledge of movies but of a different kind of knowledge altogether.

It is this second kind of knowledge that is the subject of this dissertation. It does not attempt, as many previous studies have done, to test the variables ascribed to movies or television shows that will statistically predict their success. Instead, it will examine how people in Hollywood evaluate and define success. This, as we will see, are two entirely separate questions. For sure, the real successes or failures of movies or television shows impacts on how executives, producers, writers and actors pick projects. But the question of the validity – the rate of accuracy at predicting success - of those evaluations falls outside the scope of this dissertation. Rather, this dissertation is about how people

attempt to “know” about movies. And, as the tale of Chuck Ross’s *Casablanca* experiment suggests, this knowledge is not found in the archives of the Academy of Motion Pictures. It is found in an altogether different *locale*: the social interactions, relationships and histories of Hollywood denizens. It is, in other words, a social knowledge.

### **“It’s Doesn’t Make Any Sense”**

For the screenwriting duo Ethan Reiff and Cyrus Voris, the Robin Hood tale seemed perfect for their next script. The tale combined Reiff’s love of medieval history and Voris’s fanboy fascination with comic books and superheroes. It was a popcorn action movie and historical epic all at the same time. What’s more, they had a killer premise: “For us, the big hook - the big idea - was ‘let’s turn it around,’” Voris later explained, “let’s tell Robin Hood from the other guy’s point of view. Let’s make the Sheriff of Nottingham the hero instead of the villain. The title of our original screenplay was *Nottingham*.” Their tag line was “there are two sides to every legend”. (Wright, 2010)

In January 2007 their finished script hit the in-boxes of studio executives and movie producers across Hollywood. The answer was unanimous: *pass*. But then four days later something strange happened. Out of the blue, Bryan Singer, the director of *The Usual Suspects* and *X-Men*, called their agent and said he wanted to pitch it to Warner Brothers. Suddenly a script that had been pronounced dead-on-arrival was now one of the hottest properties in town. And when Russell Crowe announced he wanted to play the

part of Nottingham, a full-scale bidding war broke out between three rival studios. Crowe had just finished *American Gangster* at Universal with producer Brian Grazer and wanted the same team in place for his next picture. So Universal dutifully coughed up the \$1m to secure the rights, with an extra half million thrown in if they made the movie. Ridley Scott had always wanted to make a sequel to the period epic *Gladiator* with Crowe and saw this as the perfect opportunity. He signed on to direct immediately. (Brodesser-Akner, 2010)

For Reiff and Voris, their dream was coming true: two of the biggest stars in Hollywood wanted to make their movie. Plans were being drawn up to fly them to Crowe's farm in Australia to make adjustments to the script. But just before they were due to leave, their phone stopped ringing. And then they heard that Universal was looking for screenwriters for a project called "Robin Hood". They realized they had just been fired off their own movie.

It turned out that Crowe didn't want to play Nottingham after all. He wanted to play Robin Hood. "When I read that particular script, and no disrespect to the guys who wrote it, but it kind of read like *CSI: Sherwood Forest*," Crowe explained, "and I just wasn't into doing that". Scott hated the script even more. "It was fucking ridiculous," he said, laughing, "it was terrible, a page-one rewrite. If you're going to invest in a Robin Hood story, why call it Nottingham? You'd end up spending 80% of the publicity budget explaining why it's Nottingham, not just Robin Hood. It doesn't make any sense". (Lawrence, 2010)

Universal ended up paying a host of screenwriters \$6.7m to turn *Nottingham* into the 2010 movie *Robin Hood*. What's more, it's actually pretty typical studio behavior.

Every year the studios spend tens of millions of dollars purchasing pitches and spec scripts which they then set about immediately rewriting. The studios claim that they are buying the premise – the “big idea” – but as we saw with *Nottingham*, that is not always the case. The big idea was the first thing they scrapped. So why did Universal pay two writers \$1.5m for something that nobody really wanted? After all, nobody owns the rights to a Robin Hood story – it’s public domain – so you don’t have to pay anyone anything for the privilege to make one.

The answer is not simple. Because, at least on the surface, in the words of Ridley Scott: “It doesn’t make any sense.” Regardless of the financial success or failure of *Robin Hood*, before the cameras rolled, a set of economically irrational decisions were made that can be found, if one looks hard enough, in every movie or television show that is given the green light. These decisions are not simply habitual norms, psychological biases, or external pressures. Rather, they are a complex web, a matrix, of overlapping, contradictory, and reinforcing social processes. These processes we can comprehend through three sociological heuristics: status, social capital, and institutional scripts. The dissertation will be comprised of three chapters dedicated to each heuristic. After this theoretical exposition, we will return, in the conclusion, to the story of Ethan Reiff and Cyrus Voris and use these heuristics to explain what, from the outside at least, is economically irrational behavior. And why, to the denizens of Hollywood, it makes perfect sense.

## 1. Literature Review: The Social Science of Hollywood

The products of the entertainment industry have, on the whole, been examined as an independent variable: a cause of an effect. Sociologists have long studied the impact of the media on institutions (e.g. Habermas, 1989; Thompson, 1995; Castells, 1996), how audiences receive and interpret media messages (e.g. Lazarsfeld, Berelson, Gaudet, 1944; McCombs and Shaw, 1972; Liebes and Katz, 1990), and how media engagement leads to changes in human behavior itself (e.g. Phillips, 1982; Paik and Comstock, 1994; Klesges, Shelton, and Klesges, 1993). From the balance of power in modern democracies to rates of childhood obesity, sociologists have traced the deep and lasting influence of the media on everyday life.

The influence of television and motion pictures should come as no surprise. According to Nielson Co., the average American consumer spends an average of five hours a day watching television, with the trend showing *increasing* consumption.<sup>1</sup> The Bureau of Labor Statistics, estimates that over the US population as a whole, Americans only work for one hour more a day than they spend watching television.<sup>2</sup> The viewing times of motion pictures are harder estimate,<sup>3</sup> and make up a large portion television viewing itself, but there is no doubt that they form the central pillars of American popular culture and the primary means of its global export.

However, the study of the entertainment industry itself as a dependent variable, a constellation of outcomes from other forces, has received far less attention. The research that does exist suffers from fragmentation into substantive niches reinforced by

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<sup>1</sup> Nielsen Co., *Three Screen Report*, Vol. 7, 4<sup>th</sup> Quarter 2009.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.bls.gov/tus/tables.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Television is, by definition, a means of distribution, whereas motion pictures are a product that have many means of distribution: theatrical, DVD-sales, online, on-demand, rental, and television itself.

disciplinary specialization. Despite this, they do, when examined holistically, form an outline for how a study of Hollywood may proceed.

### *1.1 Careers*

Overall, there is a large literature on artistic careers which examines career patterns, occupational choice, risk management, and over-supply of artists (cf. Menger, 1999). The findings in relation to Hollywood have been: those who have worked together in the past tend to work together in the future (Faulkner and Anderson, 1987); women and minorities are very poorly represented in directing and producing roles (Christopherson, 2008); the keys to success are reputation (Faulkner and Anderson 1987), agency representation (Bielby and Bielby, 1999), being typecast early in your career (Zuckerman et al., 2003), appearing in a block-buster (De Vany, 2004); retaining incredibly high unionization rates between 60% and 100% for above-the-line workers despite flexible and temporary work arrangements (Paul and Kleingartner, 1994; Christopherson and Storper, 1986). Although these studies offer insightful descriptions of the Hollywood labor market, they fall short on why this is so.

For example, Christopherson (2008) speculates that it is the role of social networks that leads to the exclusion of women from the most competitive positions, but there is no empirical work to support this hypothesis. Similarly, Research by Rossman et al. (2010) infers that network effects are responsible for explaining how Academy Awards can “spillover” from stars to lesser-known actors. In the same vein, Pontike, Negro, and Rao’s (2010) study of black listing between 1945-1960 during the “red scares” found network effects in the transmission of stigma from one black listed writer to “associated” others. Yet, in each of these studies the causal mechanisms are only

inferences to explain correlations. They do not address the hypothesized mechanisms that affect artistic careers directly. Furthermore, little is known about the motivations of those writing, producing or directing film and television; rather, the usual trope of ‘art for arts sake’ is adopted without question (e.g. Caves, 2000).

### ***1.2 Institutional Scripts***

The study of “institutional scripts” (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Meyer and Rowan, 1977) as axioms, habits, formulas, and rules of thumb has been central to cultural explanations of economic phenomena (Biggart and Bearmish, 2003). However, the findings of studies conducted on the television networks have been contradictory. Gitlin (1983) extensively interviewed television executives and concluded that the “axioms” they used to decide which shows to air and which to bury were largely invented retrospectively or as an excuse to reject an idea from a producer or writer. By contrast, in Bielby and Bielby’s (1994) analysis of TV show pitches at domestic television conventions they found that axioms were used in the selection of shows, e.g., the reputation of the cast, if it imitated a successful show, and if it fitted into a favored genre. These findings were reinforced in their next study (Bielby and Harrington 2004) which found that traders in international television use a combination of genre and local knowledge to select shows. Further evidence is supplied by Havens (2002) who interviewed producers and international syndicators about the marketability of black situational comedies. He found that there were significant barriers to commissioning shows with black characters as they were unable to export them because they were not considered to be “universal” enough for foreign markets. Further research is required not

only to reconcile these contradictory findings but also to understand the social processes by which these formulas are adopted or abandoned.

### ***1.3 Industry Organization***

In the organizational literature, the most mature theoretical discussion concerns the industry structure. The debate over the extent to which Hollywood is a project-based industry (Faulkner and Anderson, 1987), arranged as a ‘flexible specialized production organization’ (Christopherson and Storper, 1989), remains dominated by the studios system (Aksoy and Robins, 1992; Schatz 2008), exists in stratified spheres of production (Scott, 2002, 2005), or as a subsystem of corporate hegemony (Bagdikian, 2004; McChesney, 1999) depends on the object of analysis - production, ownership, and control. To my knowledge, there is only a single contemporary fieldwork based study of a film or television producing organization, which is Born’s (2004) ethnography of the BBC in London. Although there are many historical accounts (e.g. Raphael, 2004) of the rise of new kinds of programming, they take a broadly institutional perspective in cultural and television studies. As a consequence, they do not tell us about the internal organizational dynamics that led to those outcomes, only that a particular organization was key to its development.

### ***1.4 Technology***

Technology has had a monumental impact on the economics and creative possibilities of film and television production (Lotz, 2007) and consumption (Klinger, 2006). On the production side, the rise of cable as a subscription-based delivery system with distribution windows aligned to demographic niches, has transformed American television over the past 25 years (Lotz, 2007). The issue of whether a new economic



model to monetize both present and past production should be based upon the “long-tail” (Anderson, 2006) or “blockbuster” (Elberse, 2008) models is the top debate amongst marketing and business scholars. The impact of the Internet on movies and television production remains uncertain and under-researched, in part due to its fast changing nature. What is not in question is the importance of market fragmentation into smaller and smaller audience niches, regardless of which model or models will eventually dominate. For example, Becker (2006) attributed the rise of gay characters in prime time dramas in the 1990s as a response by marketing professionals to the emergence of ‘narrowcasting.’ They sought to appeal to social liberal urban minded professionals (the SLUMPY demographic) who they believed would think that gay characters were “cool.”

## **2. Dependent Variable: Development and Green Lighting**

### ***2.1 Research Problematic***

The central problem with the research conducted on Hollywood is the lack of a common problematic. As such, Hollywood is all too often perceived simply as an individual instance or case study of a broader social problematic, such as industry organization or labor markets. The integration of this research into the empirical work of this dissertation will be centered upon the social process by which the potential television shows and motion pictures are selected for production. The long process of selection is known as “development” and the decision to enter into production is referred to as the “green light”.

This dependent variable was not chosen arbitrarily. Perhaps most importantly, it speaks to the broadest issue of the influence of the media upon society directly. Both

popular and scholarly accounts of the impact of the media focus on racial or ethnic diversity of the cast, the level of violence depicted, or its “family friendliness.” By focusing on development and green lighting, these causes are turned into effects as they are switched from independent to dependent variables. It is in the development of scripts and properties that the ethnicity of the characters is cast, the genre is selected, and the chosen audience targeted. This social process of cultural production has never been studied directly, as recent reviews of the literature have noted (Grindstaff and Turow 2006; Eliashberg, Elberse, Leenders, 2006).

To further clarify the scope of the dissertation, it is necessary to understand what is not problematized; namely, whether or not the social processes that structure development and green lighting decisions are commercially optimal. There already exists an extensive literature by economists and marketers on the hypothesized variables that predict the success of motion pictures (e.g. De Vany, 2004; Eliasberg, Elberse, Leenders, 2006; Hsu and Hannan, 2009). These studies take the opposite perspective to that of cultural production by imposing scholastic categories of analysis onto those of practice, as a mode of explanation. For example, in the case of Hsu and Hannan (2009), who use the ‘genre’ of a film to predict its success, specifically whether or not the film spans genres or conforms to a single one. The ‘genres’ taken are official classifications, neither those used by the audience in interpreting the film nor the interpretations of those in the production process.

There is another more significant reason why the commercial effectiveness of development and green lighting decisions is bracketed from the analysis. To take such a stance would be to impose a normative perspective into the analysis that would both

implicitly endorse and explicitly privilege the commercial definition of television shows and motion pictures over others, such as moral, political, or artistic decisions. It would, in others words, adopt the point-of-view of participants within the field who are seeking to impose the legitimate definition of the field. It would adopt social hierarchies within the field as a categorical hierarchy of analysis. By bracketing the numerous normative and practical impacts – commercial, moral, political, and otherwise - of these cultural goods, a sociological depiction of the decision making process within Hollywood is made is possible.

### ***2.2 A Primer in Development and Green Lighting***

The motion picture and television industries are “project based” (Faulkner and Anderson, 1987). Producers are the formal assemblers, the entrepreneurs who bring together the four essential ingredients: intellectual property, talent, financing, and distribution. Turning intellectual property into a shooting script, recruiting the director and key cast members, is the process called development. When financing is available to roll camera, the project is given the green light. Distribution in theaters or on television depends on the final product, not before, as financing is pulled in the midst of production more often than anybody is comfortable with.

Intellectual property can exist in a variety of forms. A *spec-script* is a script written on the screenwriter’s own initiative and then sold to a producer or studio for a two tier fee: the first is to option the rights to make the movie or TV pilot, the second is an additional payment if it goes into production. *Pitches* are traditionally oral presentations of a potential property, be it a scripted narrative or reality show, although it may also come in the form of a written treatment, and can be purchased directly. Pitches are

becoming rarer in movies, but remain a key part of television development. *Pre-existing intellectual property* includes, but is not restricted to: novels, non-fiction books, memories, comic books, graphic novels, magazine articles, video games, board games, and the rights to sequels and remakes of existing movies and television shows. When these forms of intellectual property are placed into development, scripts are written and re-written by a number of rotating screenwriters overseen by a coterie of executives and producers.

In the networks and studios, there is a hierarchy of development executives and vice-presidents who are overseen by the presidents of production (known as the “network chiefs” or “studio heads”). These chiefs and heads may have their authority curtailed by the “green light” committee, which is composed of presidents of marketing, distribution, and other specialties, and these in turn, are answerable to the CEO or Chairman of the studio or conglomerate that sits above them. Whatever the organizational configuration in any given studio or network, development is the process by which a property moves up the chain. The decision to green light, therefore, is only made after the property has passed through a whole series of filters before being presented to those with the highest authority for consideration. There are, however, ways to circumvent this process entirely and will be discussed in detail in the course of this dissertation.

In network television, the development process for scripted content is the most formally structured. Writers submit pitches and spec-scripts through their agent, often with a producer attached, to the television networks in June. This marks the beginning of the pitch season, which goes on until October. Each network will expect to consider 400 potential ideas; between 50 and 100 are bought and placed into development. From

October to January the pilot scripts are written and the executives and producers provide feedback in the form of notes. Ten will be considered strong enough to put in a pilot order. From February to April the pilots are cast and shot. In May, around six will be chosen for broadcast. Of those, one or two are usually cancelled mid-season and replaced with another unaired pilot. And by the end of the year, only one is usually renewed for a second season.

Cable television does not follow the regular “seasons” of network television and may choose to broadcast at any point in the year. Most studios do try to keep a solid slate of movies to release during the year – blockbusters in the summer, family movies at Thanksgiving – but their development process is far more haphazard. Studios vary in size, releasing between a dozen and two dozen theatrically released films a year, but maintain similar development ratios: roughly 30 properties in active development for every picture released. Some are rushed into production and release, while others languish in “development hell” for years on end. And despite the formal process of producers, writers, and agents pitching properties to executives, the actual route for any one project is unique. Often, the properties are purchased by the studio and given to producers to develop. High-status actors, writers, and directors are becoming important producers for the studio as well, and may be handed properties from the studio to star in or helm. The lines are blurred, the roles are uncertain, and the source of material is unpredictable. In one interview, I summarized my understanding of each individual’s role and their function in the process. “Rupert,” the producer said as he shook his head, “there are no rules.”

This is what makes the process sociologically interesting. The lack of formal institutionalization is what allows for the creative social practices of performance, brokerage, and ritual possible and gives them such importance in the process. It is also an animated and colorful social milieu rich with conflict and the narratives of conflict. By way of example, here are two jokes on the development process two screenwriters told me:

“How many development executives does it take to change a light bulb?”  
“Does it have to be a light bulb?”

A writer and a studio executive are stranded on a desert island. The executive finds some water in a coconut and starts to urinate into it. “What are you doing?” the writer asks, horrified. “I’m making it better,” the executive replies with confidence.

Hollywood is interesting because it is a place that likes to tell stories about itself. And since it is an industry that prides itself as the world’s premiere storyteller, these stories are all the richer and more persuasive/all the more persuasive and richer than may be found in other milieus. The task of this dissertation is, in part, to take apart the stories the story tellers like to tell about themselves and show not just the origins of their fabrication, but their many social functions as well.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

There have been four dominant theoretical approaches to the study of cultural production that have emerged over the last hundred years: Marxist, Social Constructionism, Bourdieu inspired, and middle-range mechanisms. Each will be reviewed in turn before elaborating the proposed “social process” approached.

### ***3.1 Marxism***

Even within the large variety of Marxist schools of thought, they converge on a singular use for cultural production in capitalism: ideological control of the working classes by the ruling classes. Within a traditional Marxist framework, it is the “superstructure” dialectically supported by and emergent from the material infrastructure, the relations of production. The first iteration of this argument, and perhaps the most sophisticated, came in the writings of the Frankfurt School in the wake of the Second World War. In a number of works, the most notable of which may be *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1982 [1944]), they emphasized what might be described as the Weberian dimensions of the entertainment industry as the means of social control (Weber, 1978 [1922]). They argued that the emergence of creative expression in bureaucratic institutions with its reliance on formulas and conformist values removed any depictions of an alternative society. In other words, the use of formulas was depriving the population of critical materials with which to critique the state. With the onset of the Vietnam War, later Marxists saw popular entertainment as an intentional tool of propaganda from the state apparatus to justify and promote militaristic interventionism (Chomsky, 1988; McChesney, 1999). This latter conception fails from a reductive reading of the entertainment industry, which bypasses any analysis of its internal workings by an examination solely of its external effects. The former emphasis of bureaucratic rationality is well placed as this thesis will show; however, the psychological effects on the population consuming media productions were never analyzed and cannot be inferred from the site of production (Thompson, 1995).

### ***3.2 Social Constructionism***

In the early 1980s, a self-described “sociological view” of cultural production emerged (Becker, 1982; Crane, 1987; Griswold, 1987; Bowler, 1994). Positioning itself in between Anglophone Marxism and traditional art history, sociologists sought to create new heuristics in the study of the production and circulation of cultural objects in society. Against the Marxists, they offered multi-causal, multi-level and semi-autonomous views of artistic production that did not reduce it to the economic relations of production embedded within. Against the art historians, they emphasized the collective and institutional basis of artistic production over that of individual biographies, tastes, or alleged “genius.” Leaving aside the plausibility of these contentions<sup>4</sup> as baseline assumptions, they are problematic. They posit the ‘collective’ nature of art as a state rather than a variable, closing off questions with respect to the degree of collectivity and how different group sizes and dynamics may lead to different artistic outcomes.<sup>5</sup> For example, in Peterson and Anand’s (2004) attempted synthesis of a ‘five facet’ model of cultural production - technology, law, industry structure, organizational structure, occupational careers – delineates an area of substantive, rather than theoretical, interest. The facets are, therefore, largely descriptive rather than explanatory and have little utility for hypothesis testing. This cultural production school has also been criticized for neglecting the role of ideology entirely (Kellner, 1995; Thompson, 1990) and culture itself as an ironically absent variable (Eyerman and McCormick, 2006).

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<sup>4</sup> For example, the claim that art historians take a naïve ‘individual genius’ model is an extreme caricature.

<sup>5</sup> For example, the different practices involved in screen writing. Films tend to have one screenwriter, which may then be edited by other screenwriters, studio heads, the director, producers and even actors, in pre, during and post-production. Television dramas tend to be written by teams of writers, of as many as twenty, overseen by a series-producer.



### ***3.3 Middle Range Mechanisms***

Much of the recent research has shied away from a meta-theoretical or holistic approach to cultural production. Rather, “middle-range” (Merton, 1949) or “mechanism” (Gross, 2009) based approaches have predominated. This has had the advantage of empirically isolating and illuminating how general sociological process comes into play in sociological production: from status (Rossman et al., 2010), to institutional scripts (Bielby and Bielby, 1999), to impression management (Zafirau, 2008), to labor markets (Faulker and Anderson, 1987; Christopherson, 2008), to classification (Zuckerman et al. 2003; Hsu and Hannan, 2009), to the impact of space (Lloyd, 2006; Florida, 2002; Scott, 2005), and audience network ties (Salganik and Watts, 2008). These studies are important in that they emphasize isolating causality as a central problem rather than attempting to describe or map overall systems of production, as the culture of production school and Bourdieu have attempted.

### ***3.4 Bourdieu’s Theory of Cultural Production***

Pierre Bourdieu (1993, 1996) offered the most comprehensive and sophisticated model of cultural production by proposing a universal “field of cultural production.” The field is characterized by two poles: art for arts sake which is rich in dominant cultural capital, and, at the opposite end, commercial art which is dominant in economic capital. Those dominant in cultural capital are symbolically autonomous; that is, they are able to define legitimate art. This autonomy allows them to define the rules of art along lines of their own choosing. This relegates commercial art to a lesser state of social recognition. As all artistic endeavors are, in the last instance, dependent on economic goods for their survival, the autonomy of the artistic sphere within the field represents a “denial.” By

denial, Bourdieu is demonstrating the means by which cultures can become autonomous from their economic foundations, and how this autonomy is central to the creation of art. Bourdieu's model is significant because it places at the heart of artistic production the struggle over cultural capital, economic capital, and symbolic capital (recognition). It offers a detailed, sophisticated, multi-faceted model of cultural production that offers predictive power and at the same time does not fall into the trap of simplistic reductionism.

### ***3.5 Social Process***

Bourdieu's (1990, 2000) conception of a field as a social space of struggle for legitimacy and recognition is crucial to the theoretical framework of this dissertation. However, its predictive power is limited and its one-size-fits-all approach makes it limiting as a heuristic device. For example, while he demonstrates how those rich in economic or cultural capital, respectively, are in a constant struggle over the legitimate definition of the field, he has little to say about how a definition of "artistic" or "commercial" work is actually achieved. This is the strength of the middle range mechanism approach, which attempts to isolate those individual causal mechanisms that may be at work within the larger system. However, Bourdieu may respond by arguing that a "middle-range" approach neglects the context those mechanisms are embedded in, namely: the history of the field, the distribution of resources, the competing mythologies, and struggles for

legitimacy. Thus, for the context of this dissertation Bourdieu's language of field, struggle, mythology, and resources is adopted.<sup>6</sup>

The question of mechanisms is not as straightforward. On the surface, it promises a productive way of examining the problem of development and green lighting: why some projects are selected for production and others are not. Indeed, this dissertation is organized by three central mechanisms: status, institutional scripts, and social capital. While these mechanisms are addressed, they are not recruited in an uncritical or conventional fashion. The problem is not so much with the current theoretical specifications of each of these mechanisms but the epistemological and ontological basis of the mechanism approach itself. It is from these theoretical underpinnings that the problems arise.

It should also be stressed that these problems first arose not from theoretical scrutiny but empirical inquiry, where the existing ideas concerning status, social capital, and institutional scripts did not adequately represent or explain the data collected. Only then, were the theoretical foundations of these conceptualizations critiqued. From this effort, a "social process" approach was developed.

The central problem with the middle range mechanism approach is that of temporality. Time is not adequately integrated into the epistemology of mechanisms and, as such, they cannot form the basis of a theory of practice. This is because mechanisms are reified in social science research as "social facts" that "act" in social contexts. It should be noted that one of the reasons for this is the efficacy of the language of

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<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that in adopting these components of Bourdieu's theory of practice, this is a return to Weberian sociology. Bourdieu is explicit (2000) that these categories of analysis are derived from Weber's (1968) sociology of religion. In Chapter 3, "Stars," the differences between Weber's and Bourdieu's approaches are dealt with and a new synthesis is defined.

“mechanisms.” A single word – such as “status” – is able to act as a bridge between qualitative and quantitative studies: the correlations that can be identified can be explained causally through qualitative research. The given mechanism - be it “social capital” (Lin, 2001) or “institutional scripts” (Meyer and Rowan, 1977) – provides a useful shorthand for this dialogue. However, such a shorthand runs the risk of hypostatizing an unfolding, embedded, and multi-faceted series of argentic social practices into a single black box. These boxes lend themselves all too well to being conveniently ordered into a “causal chain” (Gross, 2009) to be used as explanations for complex social phenomena.

The problem with reifying these complex social practices into the language of mechanisms is that their constitutive elements are ignored. It is these constitutive elements that make up a broader social process, parts of which we have labeled “mechanisms.” This has very real and practical consequences for social research. By bracketing the constitutive elements, the question of how mechanisms share those elements is sidestepped. In other words, an epistemology that freezes a mechanism in time does so in order to make an ontologically independent and exogenous variable capable of “causing” an outcome on its own. However, those mechanisms may be endogenous to one another without the autonomy they are all too often imbued with. As we will see in this dissertation, in the context of social capital and status in particular, this obscures the very way in which they emerge in practice because their constitutive elements overlap considerably to the point that the heuristics “status” and “social capital” are no longer productive. The emergence of the elements is temporal: they unfold in practice as a social process. By freezing these practices in time – as mechanisms – this

process of unfolding is denied, and as such, the social practice under consideration, cannot be explained.

By examining development and green lighting as an unfolding social process, the diachronic and synchronic elements are integrated. The formation of relationships (social capital), the acquisition and loss of recognition (status), and the faddish cycle of formulas (institutional scripts), are all temporal process. It is through this unfolding that movies and television shows are developed and put into production. It is essential, therefore, *not* to ask which “variable,” “factor,” or “mechanism,” is the “most important,” but rather, how in this process of unfolding they interconnect, intertwine, and form a moving social synchronic field that, at any one time, forms a matrix of probabilities. It doing so, the actual “decision” to green light a motion picture or television show is downplayed in its significance in favor of understanding the basis of this matrix of possibilities that those decisions arise from.

#### **4. Method**

The social process perspective demands a qualitative methodological approach. The unfolding of relationships, the formation of formulas, and the acquisition and loss of status, are best empirically captured through long, open-ended, inductive interviews with individuals occupying various positions in the field. Overall, a grounded-theory approach was undertaken (Strauss and Corbin, 2008). To bring into relief the empirical findings, a comparative approach is undertaken where development and green lighting in four market niches are considered: scripted television, reality television, studio movies, and independent film. The spatial locale for this study was predominantly Los Angeles, California.

#### ***4.1 Locale***

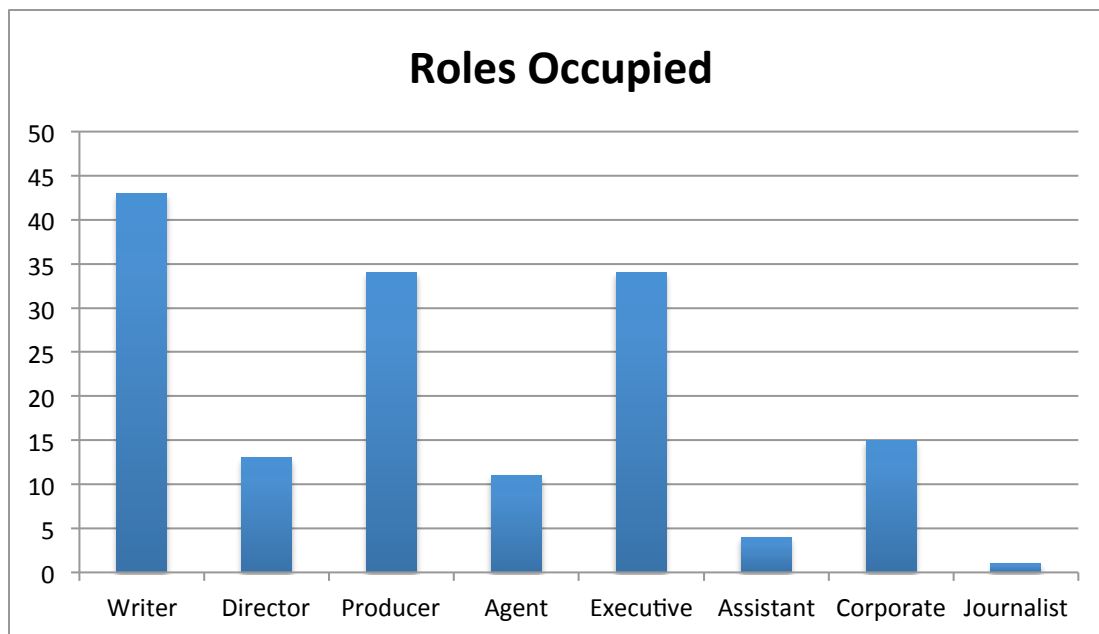
It is important to note that the field of television and motion picture production is far greater than the scope of this study. Anybody armed with a smart phone is now capable of making her own video content and broadcasting it to a mass audience. As such, the field enjoys incredible social fragmentation. The topic of this thesis is a singular fragment that dominates the entire field known as “Hollywood.” Although this term may be perceived to be a folk-category too fuzzy for analysis, it is, in fact, an crucial heuristic to describe this dominant part of the field. It is limited to a small number of core agencies (WME, ICM, CAA, UTA), major studios (Universal, Paramount, Sony/Columbia, Twentieth-Century Fox, Disney, and Warner Brothers), mini-majors (e.g. Summit/Lionsgate, Reflexivity, DreamWorks), television networks (ABC, NBC, CBS, Fox), and cable networks (e.g. HBO, Showtime, USA, FX, TNT, CW, MTV, Bravo, Oxygen). These studios, television networks, production companies, and agencies located in Los Angeles, form not just the economic hub of global television and motion pictures, but also a shared social milieu (Scott, 2005). This milieu has its own distinct collectively recognized hierarchies, mythologies, and relationships. It is precisely because such global significance is concentrated in a single spatial locale that a qualitative study of this kind is possible.

#### ***4.2 Sample***

Beginning from a dozen contacts from the Harvard Alumni Association and the Harvard Business School, a snowball sampling method was used to recruit individuals for in-depth interviews. At the end of each interview, subjects were asked if they could provide

further contacts. It was found that from each initial contact a line of referrals would eventually become exhausted. At this stage of the study, new participants were recruited by cold calling. They were selected either by their importance in the field or because they were an under represented group in the sample.

A total of 110 people were interviewed ( $n = 110$ ). Seventy had worked in film and forty in television, and of those combined eleven had worked in both mediums. The sample skews towards motion pictures because many people in television had at least one credit in motion pictures, which can be released on very low budgets. For example, it was common for those working in reality television to have also worked on a feature documentary at one point in their career. The sample included the network chiefs of three TV networks, two former studio heads, three Academy Award winning directors, and one reality TV star.



*Figure 1: The roles occupied by sample in their career trajectories*

### *4.3 Interview Strategy & Analysis*

When interviews first began, a lengthy interview schedule of several pages was prepared for each interview. It was designed to take note of the career history of the interviewee, and to address the central hypotheses in the status, social capital, and institutional scripts literatures. However, it was quickly discovered that the dispositions of the interviewees were resistant to such a style of interviewing. In one early interview, the subject refused to answer a single question posed and instead talked for 45 minutes on subjects of his own choosing. These subjects were, however, fascinating and useful in addressing the central problematic posed. “You know, you work with people and then they go on to do other things,” he said slumped in a beige foam chair, “you know, become governor.” His voice trailed off as his gaze moved across the room and landed on a framed black-and-white photograph of Arnold Schwarzenegger hugging him.

In response to these initial interviews, a more open-ended, inductive interview strategy was adopted to illicit precisely these kinds of unexpected but insightful responses. All interviews began by asking the subject to describe a trajectory in their career. As they spoke, they would be asked to elaborate upon particular moments they described. These “how” questions were excellent at providing the raw descriptions of how the practice of development and green lighting actually work. When transcribed, the text was coded as it pertained to elucidating the actual operation of social capital, status, and institutional scripts. As important as the actual operation are the perceived folk interpretations of why those operations played out the way they did by the interviewee. These were elicited through “why” questions that invited the subject to create his or her own theories on how the machinery of Hollywood works. These folk theories were



drawn from the various mythologies circulating in the field. Taken together, these “how” and “why” questions form the dialectic at the heart of the theory of practice: the actual unfolding of objective social exchanges and their subjective interpretation by participants. The subjective interpretation should not be conceived as merely a “bias” but rather an intrinsic element to the unfolding of those very exchanges. This became most apparent in operation of social capital: the gap between the theory and practice of “relationships” was central to how social capital was acquired, activated, and lost.

As the interviews progressed, it became clear that position in the field was a predictor of what kind of interview they would give. For example, agents did not give information about how agencies worked or what agents did, but did on the current state of the market: which talent, genres, and properties were in demand. Younger interviewees who had just entered the field and were at the beginning of their socialization were able to describe the rituals and codes they were learning on a daily basis. Older subjects had difficulty, or an unwillingness, to elaborate on such codes, even if they acknowledged them. Writers and directors were hostile to the whole notion of Hollywood and the marketplace for potential television shows and movies, whereas agents and executives tended to justify and rationalize it. It was therefore crucial to get a varied sample from subjects across Hollywood so that each interview could elaborate on a different aspect of the social processes at work. When interview subjects disagreed – *e.g.*, between writers and executives – these together provided the contours of the struggles taking place over the very definition of the field. It was from this iterative, reflexive form of sampling and questioning that the social matrix of possibilities for developing and green lighting potential motion pictures and television shows was interrogated.

## **5. Summary of Dissertation**

In *Chapter 2*, I examine the many ways in which “formulas” come to structure the development and green lighting process. I propose a new theoretical framework that combines the diffusion studies of network analysis with the studies on symbolic evaluation in cultural sociology. Using this model, I show how formulas have a strong sorting function at the broadest level of defining the kind of TV shows and movies made, but a weak sorting function when it comes down to drawing distinctions between individual properties. Furthermore, I show how this institutionalized system of formulas creates an opportunity structure for those looking to sell properties. The strategies of sellers are themselves structured by the resources available to them.

In *Chapter 3*, I examine the role of status and charisma through what is colloquially referred to as “star” power. This chapter integrated Weber’s conceptions of charisma and its role in animating the economy of religious spheres with contemporary research on status as a function of performance, ritual, network ties, and emotion. A field-level model of the structuration of status by role and niche is presented alongside a micro-level analysis of the social processes that lead to the perception and consecration of status and charisma. Last, the power of stars is placed into context with the power of formulas as two competing bases for the central struggle in the field between high-status individuals on the one hand, and the networks and studios on the other.

In *Chapter 4*, I take on the role of social capital in the brokerage of projects through the folk-category of “relationships.” This chapter offers the sharpest contrast between the mechanism and social process approaches to comprehending and explaining social phenomena. Social capital is broken down into a series of strategic transactions

which combine objective material exchanges, and intersubjective normative understandings, which in turn create three crucial ‘gaps’ in social capital activation. After first laying out this theoretical contribution to the social capital literature, the substantive application to Hollywood begins with the core agencies. It is shown that the failure of formal brokers to act in the interests of both the buyers and the sellers in the marketplace open up opportunities for brokerage for every participant in the field. Second, the importance of the objective basis of exchange for the formation and maintenance of social capital through five material social criteria: position, quality, status, emotion, and context. Third, the importance of the three disconnects in social capital – synchronicity, asymmetry, and sequence – will be shown to be the basis of the strategies for social capital activation in the field.

Finally, in the conclusion, I apply the arguments developed in these three chapters to three case studies. In my final remarks I compare the proposed model of cultural production with the approaches laid out in the introduction.

## Chapter 2

### *Formulas*



“Okay, to hell with the story. Wallace Beery is a wrestler. I wanna know his hopes, his dreams. Naturally, he'll have to get mixed up with a bad element. And a romantic interest. You know the drill. Romantic interest, or else a young kid. An orphan. What do you think, Lou? Wally a little too old for a romantic interest? Look at me, a writer in the room and I'm askin' Lou what the goddamn story should be!”

- Jack Lipnik, a 1940s studio head in *Barton Fink* (1991)

In the Coen Brother's first theatrically released movie, *Barton Fink*, the titular character is brought to Hollywood by Jack Lipnik, the head of a small-time studio, after reading glowing reviews of Fink's Broadway play. Set in a somewhat surreal 1940s Hollywood, the Cohen Brothers depict a historical constant of the movie business: the paradox of asking for originality from writers whilst at the same time demanding they adhere to the same formulas. Barton Fink, a stand in for every Hollywood screenwriter, is not only psychologically crushed in his pursuit of this impossible task, but evicted from the studio lot as quickly as he was brought in.

It isn't surprising, that in a town whose history is so often written by its lowly scribes, that this oft-told tale is something of a cliché; a truism of tinsel-town mythology.

It's a legend, a warning told over and over again to each innocent soul who looks up and aspires to ascend to the lofty gates of Paramount, Universal or Warner Brothers. Yet, in creating this mythology writers have drawn upon a formula of their own, and not a very original one at that. It is a straightforward rendition of the Biblical morality tale of David and Goliath, where the self-righteous writer confronts the corrupt forces of the almighty studio. Only in Hollywood, David always loses.

The question of "formulas" in Hollywood has had some, albeit limited, attention in academic research. The bulk of it has been on television and has so far yielded only mixed and contradictory findings. Gitlin (1983) extensively interviewed television executives only to find that their notions of show success differed so greatly and changed so rapidly that they had no overall impact on the creation of 'prime-time' programming. "The axioms, in short," Gitlin (1983, p.23) argues, "are short, flimsy, flexible, *ad hoc*." They were used by executives merely as excuses to reject writers and their ideas. In Gitlin's model, the formulas serve to legitimize decisions that have already been made. They have no causal role in forming the decisions themselves.

In contrast, Bielby and Bielby (1994) found that the reputation of the cast, an imitation of a successful show, and specific genres increased the likelihood of a pilot entering into the prime-time schedule. This would suggest that even if such axioms were fleeting they did in fact have a casual effect on which television shows were selected. This conclusion is supported by Havens's (2002) interview-based research into how the racial composition of the cast impacts a show's export potential. He found that African-American casts were perceived by executives to be difficult to sell to non-US markets, thus undermining the potential international syndication that is crucial for television

shows to break even.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Becker (2006) argues that the inclusion of gay characters in television shows in the early 1990s was the result of shifting perceptions in audience taste by networks executives targeting affluent, urban audiences. Becker argues that this axiom was far from fleeting, but rather gained momentum as the decade unfolded. To my knowledge, no scholarly studies exist on the use of “formulas” in the decision-making process of executives at movie studios. This chapter will address the contradictory findings on television and the lacuna of research on motion pictures by asking: what is the role of formulas in the selection and development of potential television shows and motion pictures?

### **1. Formulas as Market Information**

However, it is first necessary to address the question of what a formula *is*. Even within the field, the whole notion of a “formula” has multiple definitions: from using variables to mathematically predict the success of an individual property, to specifying which story beats belong on which page number. In addition, these definitions usual involve negative moral overtones. Sociologically, a formula is a reification. It is a discourse or narrative that has become hypostatized from its emergent social origin into an autonomous social fact with its own independent causal force across time and space. In keeping with the theoretical and methodological principles outlined in the Introduction, the analytical category “formula” must be conceived as social process.

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<sup>7</sup> This is due to the once dominant, but now somewhat modified, model of deficit-financing where a television studio will produce a show for a television network at a loss whereby the studio retains the rights to the show and licenses out the content to the network on a per-showing basis. As licenses for a single showing are significantly less than the cost of the show (hence, deficit-financing) the possibility of national and international syndication is crucial to not simply making profits but preventing large losses.

In the context of the field of motion picture and television production, formulas emerge as heuristics to interpret the market forces of supply and demand. In other words, formulas are the social tools for interpreting, exchanging and evaluating market information. Overall, the market is a social space where ideas and blue-prints for television shows and motion pictures are bought and sold. The roles of “buyers” and “sellers” in this marketplace are formally defined: writers come up with pitches and write spec-scripts, agents shop them to producers, who in turn take them to the networks and studios who purchase them.<sup>8</sup> As economic sociologists have long established, the interpretation of supply and demand, and the resultant “price”, is not an act of an individual rational calculation, but a complex social process of intersubjective evaluation and communication embedded in institutions, organizations and social networks (Weber, 1978; White, 2002; Podolny, 2005; Burt, 1992).

However, the mechanisms that drive this social process is disputed among both cultural and economic sociologists. Furthermore, the means by which the pitches, spec-scripts and pre-existing intellectual property is purchased, developed and green-lit for production does not take place in a singular momentary market transaction, but as a drawn out process spanning months, years and even decades. To address these issues, a conceptual framework has been devised that takes into account both the temporal nature of market information and the two competing conceptions in economic and cultural sociology of the mechanisms at work. This model will first be presented abstractly, drawing on the existing research in motion picture and television production, as well as

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<sup>8</sup> However, in practice, the trading relationships between roles is not linear. For example, a studio may option the rights to a best-selling novel, hire a director who has a producing deal with the studio to develop the property, who in turn hires writers to write prospective drafts of the screenplay. Throughout this process, the property – in its form as a single “log-line” pitch or a polished screenplay – is constantly evaluated.

debates in cultural and economic sociology, and then by incorporating the substantive findings in a summary form. Each stage in the process of evaluation will be expounded upon in detail with evidence collected from fieldwork and secondary sources. There will then be a change in perspective as this process of evaluation is re-conceptualized as an opportunity structure for those seeking to “supply” the market. Last, the contributions to the literature will be outlined in the conclusion.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 *Dependent Variables: Generalized and Specific*

In the existing research conducted on the subject of television, the dependent variable under consideration varies: from assessments of export potential (Havens, 2002), conceptions of the audience (Becker, 2006), to pilots fit for airing (Bielby and Bielby, 1994), to a generalized notion of good television (Becker, 1983). The absence of a clear dependent variable has contributed to the reporting of mixed results: each study examined different phenomena. To address this issue, two dependent variables will be addressed that have different sorting functions in the market.

		<i>Dependent Variable</i>	
		<b>General</b>	<b>Specific</b>
<i>Mechanism</i>	<b>Intersectional</b>	Interorganizational definitions of legitimate firm strategies and forms; external definitions of group identity	Intersubjective evaluations of objects based on the values ascribed by others.
	<b>Categorical</b>	Durable, institutionalized definitions of organizational strategies and forms, group cohesiveness and identity.	Durable, institutionalized evaluative criteria of specific objects.

Figure 2: Theoretical definitions of variables and mechanisms



First, is the *general* strategy that lays out in advance the kind of properties that are sought after as part of the production ‘slate’ of a studio or a programming schedule of a television network. These general strategies are the network and studio *directives*, usually established by those in the highest positions of the organization and handed down to subordinates and fed to their major suppliers of properties, most often favored agents or producers. Second, is the evaluation of *specific* properties as suitable for the slots presented and how, once purchased, they should be developed in preparation for production. These evaluations are made constantly throughout the field from “readers” at production companies and agencies who write “coverage” for the incoming material, agents looking to sign new writers, producers looking to option material, development executives as they sift through piles of scripts, and studio heads who evaluate those properties that have made it through all those aforementioned gatekeepers. As different objects fall under evaluation, be they general strategies or specific properties, it is hypothesized that they are subject to different social processes. This would explain why, when these objects are collapsed into a single variable, contradictory findings have so far been reported.

## ***2.2 Mechanisms: Intersectional and Categorical***

The second heuristic distinction is used to capture the different temporal dynamics of culture: that which moves quickly in the forms of cycles, fads and buzz which I call the *intersectional mode*; and that which moves slowly in the form of ingrained routines, institutional scripts, and longstanding customs, which I term *categorical mode*. This temporal axis is intended to capture the variance reported in the existing studies of television that point to formulas lasting anywhere between a single week to spanning

decades. In practice, these are ideal-types used to bring into relief the subtle and nuanced ways in which contemporary transactions interact with those past transactions that have become institutionalized. Both modes are responses to uncertainty and risk in decision-making as audience demand is unknown prior to their reception of the product (Caves, 2000). As a result, they both offer sources of legitimacy for decision-makers to draw upon to validate their decisions to others in the field.

### *2.2.1 Categorical Mode*

The categorical mode emphasizes *socialization and institutionalization* as a mechanism for the emergence of an empirically identifiable point of view in a social group or organization. The points of view may be multiple, overlapping and contradictory, with many competing scripts and repertoires. However, these competing principles will be durable over time if socialized and institutionalized sufficiently within a social group. The emphasis here, in contrast to the intersectional mode, is on its temporal element: it is durable over time and exhibits path-dependency where this point of view is “locked-in” even as the individuals may cycle through the same location in the social structure.

In sociological research, the categorical mode is the most pervasive in cultural sociology and neoinstitutionalism. Researchers in this mode have examined the ways in which stabilized cultural objects in the form of scripts (Meyer and Rowan, 1977), repertoires (Swidler, 1986), narratives (Polletta, 2006), and frames (Benford and Snow, 2000) impact a variety of social process. Categorical studies at the general level examine strategies and forms that organizations undertake which are derived from cultural templates (DiMaggio, 1987, 1992, 1997) and identity over time. Formulas often take the form of what cultural sociologists term “criteria of evaluation”. The causal impact of

these criteria have been hypothesized in a number of social evaluations such as fellowship proposals (Lamont, 2009), job applications (Rivera, 2009), news stories (Gans, 1979; Schudson, 2003), art forms (Bourdieu, 1986; Baumann, 2007) and food (Zhao, 2005).<sup>9</sup> Evaluations are stabilized and predictable over time and social groups, because of the cultural objects these groups share and reproduce.

### 2.2.2 *Intersectional Mode*

The intersectional mode refers to a point of view that emerges through a different mechanism altogether: *intersubjective or interorganizational communication*.<sup>10</sup> Most studies from this approach have examined the adoption of specific objects in diffusion studies (e.g. Coleman et al., 1957; Fligstein, 1985; Dobbin, 1994)<sup>11</sup> or how they attract “heat” through buzz (Uzzi et al., forthcoming) or popularity (Lieberson, 2000). These studies emphasize a different temporal dimension: the speedy cultural change observed in fads and cycles. The object of inquiry is typically that of a social network where specific dyadic relationships serve as the structure of social change. In contrast, the categorical mode, with its focus on institutions and organizations, emphasizes social locations that are independent of any one individual or tie.

Strang and Macy (2001) offer a sophisticated model of the diffusion of formulas by a “process of ‘adaptive emulation’ where actors respond to perceived failure by

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<sup>9</sup> For a review of the categorical literature from the symbolic and social boundaries perspective see Lamont and Molnar (2002) and Pachucki et al. (2007); for a review on cultural habits and customs on economic behavior see Biggard and Beamish (2003).

<sup>10</sup> This argument builds upon Harrison White’s (2002) observation that in markets, levels of production are set by producers’ observations of the production level of other producers.

<sup>11</sup> For reviews see Strang and Soule, 1998; Dobbin, Simmons and Garrett, 2007

imitating their most successful peers.”<sup>12</sup> They contrast this to DiMaggio and Powell’s (1983) neoinstitutional theory, where “adaptive emulation tends to produce not stable isomorphic equilibrium, but faddish cycles.” (Strang and Macy, 2001, p.155) The causal mechanism in their account is the emergence of a “success story” in the business press, which is biased to emphasize successes rather than failures, and whose readers suffer from a confirmation bias (Gilovich, 1993) that leads them to favor confirming over disconfirming evidence (Macy and Strang, 2001). The adoption is only retained over the long term if it strongly affects firm outcomes and if it does not it is abandoned.

The integration of both modes of evaluation is necessary because their seemingly autonomous operation operates through interaction and reinforcement. Hypothetically, if a point of view is institutionalized and socialized then this may crowd out the possibility for alternative perspectives, which is typical of path-dependent social processes. If, on the other hand, points of view change so rapidly, and there is an absence in institutions of socialization, such as professional schools or family structures, then such a point of view may not ever take on a durable quality. Alternatively, one may find that one level may be categorical and another intersectional, depending on the problematic at hand. This separates out the competing cultural logics that are at work in decision-making, and as we will see, resolves the tension of contradictory findings in the literature.

### **3. Findings: Summary**

As hypothesized, both the categorical and intersectional modes impact the evaluations of general strategies and specific properties as distinctive social processes. Crucially, the

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<sup>12</sup> This is perhaps the sociological version of what behavioral economists have conceived of as “herd behavior” where “we are influenced in our decision-making by what others around us are doing.” (Banerjee, 1992, p. 797)

overall evaluation of properties can only be understood through the interaction of the general and the specific with the intersectional and the categorical. Taken in isolation, the social logic of the process of evaluation is obscured as they function in tandem with one another. But when these processes are compared with one another, the seemingly contradictory nature of evaluation expounded in studies of television can be given coherence. Given the complex nature of this interaction, it is necessary for the sake of clarity to summarize the findings *as if* market information unfolds in a linear, sequential path over five distinct stages.

		<i>Dependent Variable</i>	
		<b>General</b>	<b>Specific</b>
<i>Mechanism</i>	<b>Intersectional</b>	Cycles of genres Rules of success	Heat, buzz and 'comps'
	<b>Categorical</b>	Architecture of "Genre" & "Audience"	Post-hoc justifications Formulas used in development

*Figure 3: Applied definitions of mechanisms and variables*

### ***3.1 General-Categorical: Establishing the Architecture of the Market***

Ultimately, the market is defined by the audience: how it is segmented and how it is monetized. The "audience" defines the boundaries of market niches within the field of motion picture and television production. These boundaries, while legal, technological and organizational in nature, are interpreted through shared cultural categories at the field level. This includes categories to classify the "audience," such as gender and age, but also the corresponding categories used to classify audience taste: "genres." These twin,

homologous classification systems – “audience” and “genre” - and their relationship to one another, have been remarkably durable and stable throughout the history of the field. The language of “male” and “female” audience, as well as “comedies” and “thrillers”, is a historical constant.

Upon closer analysis, these categories also possess a symbolic emptiness. They are cultural *forms* that are largely devoid of symbolic *content*. That is to say, while the categories are stable over time, their definitions are not. As a result, the linked classifications of “audience” and “genre” provide an architectural framework that constrains the general strategies which the networks and studios can form. This framework does not dictate which genres are pursued or which audience is targeted, but rather, frames the creation and interpretation of market information. However, because these strategies are materially dependent upon the ability to monetize a given audience, they are also contingent upon the technological, legal and organizational factors that make that monetization possible.

### ***3.2 General-Intersectional: The Cycles of “Rules for Success”***

It is in the intersectional mode that the symbolic content of the architectural, institutional categories are generated. It is through the creation and diffusion of “success stories” that the meaning of each genre is defined and ranked against one another. Formulas at the general level, therefore, adopt their form from long-standing institutionalized classification in the categorical mode and adopt their symbolic content and hierachization in the intersectional mode. In practice, these two modes are combined. Audience demand cannot be directly observed and is fundamentally uncertain (Caves, 2000). It is made visible through unexpected hits which are taken to be indicative in a change to underlying

audience taste. But the interpretation of these hits uses the long-standing categories of the field. This is how the green lighting and development demonstrates both continuity and change simultaneously. Change is observed in the form of cycles that are contained, for the most part, by the boundaries of monetized audience niches. Each cycle is begun by a perception of a hit which leads to a new “rule” or “rules” for success. These “rules” establish a recognized, legitimate formula that forms the basis of directives at the network or studio for developing their production slates. The *institutionalization of change* observed not just in Hollywood, but other culture industries such as fine art, fashion and music, is an emergent product of two competing cultural modes: the intersectional and the categorical.

### ***3.3 Specific-Categorical: Post-Hoc Justifications & Formulaic Stories***

When it comes to the evaluation of individual properties, the relationship between the categorical and intersectional modes is not only similar but also more pronounced than at the general level. Although a common language is used in the evaluation of properties there is scant evidence that properties are evaluated in accordance with this criteria and that this common language holds shared definitions across the field. Instead, this language of evaluation is sufficiently vague to retrospectively justify the decision to buy or pass on a property regardless of the property in question. However, categorical formulas were used in the development of properties after their purchase by both television networks and movie studios.

### ***3.4 Specific-Intersectional: Heat, Buzz & Comps***

The lack of shared, meaningful categorical criteria of evaluation makes the intersectional mode of paramount importance in the buying and selling of individual properties. The

fleeting “heat” around the writers, director or producer attached or the “buzz” around the screenplay itself, make up the engines that drive the auctions and acquisitions of pitches and scripts. Heat, as described in detail in *Chapter 3, “Stars”*, is largely a function of the status of those affiliated to the property, and buzz is governed in large part by the network structure that defines the flow of communication. As both heat and buzz are highly temporal in nature, the value of any given property is always in a state of flux. Therefore, sales depend upon a canny, insider knowledge of the social thermodynamics of the field which bestows an ability to predict surges of heat and chatter by writers, agents and producers alike.

### ***3.5 The Opportunity Structure***

Each of these four stages is located on the ‘demand’ side of the market within networks, studios and independent financiers. Those on the ‘supply’ side of the industry, primarily the writers, directors, producers and agents, perceive of market demand as an opportunity structure. They do not respond mechanistically to the reigning “formula” but choose from a variety of strategies. However, their ability to execute a strategy is dependent upon the resources available to them. In fact, those with the greatest resources, be it independent financing, status or social capital, are able to have greater leverage to ‘impose’ upon buyers what they wish to supply. Conversely, those with the fewest resources are more subject to the whims of buyers and thus have fewer opportunities.

In short, the structuration of the market emerges from each of these social processes working in tandem with one another. The emptiness of the categorical criteria of evaluation leads directly to the importance of the intersectional dynamics of cycles, heat and buzz. Yet, forms of categorical criteria establish a framework within which



intersubjective communication and evaluation takes place. It is only by examining each of these modes of evaluation simultaneously that the principles of structuration are brought into relief.

#### **4. Generalized-Categorical: Market Niches, Audiences and Genres**

The strategies pursued by networks and studios to build their development slates are the negotiations between two sets of categories: definitions of the target audience and the definition of audience taste in the form of genres. This genre/audience strategy is socialized and institutionalized in the field as the legitimate point of view of how development slates are to be organized. One development executive illustrates how such a point of view was implemented at a mid-sized studio:

And when she [the new head of production] got there, she was like “where are all the movies, guys? What have you been doing?” It pretty much had been run essentially as a production company, with the attitude being “if it comes together, it comes together, and if it doesn’t well, you know, if we make two movies, or we can make seven, whichever ones come together, you know?” She had always worked studio, had always kind of looked at things in the competitive landscape of other studios. She came in and said, “in a year we need to have this number of movies in these kinds of genres: we’re going to have big summer tentpole in the middle of the year, we’re going to have a holiday movie, adult comedies, we need a first-quarter thriller – let’s go find those things.”

Her strategy in turning this “production company” into a “studio” was typical of most studios in the field: to divide the calendar year into audience niches and then assign each niche a genre. “Tentpoles” are held in the summer to capture primarily young audiences who are not at school or college, whereas “holiday movies,” released around Christmas or Easter, for example, are targeted at family audiences.

Yet, the construction of the audience is not merely a symbolic process of interpretation but also one rooted in the broader political economy of the field of motion picture and television production which is also constituted by legal, technological, and organizational factors. Understanding how these factors combine to monetize television shows and movies is central to how the genre/audience strategies are conceived and executed. Motion pictures are monetized by international and domestic box office tickets, sales to television networks, video rentals, DVDs sales, tax-breaks, product placement, and licensing and merchandising opportunities such as video and board games, theme park rides, fast-food meals and toys. Television too, can monetize content by DVD sales, tax-breaks, video rentals and merchandising, but the niches are defined by the dependence of a network on either advertising or subscription fees from cable companies, or a combination of the two. Changes to these revenues streams – such as a drop in the DVD market, a shift in the tax-code, or the rise of on-line streaming – change the economic viability of a niche and genre. For example, the rise of the DVD market in the 1990s helped to facilitate the rise of independent film as a viable business model, enabling a boom of independent production houses, which in turn were bought by and incorporated into the studios, only then to be closed down when DVD sales dried up. In television, both advertiser-supported and premium cable has risen as quickly as network television has declined (Lotz, 2007). These changes in the political economy may be quite separate from the audience demand for an individual genre.

As each market niche depends upon different revenue streams to monetize content, networks and studios seek to match those genres with the best performance record of those revenue streams. For example, the market niche of independent film

relies upon the ability to raise funds for production by pre-selling the rights to foreign distributors, particularly the European markets. The need to sell to multiple markets in different countries leads to the inclusion and exclusion of different genres of film, as the head of one mini-major film studio explains:

The only genres that work all over the world in that area are drama, romantic comedy, thriller, and action. You might say, well what about comedy, I would say yes, when you have a huge movie star yes, otherwise no, because the Italians have a different idea about comedy than the Germans, than the English and so on, and the Japanese don't like it at all ... You may say but what about science fiction? The answer is yes if it's a huge *Star Trek* sized, *Matrix* sized, monster film otherwise no. And that wipes out a lot of things – Westerns, teen movies, American sports movies, a lot.

However, certain genres, in particular horror, can be made for low-budgets and still return a profit by only tapping into some of the revenue streams. As one horror-movie producer explained, “for that budget range [\$5m] it's the most logical thing to do, unless you're friends with some high-end comedians, because unless you really screw it up you're pretty much guaranteed to make your money back.” Again, the ability for television shows to access these additional revenue streams, which, when deficit-financed, are crucial to breaking-even, is defined in terms of genre. For example, procedurals have far higher syndication value than serials because they can be watched out of sequence – each procedural has a self-contained story (e.g. solving a crime) - whereas serials require the viewer to watch them in sequence because the story builds from episode to episode across the seasons.

Even within television, there are enormous differences in the legal, organizational and technological arrangements of different networks. Premium cable networks, for example, which are exempt from standard regulations and monetized primarily by

subscriptions that are sold wholesale to cable companies, operate in a very different marketplace than the traditional networks ABC, NBC, CBS and Fox. “The business model and the lack of regulations,” a premium cable network executive explained, “really allowed us to push the envelope in creativity and create these types of programs but also to target a demographic that was more thoughtful, more sophisticated – so we could say to our talent, “you don’t need to have an explosion every 10 minutes.”” Most significantly, “success” was not defined by ratings but by subscriptions. “We are banking on people paying \$10, \$15, or \$20 a month for the core [network] product,” he continued, “we don’t care if it’s on TV, mobile or online.”

Studios and networks also have significantly different relationships to the audience which in turn impacts their genre/audience strategy. This is due to the fact that there is a separation between the studio producing the motion picture and the means by which it is consumed by the consumer, whereas in television these two elements are combined. As a result, movie studios, with the exception of Disney,<sup>13</sup> do not try to program to a specific audience as a part of their brand identity, as one studio exec puts it:

As studios, we think in our minds, that there is a difference between a Fox movie and a Warner Brothers movie and a Sony movie, and there certainly is in terms of the stories we tell, the effects work, the people we cast ... the reality of the situation is, when I talk to my friends back home, they have no idea what the difference is between a Fox movie or a Warner movie or whatever. They don’t see the [the studio’s] logo on the front of a movie and say, “yeah, I know what this is going to be.”

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<sup>13</sup> It is not so much that Disney is a branded movie studio but a global entertainment brand aimed at children and families that contains a movie studio. In this respect, it is unique and falls outside the generalization being made. There are some very small movie production houses that have direct relationships to consumers through mail order involved in specialty content, from religiously themed to niche horror to pornography.

Instead, each individual movie is marketed on its own terms: drawing on a pre-existing brand or cultural hook, the above-the-title star, and a ‘high’ or ‘big’ concept that will intrigue audiences. In contrast, television networks attempt to grow their audience by developing shows that cater to the audience that watches their existing shows.

A television agent explained how this was done by very specific interactions of television genres:

Fox [Network] as of late – it started, obviously, with edgy comedy, and attracting – you try and grow you’re core audience – so edgy comedy, young people, and African American shows ... as of late Fox is action shows, and they do flawed male-centric leads, comically centered, around a pretty star. That’s what they’ve tried to do and that’s what they’ve been successful with.

Brand and audience thereby constrains the genres and their treatment on television networks, whereas movie studios that have no set brand or audience niche do not sort through potential properties on that basis.

As a result, television has a far more sophisticated understanding of its audience by employing the latest market research techniques. They also develop far sharper profiles of their audiences, as one network chief explained:

They are the most affluent of any cable channel, they are the most educated, they’re the most upscale, affluent and engaged audience on cable ... We’ve got two prime audiences that we focus towards. One, we call the ‘Will and Graces’, they’re female urban professionals and their gay best friends. Then we have another group called the ‘PTA trend setters’ who are women from across the country, up-scale, wealthy, suburban, but the trend-setters in their neighborhoods. They may live in St. Louis but they travel a lot, or they aspire to, they want to know about the hot restaurants in every city, they want the hot shoe and all that stuff.

He added, “everything I told you about our audience is the filter by which we develop. So we are constantly searching for shows that appeal to that group.” Studios use much more rudimentary guides by using the four quadrant model which is divided by gender and age (above and below 25). Despite television’s sophistication in profiling their audience, both rely heavily on gender and age to organize the appropriate genres for the target audience. As one network executive put it, “The data is very clear on this, but it sounds a little sexist. Boys like cartoons, they like action, something silly, what you would expect. Girls like drama, competition, light comedy. It’s remarkable how the audiences track in different places.”

However, what comes to define each of these genres changes cyclically in the intersectional mode. For example, the term “tent-pole” is the new iteration of the “blockbuster,” which since the birth of the motion picture industry has had different definitions from musicals to B-movies to comic-book characters. Similarly, in television, what comes to be defined a procedural, soap or comedy changes continuously. Although the internal content of the categories changes, their form remains similar with each era producing its version of a ‘cop show’ or ‘holiday movie’. As a sorting mechanism, these forms are at once exclusionary and elastic: a cop show excludes many other kinds of stories - namely, those without cops in them - but there are many different iterations of what a cop show can be, as figure 4 illustrates.

### **COPS WHO'VE BEEN FRAMED!**

- *The Cape* (NBC): A framed cop kicked off the force turns himself into a caped crusader to fight crime, prove his innocence and win back the love of his kid.
- *Boston's Finest* (ABC): A framed cop who faked his own death to escape his enemies teams with a beautiful (and as-yet-unframed) detective to help fight crime and prove his innocence.

### **COPS WITH FRAMED DIPLOMAS!**

- *I Witness* (CBS): A gutsy-but-gorgeous college professor and part-time detective uses her psycho-physiological skills to solve crimes, though her egg-headed perspective occasionally creates conflicts with her bureaucratic superiors.
- *Body of Evidence* (ABC): A gutsy-but-gorgeous neurosurgeon joins the medical examiner's office, but her tenacity and scientific perspective occasionally create conflicts with her bureaucratic superiors.
- *Edgar Floats* (ABC): A police psychologist freelances as a bounty hunter, but his smarty-pants background occasionally creates conflicts with his blue-collar bounty hunter in-laws.
- *Criminal Minds: San Francisco* (CBS): A gutsy-but-bald FBI man leads a new group of profilers in solving crimes, but their tenacity occasionally creates conflicts with serial killers.

### **COPS WHO LEAVE THE BIG TIME, BUT STILL STUMBLE ONTO BIG-TIME TROUBLE**

- *The Gates* (ABC): Cop from a Big City gives up his urban job to run law enforcement at a gated community in an affluent suburb, where he discovers a web of intrigue.
- *True Blue* (ABC): A group of former San Francisco homicide detectives reunites to solve the murder of one of their own, and they discover a web of intrigue.

*Figure 4: Shows the television pilots in development in the 2010 season for the major networks; adapted from Brodesser-Akner (2010).*

- *Pleading Guilty* (Fox): Alcoholic ex-cop turned blue-chip attorney searches for his firm's partner who disappeared with a client's millions.

- *Breakfast Kings* (Fox): A former cop pairs with three hard-nosed convicts to track down escaped prisoners for the U.S. Marshals. No web of intrigue is uncovered, but the protagonist does discover how to make a shiv out of a toilet brush.

#### **COPS WITH REGIONAL FLAIR!**

- *Hawaii Five-O* (CBS): Steve McGarrett teams with Chin Ho Kelly to take down Hawaiian ne'er-do-wells.

- *The Odds* (CBS): Two Las Vegas cops take down gambling, pimping, and mobbed-up ne'er-do-wells.

- *187 Detroit* (ABC): Detroit cops take down the few ne'er-do-wells left in their city, mockumentary-style.

- *Ride-Along* (Fox): Chicago cops take down ne'er-do-wells eating deep-dish pizza.

- *Reagan's Law* (CBS): Three generations of a New York City cop family (including the current chief and former chief) take down ne'er-do-wells who say "fuggedaboutit."

#### **COPS LACKING WORK-LIFE BALANCE!**

- *The Line* (CBS): A Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms agent balances his dangerous job with being a father to his newly un-estranged teenage daughter.

- *Good Guys* (Fox): A straight-laced young cop struggles to balance his desire to do things by the book when he's paired with a drinking, womanizing partner.

- *The Rememberer* (CBS): A female NYPD detective in the New York Police Department balances her talent for never forgetting anything with the fact that that's a really irritating quality to ask friends to put up with.

(Figure 4, continued)



## 5. General-Intersectional: Success, Cycles, and Rules

### 5.1 Creating Rules: Interpreting Audience Demand

It is in the generalized-intersectional mode that the durable and institutionalized forms are given their content. As Strang and Macy (2001) predict, these cycles are dependent upon the markers of success and failure in the field. A television producer explains how new rules for the content of shows emerge and disappear within reality television:

People try to create rules. It's almost an attempt to rationalize the irrational. So you say, "this show works because..." and so some of the rules are - family businesses, they work because you see a family, and you see relationships, and you see tensions between people who know and love and hate each other and that's compelling. And it's in a business sense, it's a process, and people like to see success or failure. So you've got these sufficient elements that makes for a good atmosphere, such as *Dog the Bounty Hunter*, it's a family business. So people see that show succeed and then start to create the rules that define it's success. I'm not sure they're always right, but it becomes this sort of received wisdom. But there will become a point when people will stop watching family business shows. And we'll be like, shit, the rule will be family business shows no longer work ... This did happen with *Trading Spaces*. Huge hit for TLC. Everything was make over, make over and then suddenly, literally overnight, the audience stopped watching it. And we're like, "oh my god," the new rule: make over shows are finished, they don't work anymore.

The interpretation of success stories is the linkage between a given audience and rendition on previously existing genres. These new renditions are defined by a constitute aspect which is believed to be the source of their success. In the case of *Dog the Bounty Hunter* it is the 'family business' element, rather than the depiction of the protagonist, racial composition of the cast, romantic interest, or the crime and outlaw elements, to name a few. Hence there is a gap between the success of an individual movie or television show and the reasoning behind what lies at the origin of that success. This is

because the adoption of innovations is an interpretative process where those in positions of authority search for common elements between successful shows and films to create new rules that explain their success. Adoption of a new ‘innovation’ in this instance is therefore a more arbitrary and interpretative process than Strang and Macy (2001) suggest.

Furthermore, the temporal dimension to the cycle can affect the kind of impact that the new ‘rules’ will have upon the sorting process. A manager/producer describes the process in motion pictures:

It can change day-to-day, hour-to-hour, minute-to-minute ... A movie did well for the weekend, *Dear John* did well, and now everybody wants romances. So usually it’s what did well that weekend, and everyone chases after that ... So *Taken* did really well, so all of a sudden a thriller that has the potential for a happy ending became the big thing, so they don’t want revenge thrillers anymore, unless he’s able to save his daughter. Because the thinking was the reason why people flocked to that movie is that it does go into the war-time need for revenge and bloody action but at that same time there was the hope for the positive. If you have the ‘you killed my wife now I’m going to kill you’ that’s not good. If you have ‘you kidnapped my wife and now I’m going to get her back’ that’s good.

The more specific the ‘rule’ the more fleeting and the less diffuse throughout the field it will be. Smaller, more specific changes are more likely to come to define the criteria of evaluation in a single division of a single studio or network as they respond to success and failure as an immediate reaction. The major cycles that define a decade, such as the musicals, B-movies and comic-book movies, are broad and come to define successful movies and shows across the field as a whole.

## 5.2 Movie Rules: Four Quadrant, High-Concept, Pre-Existing IP, & No Dramas

Among the studios, mini-majors and financiers there was a consensus over what defined a ‘commercial movie’. One studio executive neatly summarized it:

As a [studio] executive, I’m looking for a movie that can be sold to a mainstream, commercial audience. Not just that they would like it, but that it has commercial elements to it, like a high concept or by exploiting previously existing intellectual property that means that our marketing department can sell that movie to the major American public. There are increasingly rigid assumptions about what you can sell ... the assumption right now is that a commercial film is a tent pole, franchisable movie that is not particularly male or female, it’s not going to be particularly young or old, and in an ideal world it’s based on some kind of intellectual property that people are already familiar with. *Pirates of the Caribbean* is a great example of that, *Batman* is a great example of that. That is one big bucket of things that people are looking for right now. The other is high-concept comedy.

“High-concept” is not so much a genre of film itself but rather the requirement that it can be *sold* in a single, “marketable” one-line sentence.<sup>14</sup> “*Big*: young man wants to be older, he wakes up the next morning and he’s an adult,” another studio executive offers as an example, and one more, “*Cave Man*: two California kids find a cave man and bring him to high school as their new best friend.” An executive at a financier company explains that this strategy is about the amelioration of mitigating risk:

Eisner once said that a high-concept is something that you can execute mediocrely and you’ll still be fine. People won’t admit that, but it’s absolutely true ... the difficulty level for *Taken*, is not that high, that’s why it’s now the model for half the things in the town. It’s because everybody understands that any person would say, it’s too obvious, you set it up too much, it’s dull - we’d all clean it up but we’d all clean it up too much. What happens is your average punter at minute 25 absolutely knows the problem of the movie and can commit emotionally to the movie.

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<sup>14</sup> It emerged in the early 1980s at Paramount under Michael Eisner, and producing team Don Simpson and Jerry Bruckheimer. Eisner, a vice-president of ABC, who had brought over the ‘log-line’ approach to development together with an extended development deal (Flemming, 1998).

Stories that can be sold in one sentence are also those stories that the audience can ‘get’ immediately with characters they already ‘know’. By reducing the story down to its most rudimentary elements, high-concept has attracted moral overtones, also referred to as “whorishly commercial” or “prostitution on paper”

The emphasis on pre-existing intellectual property is another attempt to reduce risk. As a development executive at a production company explains:

The studios are more likely to buy a movie script based on a graphic novel that may have sold several hundred copies, than an original screenplay that is exactly the same. And yes, part of that is it is easy to imagine what the movie looks like in a graphic novel, the action on some level, what the actors look like etc etc. But I also think that on some level studios have a false sense of security by basing these movies on what they think in their head is a pre-branded piece of intellectual property – no one in America knows about these small comic books by and large. When Universal made *Wanted*, was *Wanted* a wildly successful comic? No. But it was something that was based on a pre-existing piece of material and provided some level of amelioration of risk.

The use of pre-existing intellectual property is not to necessarily tap into a piece of branded material that already has built an audience it can be sold to. That might have been the original rationale and is restricted to a few, very valuable piece of intellectual property.<sup>15</sup> The current state of affairs is a preference for *anything* that exists in any form other than a spec-screenplay. As a result, screenwriters and producers turn their scripts into comic books at a very low cost, which they then believe increases their chance of being purchased and green lit.<sup>16</sup> This demonstrates how in the process of adoption the

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<sup>15</sup> Since the most popular comic books are owned by two studios, Disney and Warner Brothers, the remaining studios are forced to build comic book movies around characters that do not have a dedicated fan-base.

<sup>16</sup> Recent examples of graphic novels are *District 9*, *Surrogates*, and *Kick Ass*.

rule itself can subtly change away from the original rationale for success into a principle of legitimacy that is separated from it. It moves, to use Weber's terms, from being instrumentally rational to becoming custom or habit. In doing so, rationalistic elements are defeated over time.

Adult dramas are currently in the trough of their cycle, universally declared as a "dead" genre. "It's dead, done, goodbye – appropriated by television," a motion picture literary agent observed, before adding:

It just needs to be fantastic, it needs movie stars and it needs to be made at a price point ... you'll see one or two break out a year, and they will come back. It wasn't that long ago when people were saying that big studios are just going to be like indies when we had those indie break out years, and then we had years of dismal failure.

Indeed, adult dramas had fueled the growth of the independent sector in the 1990s (Biskind, 2004) and peaked when studios set up their own independent production houses, of which a single one remains, Fox Searchlight. A development executive at a production company explains the economic rationale:

If you're a studio you have fourteen slots a year. So you look at your slots and think, a movie like *State of Play*. The best-case scenario for that movie is *A Beautiful Mind*, the worst case scenario is it does nothing. If you take that movie, which is a \$60m movie, and you look at it another way you could spend \$60m which is *Eragon*, with an upside of \$700m worldwide and launches and franchise, and in the downside case you lose \$30m. If you look at the bell-curve it's crazy that not all movies are that kind of movie. It just doesn't make sense to make *Frost/Nixon* given that the cost of releasing a movie is similar, between \$40m and \$60m.

This shift is not restricted to the studios but occurring concurrently in the independent world where both are converging upon high-concept movie at the expense of adult

dramas. An executive at a film finance company that had recent success with adult dramas is nevertheless having to adjust to the new environment:

We've had some success in the art house world or the commercial art-house world, but we kinda saw the writing on the wall: when you lose Paramount Vintage and you lose Warner Independent - and Miramax was going away, and Focus is really focused on their own slate - to finance these smaller independent films and hope for a domestic distributor is getting really hard.

These studios did not just finance movies, they were key players in securing their distribution by supplying the costs for prints and advertising. As these P&A costs have increased, adult dramas have been punished, whereas 'genre' pictures, such as science fiction, horror or romantic comedy, are possible at lower price points.

### ***5.3 TV Rules: From Doctors, Lawyers, and Cops, to Drag Queens & Coupon Queens***

In television, cycles occur less at the field level and more within individual networks or between networks that share the same audience niches. Whereas studios are competing for essentially the same 'four quadrant' demographic, television networks seek to carve out their own audiences with a distinctive brand identity. The rules of success, therefore, are formed within the niche rather than the field. When genres are appropriated they must be made to fit in with the demands of the brand identity, as a TV agent explains:

Up until recently, ABC has always been about soaps, and all of their product looks very pretty and clean. Increasingly they've been having this problem of 'what's an ABC procedural show' or 'what's the ABC version of a CBS procedural show' and they've finally found one in *Castle* which is a murder-he-wrote kinda glossy, clean, back and forth with these two very good looking leads.

In the most general forms of the genres, such as a comic procedural, they are able to break out across the industry. As another TV agent noted:

The USA [network] type of comedic procedural, is where you're solving a case, but there's humor and character. The whole industry has looked at the USA and it's success, the whole industry has looked at that and there's a lot of that happening. That's a very hot genre.

Musical shows and situational comedies are two other genres that have recently made a comeback after years of retrenchment after the success of *American Idol* and *Two and a Half Men*, respectively.

The broader and less specific the genre, the more likely it is to circle throughout the television space. After two decades of the rise and evolution of reality television as a core genre, the cycle now is turning back towards scripted programming. This is taking place throughout the field even among networks that have never had scripted programming before. "Every day we have ten of them calling us up, you know The History Channel," a television agent explains, "we want to get into the scripted business." The most iconic example of this shift is taking place at MTV where, as the network chief explained, "Right now, this generation that is coming up has been raised on Walt Disney scripted programming, so at MTV we want to do scripted programming for, like 18 to 30. MTV is trying to shift out of reality." He went on to put this in the context of the cycles that MTV as a network has moved through over the past two decades:

It was the Back Street Boys and NSync era. After that there was *Jack Ass*, fun, silly goofy, young male stuff. Then there was *The Osbornes*, which began an era of celebrity sit-coms. There was then a moment where we had broad based, popular shows like *Punk'd* and *Pimp My Ride* franchises that everybody watched and there was no distinction. And then it became the *Laguna Beach*, *The Hills* era. And now we're into scripted.

This comes down to the perceived success of other networks as well, he continues:

The most successful cable TV networks today are scripted – TNT, FX, they have slates of original programming, and Disney Cartoon. Cable is becoming completely premium, so if you don't have some kind of premium, distinct offering, I think it's hard to be registered in the national consciousness.

The programming and slate cycles are defined by the rules created by the success and failure of shows within the political economy of the television and motion picture industries that establishes the means by which audiences are categorized and monetized. Rules that apply to the most general level of sorting have more transferability across niches than those rules that sort at more specific levels.

#### ***5.4 Legitimacy: Bound to the Rule***

Additionally, the interpretation of the rules of success is not necessarily a widely shared belief but a function of authority and legitimacy across the field and within organizations. A studio executive reflects upon the current cycle in motion pictures with respect to his own personal interpretation of the market:

Me, personally? What do I think the American audience wants? The assumptions I have deciding - whether or not to run a particular piece of material up the flag pole are not necessarily my own personal preferences and assumptions. I am not at a point of my career where I can say “no, I'm going to pass on this thing because these things don't work, because there's no real human element or a humanistic approach to it.” By the same token, I have real difficulty with that when I try and sell a piece of material to my bosses and say, you know, this taps into the American public's latent desire for revenge about what happened to the economy. You know, I would take a movie like *Taken* and *Gran Torino* and the success of those movies and say there is a desire to see the common man be rewarded justice. I think there is a legitimate argument behind that perspective, but nobody wants to hear it. At the end of the day, it's tent pole, franchizable, four quadrant entertainment preferably PG or PG-13, or high-concept comedy made at a low budget.



Another studio executive adds in the same vein: “it doesn’t matter if you don’t like *Twilight*, it’s giant hit movie.” Those on the buying side of the business may come up with different rules of success based upon their interpretation of the market place but these are mitigated by their position in the authority structure. This can play out in the group dynamics of the organization, as one network executive explains:

It’s very easy for the nodding head syndrome to occur. You have a vertical structure inside a single company, all of their underlings want to please that someone at the top, so if that person even indicates slightly a preference for one project over another, I just think it’s human nature that it stands to reason that the ones below, starting nodding their heads, “oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, that’s a good idea,” and subsume their own instincts.

The formation of the rules of success is an interpretive and social process where rules are derived from successes in an arbitrary fashion, their specificity in sorting determines their ability to cross niches and obtain longevity, and they are embedded with authority structures that serve as markers for legitimacy across the field. Furthermore, adoption may be retained even after it has become economically rational to do so as the legitimation aspect of the rules acts as an autonomous force.

There are many, many pitches and spec-scripts that meet these criteria, they are, after all, very broad in the potential stories they encompass, even as they cut many more out. The question now is, how those individual properties *within* the generalized parameters are evaluated, selected and developed?

## 6. Specific-Categorical: Applying the Formula, Afterwards

### 6.1 *Post-Hoc Justifications*

The specific-categorical criteria of evaluation applied to individual properties has a weak sorting function in determining which spec-scripts and pitches are purchased, but a strong impact on how those stories are developed after they are purchased. If the alternative hypothesis is true - that the criteria of evaluation did have a strong sorting function - then those properties that met the criteria would be subject to competing bids from multiple buyers. But this is not the case. It is incredibly rare for bidding wars between rival studios or networks to occur. Such instances seldom occur, and usually come down to either the intersectional factors in the form of ‘heat’ and ‘buzz’ or the status of the writer or producer selling the property. Usually, properties and scripts are sold to a single bidder. However, once properties enter into the development ‘machine’ the criteria that define worthy movies and television shows are applied to mould them to those standards located at the field level or within the organization.

There is a shared language of justification that rationalizes purchases *post hoc*. A network executive offers a typical example: “we look for, generally, a concept that we find intriguing, characters that we find really compelling at the center of it, a voice or a tone that sounds original, provocative - a engine behind it that will give it legs in terms of going to series.” There is a consistent lexicon of terms used to evaluate properties: character, plot, theme, tone, acts, beats, arcs, and so forth. The problem with this language, as many of those on the supply-end frequently complain, is that it is “too vague to be useful,” as one writer/director put it. Indeed, when asked to elaborate on the specific meaning of the terms, they either responded by giving idiosyncratic definitions

or by appealing to an emotional, ‘feeling’, or individual response to the text. “It’s like the saying with porn,” a manager/producer told me, “you just know it when you see it.” For example, the question of what defines a “genre” picture included horror, fantasy, romantic comedies, science-fiction, thriller, action and adventure. Some had restricted definitions that narrowed it to just one of these, whilst others included all of them, but all/everyone agreed it excluded adult dramas. The only rules that did have a clear sorting function concerned the form screenplays took, such as the formatting of the document and the number of pages (e.g. under 120 pages for features), which were perceived to be signs of professionalism rather than quality.

The retrospective nature of the justifications is revealed in how the ‘relateability’ of the characters is determined. Those that are seen to be relateable are those that tap into some kind of “universal experience” that the audience can relate to, either through some broad theme or challenge the characters face, or through the literal use of gender, race, age and location of the characters. As one studio executive explains:

I think the reason why *Funny People* failed, is not because it’s a bad movie, but because it’s basically about Adam Sandler being depressed, about a bazillionaire comedian, movie star, living in a giant house who is sad because the woman he cheated on isn’t with him any more – talk about something that nobody relates to right now.

In the same vein, a network executive explains the success of the hit-show *House, MD* in reference to the relatability of the character Dr. Gregory House:

Because the lynchpin there is that he’s grumpy, he represents the foibles in a lot of us, and a lot of people can weirdly sympathize with the way that he’s feeling, he says the thing that social propriety dictates that we don’t. But, at the end of the day, he’s saving people. That’s the key.

It is fair to presume that the executives who develop and green light each project assume that the audience will be able to ‘relate’ to the protagonist in some way and that the characters are similar: e.g., privileged, flawed, contemporary American males. At the same time, all characters can be stretched to embody some universal element of experience and at the same time find some aspect of them that will alienate the audience. It is sufficiently vague to justify the success and failure of any movie or television show, but too weak to sort out competing properties from one another.

The absence of criteria of evaluation with a sorting function is not surprising. The training to become a development executive is almost always serving as an assistant at a production company or a talent agency. As a result, the lexicons are acquired in the work environment where no attempt is made at any point, to synthesize or create consistent definitions of what constitutes ‘good stories’ or ‘good characters’ that would then come to act in sorting properties. Rather, the language provides cultural capital to those who master it effectively as it signals their own professionalism and suitability for a development role. If the reverse were true, then respondents would be given consistent definitions in the interview context, and properties that enter the market place would have multiple bids from competing buyers. Neither of these two conditions was observed.

## ***6.2 Formulas in Development***

What was observed was the imposition of a ‘formula’ during the development of the scripts and outlines for television shows and motion pictures. Television and movies have internally consistent definitions but opposing definitions: movies heavily emphasize plot but reduce character, television is not concerned with plot as much as character. The lay theories within the field explain this in terms of the nature of medium: motion

pictures require a highly marketable concept that will bring an audience to the theatre for a single event as opposed to television that aims to bring an audience back each week, ideally until the show reaches one hundred episodes whereupon it can enter into domestic syndication.

Studio executives constantly refer to a “big idea”, usually in the form of a high-concept, that will form the basis of developing a property. As one studio executive put it:

Whether it’s finding magazine articles or true-life stories or just reading a great sci-fi novel and finding a great kernel of an idea in that sci-fi story, but the story isn’t big enough to have a huge fan-base, you can just take the kernel of that story and construct your own thing. The perfect example is Philip K Dick stories, they usually have a few great ideas but are nonsensical, so you can usually take those ideas, whether it’s *Blade Runner* or *Minority Report*, or even *Total Recall*, and just take kernel that inspires you and build something around it.

These ‘big ideas’ are the basis of marketing the movies and lies at the core of the high-concept movie. Studios buy pitches and spec-scripts for the premises that are then developed according to the formulas used by the executives and the demands of the talent attached. As virtually every script that enters into the studio development system is re-written, often with many rounds of writers, the plots and characters are re-written, with only a passing resemblance to the premise of the original spec or pitch in the finished product. As a result, in movies, the notion of “good writing,” something every executive and agent claims to value, is, in practice, moot. Good writing, if it exists at all, only comes in after screenplays have been purchased and placed into development.

The characters must be made subservient to the high-concept by drawing upon well-known character tropes and stereotypes. As one screenwriter explains:

It has to be characters that we get right away, we don't need back story. I don't need to understand who they are as people; if you have characterization it must be killed - that's the opposite of high-concept. It's the insecure cheer-leader who has gained a lot of weight, someone who you already know, who you can relate to right off the bat, and what you're relying on is plot, not characterization at all.

Another screenwriter points out that any idiosyncratic character can risk the script coming to look like an adult drama:

The character stuff I try to pitch doesn't interest them, or it interests them but makes them nervous. It makes them think, "is this a drama?" Drama is a bad word. It's not just that they don't want to do it, it's that they're scared to death that something is going to turn into a drama ... I think they're trying to make enough action and enough thriller so that it doesn't look like a drama.

The prescriptions for the characters, the protagonist in particular, are rigid: they must be active, courageous, like-able, with any peculiar or extreme traits 'softened'. The screenwriter expands on this, giving the example of a gangster movie he writing with a major studio:

I had him say, let me take the suicide mission part of it. "No, he can't do that." Why? "Because he has small children. He can't get killed." Forget the psychology where he might consider his honor more important than his children. Just because he's? particularly tender, they're passing moral judgment. It's incredibly prohibitive.

The limits of who the protagonist can be and what he or she can do are institutionalized notions of what kinds of roles the stars required for those roles will want to play.

Another screenwriter adds:

There are limits about which characters can be important which one's can't, and how relatively important characters can be to the bankable stars,

who are the reasons for making the movie. Often they [the executives] are more jealous of the star's centrality than the star is.

Directors and writers interviewed argued that they were out of sync with the demands of many actors that they routinely worked for.

By contrast, television is defined as a character-driven medium where concepts play little role in the success of the show. High-concept shows such as *Lost* or *Flash Forward* are considered riskier shows than the hospital, police and law procedurals that dominate scripted dramas. As one television agent puts it:

Television is not a premise business. What is *The West Wing*? Let's do a show about the president and his advisors. Well, any asshole can come in and say that to me – and they do! But Aaron Sorkin had written *A Few Good Men* and *The American President*, and was very well regarded. And when *The American President* finished, he was like, “we've got these amazing sets, I have all these relationships with people in the Clinton White House, let's do *The West Wing*, and it will be real, I'll be the show runner, we have all these relationships, we have the sets, it's economical, we can execute it and it will be great.

The high-concept may be key for attracting an audience at first, but it is the ability to ‘execute’ over the long term and have compelling characters that the audience identifies with that brings the audience back from week to week. As a network executive explains:

What we really like is originality of character, character that pops, that you've never seen before and has a strong point of view ... Just take *House*, for example. It's a pretty simple show, if you strip away the character stuff and just look at the story-telling it's a pretty simple-show, it's a medical-mystery show, the beats are there, it's comfort food, you know where the act breaks are going to fall, you know where the ad breaks are going to be. The rhythm of that show, from a story-telling point of view, is fairly consistent. It's the character arc overlay that makes it special. That's why it has the best of both worlds. It has a story that has propulsion, that has a mystery to it, a play-along factor for the audience and has a familiarity to it. TV is a lot about comfort, it's about rhythm, it's about process, as much as you want to be shocked and surprised by your TV you also want know what to expect a little bit. So you're always toying that line: providing a form – you're not

asking the audience to work hard to understand it, they understand what a medical-mystery show is all about, there have been countless numbers of those.

The rules over the kind of characters allowed, do differ from network to network depending upon their audience and brand, such as gay casts on LOGO, female protagonists on Lifetime, and strong leads on Fox.

Both the story structures of television shows and motion pictures are highly formulaic defined by a sequence of plot-points or 'beats'. There are general definitions across the field on which sequence of beats makes up a romantic comedy or a police procedural, but in television these genres are further tailored to the needs of the network.

As an agent explains:

These networks do have different structures as far as their shows go based on where their ad breaks are, if they have a teaser, how many acts they have, if they try to get in an extra commercial or not, as to how they structure their show. If you look at a show like *Brothers and Sisters* – most shows are five acts – the main conflict will generally come in act three, and resolution in four and conclusion in five. They'd say in the fourth act of a *Brothers and Sisters* show there is always crying, fifth act is resolution and sixth act is family dinner. These things are formulaic. There are very set rules for these shows: who says what at what point, how you move the story along, reintroducing relationships and character names in every act and every episode.

The need to mitigate risk through formulas that are set out in advance of the creation of each individual episode can have seemingly paradoxical effects when applied to areas outside scripted programming in the 'reality' arena, as one TV producer explains:

One of the odd things about reality TV: it's supposed to be real, so what's it going to look like? There's this huge anxiety about what it's going to look like, so much so, that it prevents it from being real, because you've got to script it or fake it to the way they [network executives] want it to be. And



what they want it to be, is to look like and feel like other reality shows already out there.

The bureaucratic impulse by networks to reduce risks by crafting the series in advance comes into conflict with another directive. As one network executive puts it, “[the audience] don’t want to see fake stuff, they don’t want to see something that seems contrived or fake, they can smell it.” Premium cable networks are less proscriptive in this regard as they do not carry paid advertising and thereby do not need to create a narrative structure that creates a climax before the commercial break in order to maintain the audience. Thus, how television shows are monetized comes to impact directly on the kind of formula that is used in each case.

In motion pictures the beat structure is less differentiated by the studio or financier, and more determined by the key talent attached according to their status (see *Chapter 3, “Stars”*). In terms of studio, as opposed to star, preferences, these beats are defined in large part by the many how-to guides on screenwriting. As one screenwriter puts it:

Sometimes you’re working with people who don’t have any deep understanding of what a screenplay is. They’ve either read Sid Field or know jargon about block-points or act-structure or character arcs. Their job in essence is to take a screenplay that one person could have written and turn into a screenplay that anybody could have written.

The need to adhere to the expectations of the genre is rationalized by one producer and former studio executive as:

If you went to a test audience – hypothetically, no one’s ever done this – and said to them, “do you want the couple to get together at the end of this romantic comedy?” They would say to you, “absolutely not, because I know

what's coming, I'm so tired of it." You'd then show them the movie where the couple did not get together and they'd say, "I love the fact they didn't get together," they would then rate the movie four out of ten. If you showed them movie with the couple getting together at the end, they'd say, "I hated the fact they got together at the end, it's awful," and they'd rate it 7 out of 10. That's what the business tells you.

Indeed, formulas are perceived by those on the demand-side, executives and producers who are buying and developing projects as an enabling rather than a constraining force.

As a development executive sees it:

Restrictions are what movies are. Everything is incredibly restricted, because you have all of these antecedents that people are comfortable with, all these formal rules of film making, narrative rules – do I feel restricted because on every movie I work on you have to know by page twenty what the central problem of the movie is that has to be solved? I don't feel restricted at all.

Formulas in this sense are perceived merely as templates that allow the audience to connect with the story at hand. The resistance from directors, writers and actors to the rigidity of formula in its application by producers and executives is intrinsic to the process itself and usually settled by the status and leverage of the players involved.

As formulas are applied to stories principally after they have been initially selected, they function less to sort potential ideas as developing ideas into forms that are ready to shoot. The absence of institutionalized criteria of evaluation across the field that defines 'good' from 'bad' stories results in the language of evaluation as a retrospective justification for decisions already taken. This is further reinforced by the notion in the field that 'nobody knows anything', that there are limitations on the very possibility of evaluation for prediction. "When it's an artistic business it's all going to be arbitrary anyway," a development executive explains, "there are times when I'm like, you people

are crazy if you think this, but I can't say you're wrong for three years until the movie comes out."

## **7. Specific-Intersectional: Social Thermodynamics**

### ***7.1 Heat and Buss***

The value of a property is not determined by evaluating the property in terms of its textual characteristics, but by its position in the three axes of social relations: the relationship to other properties (comps), the relationships between buyers (buzz) and the status of those parties affiliated to the property (heat). The changing context in which they emerge means that the value of properties itself is constantly changing and at the same time subject to manipulation. It is through these three axes that the specific-intersectional mode of evaluation is structured in the field.

The source of value in social relations rather than text is recognized in one Hollywood joke: "two CAA agents are walking down the street, "what did you think of the screenplay, one agent asks the other, "I don't know," the agent replies, "no-one else has read it yet."” Indeed, even individual evaluations themselves are disregarded and denigrated by those in the field as less significant than the value of the evaluations of others, as one development executive confirms:

It's so subjective, I mean, you know, there's structure and there's character, but why something else is going to work much more than this one – someone can argue passionately for script A and someone can argue passionately for script B and they're both right. So when you see these scripts go out it's really interesting to see which one's have buzz behind them ... ultimately it may be the shittiest script of the week, but for whatever reason, if their agent or manager was able to get buzz behind it, then it sells.

This is because the value of a property is derived from the value that the market place attaches to it, as a studio executive puts it:

Hollywood is very paranoid town. People are very insecure in opinion and their ability to assess material and give it value. There's a couple of reasons for that. First, it is very difficult to assess a piece of material's value because that value changes so much and because so much of that value is determined by the perceived value of that material by other people. So people are constantly chasing whatever the new hot thing is.

The selection of individual properties for production slates and programming schedules is driven by the intersection of the relationships between buyers as communication and competition, and the relationships between sellers as status.

The hierarchical relations between sellers in the form of status generates 'heat' behind any property entering the marketing place. These sellers need not be the author, but merely affiliated in some capacity: the agent selling the property, the actors or directors attached to the project, or the production company producing the project. The status of any one of those elements can generate heat. One former development executive at a mini-major recalls how this played out in practice:

For the first six months that I was there it wasn't about 'can we get the best projects that we think are great for us' but 'there's a hot new writer, Rogue is going after them, we have to get to them first.' Truly. And we acquired tons of awful projects just because they were going after them, projects that we never even read.

The value of property through its status affiliations can be the sole means by which properties are purchased in the marketplace, as in some cases they can be simply in pitch or treatment form with no screenplay to evaluate. The charge that agents, producers and

directors don't "read" scripts is repeated often, and as demonstrated in the quote above, is indicative of intersectional, rather than categorical, social process.

The demand for high-status talent creates a situation in which the properties they are affiliated to confers status upon those who purchase them. As a result, competition opens up between buyers which in turn becomes a status game of its own, as one development executive recounted:

When there is a breakout writer or director there becomes this ego competition of who is going to get them for their next project first. And yeah, you're really hot, you have a lot of value because people are competing over you. Sure, because you're talented and you made this great film, but also because it matters who gets you next, who gets you first.

Studios are constantly monitoring the actions of the other studios for cues as to what the next valuable property is going to be. As a studio executive describes it:

It's competitive development. Part of my job is to track what's going on at other studios, what's out there, what's hot. I'm sitting here reading all this material partly to know what we might want to buy or what might be a good project for us, but also because, is someone else going to buy this? Or I heard Sony like this script, or Sony likes this writer – interesting, are they any good? Is this somebody who should be working with us? So you are always tracking things.

The competition between studios goes further, where properties may be acquired not to make a film, but to undermine a project in development at another studio. The studio executive continues,

So whenever you have a script, like this teen thriller I bought, I'm going to be on the look out between now and when this movie can get green lit to see if anybody buys something or has something that was completely inactive and now says, "oh, that teen thriller, maybe we should re-activate that," because people will try to kill these projects.

These status games are themselves mediated through relationships which come to constitute social capital in the field.

It is through tracking and observing others that “buzz” is formed, as executives share evaluations with one another. One studio executive laments:

““I always like this, I always thought it was great,” is everyone’s answer to everything.” “No you didn’t. You’re only saying this because you heard something about a script you haven’t yet seen and you’re taking their word at face value. There’s a lot of that goes on ... [For example] There was this script called *Butter*, it was kind of like a *Little Miss Sunshine*, about a real-life butter churning competition in Iowa ... and when we decided to make this movie, suddenly that got out, we told the agent, “this is great, I want to buy this so we can put it together,” so suddenly everyone in town wants it. The script had been around town for three months and one call from the co-President saying, “I want this,” and then Mandate ended up buying the script. Anyone could have had it for three months, it just sat there.

These valuations primarily take place as ongoing conversations between agents, development executives, and producers. In the development community, the constant refrain is, “have you read anything good lately?” These conversations also take place on members-only Internet tracking boards and are formalized in the annual Black List that lists the most highly rated but unsold screenplays.<sup>17</sup> Buzz, therefore, is itself structured by social capital and emerges through the reputations gained in individual conversations between executives, producers and agents. As one studio executive explains:

It really is about who recommended the script to you. So I receive scripts in a number of different ways. I may have a phone call with somebody in a studio or production company, who is my peer, and it’s a constant

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<sup>17</sup> Created by Franklin Leonard, the Black List a survey of over three hundred studio executives who vote for their favorite unmade screenplays. It started off as an attempt to formalize the “buzz” that took place among executives, producers, and agents. For those screenplays that make the list, and even more for those who top it, it provides considerable heat for those properties and their authors.

conversation about “have you read anything good lately?” That question is a regular refrain for every development executive working in this business. You are constantly seeking out people whose taste you share. I get incoming phone calls from agents and managers who say, “I just signed this new writer or director, I’d really like you to take a look at it.” And then you’re really looking at a sort of historical analysis of what this person has sent me up to now and how much have I liked this stuff they have sent me before. There is no real analysis, no one is looking at spreadsheets or anything, but you evolve an assumption about somebody’s reputation based on the stuff they’ve said before ... You are constantly assessing who do I like, who has sent me good stuff and who has sent me bad stuff, who do I take seriously and who do I not. It takes some time, but after a while you start to realize, OK so-and-so has a really good list and really good taste, if they love it I’m likely to love it.

It is precisely because of the “subjective” nature of evaluation, that there is little agreement on what constitutes a “good” character or story, and individual taste becomes a key factor in assessing the value of a given property.

Buzz and heat are in some respects predictable. This means that those looking to sell projects - agents and managers in particular, are able to manipulate the context to create the maximum buzz and heat to ensure a sale. This requires judgment in knowing which properties to place heat behind, other projects that are already in development and in demand, manipulating the time frame so that they have the greatest possible status affiliations on the project, and creating a pressurized environment that will illicit the most bids. However, agents and managers often make mistakes when trying to create this kind of environment, as one development executive explains:

If I tell you, ‘go and see *Shutter Island*, you’ll like it, you’ll have fun,’ or if I say, ‘go see *Shutter Island*, it’s the best movie you’ll see in your life,’ and tell other people that, and you go and see it and you didn’t like it, it’s going to be even worse because you’re expectations are so high. And I think there’s definitely a blow back where buzz can hurt you, where – so much buzz, so much buzz, so much buzz, and people are reading the script thinking, ‘shooting tomorrow, ready to go,’ instead of this is a great concept,

something to work on. So their mind set is ‘this is the greatest script that’s going to come out this year’ and when it’s let down, there’s a big ‘oh, I don’t want this, it’s not very good.’

Perceptions, therefore, are open to strategic manipulation, which in turn are enabled by the combination of weak evaluative criteria at the field-level and the uncertain nature of the business itself where many a ‘sure bet’ becomes a total misfire.

As status is defined differently in television and film, heat and buzz have subtly different effects on the process. As one TV agent explains:

A film is a one time event. It’s a bunch of people coming together, they do a thing, they throw it out to the world and they hope for the best. After the premier, maybe it comes round for awards, but you never really hear of it again. A successful television series has to run eighty to one hundred episodes. It’s at least four years of working together. It fundamentally changes everything about how the whole thing works. Heat matters, perception matters, no question. But you can’t fake it. *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* it really is the worst ... it was one of the most successful movies in the last year. I don’t believe that it is possible in scripted TV. Some people might cite *Two and a Half Men* ... watch three episodes of *Two and a Half Men*, it’s pretty funny ... I think it’s really hard to find a successful long term scripted series that has no merit whatsoever. To have characters that people get into and love and want to be there week after week after week ... that’s a hard enterprise, to tell 80 to 100 stories that people love is really difficult to do. So if you can’t execute, you’re found out really quickly.

In television, status is awarded primarily to those with track-records of having written and produced many episodes over a number of years, whereas the film industry is more open to untested people with big ideas - that is, finding the next Quentin Tarantino or Christopher Nolan. As a result, value is more predictable in television, whereas in motion pictures, the lure of someone who is “new” and “hot” remains a tempting possibility for buyers. Thus, this gives agents and managers more room to create



perceptions of value that are arbitrarily assigned separately from past performances.

## 7.2 Comps

Properties are also evaluated through comparison to one another in a similar fashion as the generalized-intersectional phenomena of the creation “rules” for programming and slate, through past success and failures. This is tied to the reliance upon formula as a guide to success as discussed previously and revealed by the skepticism of those in the business of buying “originality.” Instead, they exalted “freshness”. Originality refers to a new, untested idea, or rather, one that deviates from the current formulas and thereby represents risk. Freshness, on the other hand, represents a new “twist” on an existing model or template that is derivative of a successful TV show or movie. This logic was expressed by one development executive as such:

The first *Pirates of the Caribbean* movie was, beat for beat, the same plot as *Star Wars*. You’ve got a kid on a boondock outer-rim island, sees some princely damsel in distress who he might have had a past with, he has a father issue, his father went to the dark side, they go on an adventure on an interesting vessel and comes face-to-face with his destiny. It’s the same fucking movie. But no one, no one sees that. This is the most watched movie of 2003 and the most watched movie of 1977, and nobody noticed.

In television, originality is even more suspect, as everything has to be derivative in some respect. “Feature writers, especially, tend to be, like, ‘this has never been seen on television before!’,” one TV agent recounts, “well, guess what, everything has been seen and if it hasn’t there’s generally a reason.” A reality TV producer expands:

Even an idea in TV that is original is in some way derivative. *Shark Week* is Discovery’s most successful show, but *Shark Week* is basically *Jaws*. It’s a knock off of a scripted mega-hit. So people have an archetypal response to shows and it’s trading on that. Or *Real Housewives of New Jersey* is *Desperate Housewives*.

Seeking the derivation of any movie or show to another movie or show is an interpretative process where the key elements are identified and then compared along lines of ‘similarity’. This is the ‘specific’ application of social logic identified in the general-categorical mode where success and failures structure the cycles of genres.

Specific properties are evaluated in the intersectional mode through the comparison to existing shows. In motion pictures, this is done in two ways: by creating low, medium and high estimates based upon the ‘numbers’ of similar movies with different rates of success, and the creation of ‘comps’ where those movies that are perceived to be most similar serve as a more direct guide. “If it’s an action movie – it could be *Speed*, it could be *Taking of Phelem*, or it could be a disaster,” a development executive explains, “and then it comes down to, what do you believe?” The construction of “comps” is both subjective and political: the aim is to create favorable comparisons for projects that executives want to get green lit by those with the authority to do so. Comparisons of this kind are used more to decide between competing properties that have already been purchased and developed.

## **8. The Opportunity Structure: Strategies for Supply**

The aggregate of these directives, formulas, cycles and bursts of heat are observed and interpreted by those seeking to supply the market. One reality TV producers observes the market niche for his own kind of programming:

Sundance channel definitely thinks its audience is smarter than most, whereas Bravo thinks they’re more affluent than most, that they have a bit more money. WE’s audience is kinda feminine ... A lot of networks will describe themselves as aspirational in different ways. Bravo, Sundance,

HBO - they really are defining the same thing in different ways. It's nuancy. ESPN, TLC, Spike, they're all channels that describe themselves in very middle-America terms. They're not aspirational. Oxygen is women, but co-viewing, predominately women, but more downmarket than Bravo.

Although there are no contradictions in the sample interviewed in terms of what was perceived to be demand in the market from the networks and studios, there are certainly gaps in knowledge over market demand. This is principally because market information is relayed through relationships. The fewer intermediaries between the creator of a potential show or film, and those executives in positions of high authority at the network or studio, the greater the accuracy of information they will have. As a manager/producer explained, "unless you're talking to people a lot, and hearing what people are looking for, there's no way of knowing." Thus, access to market information is, in large part, a function of one's social capital, which as a result, comes to function as a mechanism of social closure barring potential entrants to the marketplace.

While there are no competing understandings of market demand, only differing levels of accuracy, there is a variety of strategies of undertaken. A studio executive sums up this dilemma for producers:

Where is that producer going to place that material? Is he going to place it at Disney where it's going to be skewed very family friendly, or Lionsgate where they have a specialty in movies like *Saw* and *Hostel* ... You say, ok, I'm probably going to go to Disney. That decision then becomes, who I am I going to go to at Disney? Am I going to go to the executive who has the Bruckheimer accounts? Who works exclusively with Jerry and generally blows things up? Or am I going to go with the guy who just did a comedy with Chris Rock who has a relationship with him and is golfing buddies on the weekends?

The choices are more diverse even from this, in how to respond to the signals from the market. Five principle strategies were identified on how to develop material to meet market demand: rejection, holes, conformity, diversified, reframing. I will now explain each of these in turn.

### ***8.1 Rejection***

“I’m not trying to cookie-cutter what I do,” as one producer put it, “I do what is interesting to me and that what I think will work.” Such statements are frequent among the most high-status producers, who have already produced hits or have served as former studio chairmen. High-status producers are able to either gain the studio’s trust in that they have a commercial taste and can be relied upon to execute production, or they have relationships with high-status talent, particularly actors, who are able to raise the financing for a movie independently. Some writers also reject “chasing the carrot” because they believe it is ultimately self-defeating and will fail to produce quality work. These statements could also be examples of bravado by exalting their individual power and artistic credentials. However, this was not true for all of those who claimed to reject considerations for market demand as their past projects do include genres and treatments outside the commercial mainstream.

### ***8.2 Gaps***

Those who search for gaps in the market is another form of a rejection in market demand. A former studio head who is now a producer asks, “what is being done? I looked for historical pictures because nobody was doing them.” The head of a mini-major, who buys and produces properties but needs to sell the product to a distributor, explains a similar strategy:

We are really here to plug holes that the studios have left open. The notion is this: there are so many films not getting made within the system itself that deserve to get made, that you can have an opportunity. Exhibit A, you could say, is *Law Abiding Citizen* which every studio passed on, except Overture. Every studio was tried multiple times by the producers before they came to us and we thought maybe we'll take a partner and tried a few, but no one wanted to, and it is very telling actually, because now some of them of course are saying damn, I wish I'd taken that movie. But they were afraid of it at the time, they said things like could you just make it PG-13? If you know anything about the movie you would know it's a hard R. It would be like saying could you make *Silence of the Lambs* PG-13? Not a good idea. You would ruin the essence of what it is. Number two, as they go towards making everything brand, it's the Barbie movie, it's the Spiderman movie, it's the movie based on the best-selling book. That leaves a lot of very good material sitting on the ground.

This takes place within television as well as smaller cable companies who look to fill in gaps in the existing market place for their own products. Such a strategy, however, can only be done by those players who either have significant financial resources, high-status or access to high-status people.

### ***8.3 Conformity***

Those without the aforementioned resources are forced in large part to conform to the prevailing market demand. As a young reality TV producer puts it:

The thing I think about most is, 'where can we sell it?' You can have the greatest project in the world but if nobody's going to buy it then it's a waste of time. If we see something that's perfect for Bravo, that's perfect for A&E, you really have to know the market and where you want to spend your time developing stuff.

As another young manager/producer describes it, "a lot of the time you're looking for projects that are a path of least resistance." The strategy also has its risks as market demand can change very quickly and very suddenly, whereas each project may take years

to develop. Thus, those who lack status must make up for it with social capital in the form of direct relationships between the studio, network or producer to receive the most accurate and up-to-date market information.

#### ***8.4 Diversified***

The most common producer strategy is to create a diversified development portfolio. “Their mandate is, we only do the high-concept comedies and the super-hero, action movies, so we’re re-thinking the stuff we’re going to put our energy into,” a movie producer tells me. “I’ve been at things long enough that I’ve seen things change and seen cycles go through”. The benefits, according to a manager/producer, are:

You get what you think are great scripts and if you can get them done, that’s what everyone’s looking for. So you keep them in your portfolio and when it becomes their time you can dust them off and have an easier time getting them sold ... Because if *Taken* does well, and you have a movie over at New Line that happens to be a revenge thriller with a happy ending and suddenly you’re like, “guess what guys, we can go make this!”

This strategy is largely in response to the gap between the time a project takes in development to the changes in the scheduling or slate strategies. As a result, it is not practically possible to develop movies in response to direct changes in the market place. The risk of doing so is that by the time the script is completed there will be a new hit, a new rule, and a new cycle established. It is possible to sell pitches in this fashion, as they take less time to prepare, but movie studios have ceased purchasing pitches from all but the uttermost A-List talent. Television networks, in contrast, do buy and develop pitches in their routine year-long development cycle, but are, at the same time, less likely to buy a pitch based simply on the premise, as discussed previously.

## ***8.5 Reframing***

Pitches and spec-scripts are always reframed to some degree. “We do listen to what they say about their audience and then we think,” a television producer explains, “how do we pitch this show to them? What different spin do we put on it?” A television writer reveals how this is done with respect to each network:

It’s a one-hour procedural about an intermediate search consultant and her ace team of people ... If I’m going to pitch [the show] to CBS .... then I’d go back and talk about these people and why they’re exceptional at what they do. Because CBS is all about – they can be kinda messed up in their private lives – but they have to be amazing at what they do for a living ... then I would talk about form, because they’re very into the formula, and how does it work each week ... If I’m doing it say, for Lifetime, it’s about a woman and she works as a search consultant, she herself was adopted, she doesn’t get along with mother, she gets along with father ... she has a kind of family in the people that she works with. I talk much more in terms of emotional engagement ... it’s independent women, it’s character and it’s procedural.

This process is aided primarily through agents and managers who help writers to reframe their ideas towards market demand, as a manager explains:

One of the things that we do is constantly talk to studio execs, producers, and agencies and you hear why people are passing on projects and you pass that onto clients. So we hear, “the last thing we want is another heist movie right now,” and our client comes in and pitches us a heist movie and we’re like, “look, great idea for a heist movie, but just so you know, the temperature on heist movies out there is not good, so let’s try to figure out what to do next ... Generally, when clients are coming in with their ideas we are looking for ideas that we think we can sell, we’re looking to help them by eliminating reasons for why people may pass on their idea and help them make it more saleable by adding whatever needs to be added.

This strategy is better suited for television where each network has a distinctive brand and directive that, even within the same audience niche, are subtly different from one

another. The prevalence of verbal pitching also makes it practically easier for writers and producers to reframe the proposed show from meeting to meeting, most of which are scheduled back-to-back in a very short time span. Movie studios, by contrast, tend to have less distinct and predictable brands and strategies as they all aim to hit the same “four-quadrant” national and international markets.

## **9. Conclusion: The Institutionalization of Change**

The impact of formulas as a causal force in the field of motion picture and television production is varied, complex, and contradictory. This impact can only be properly understood if the notion of a “formula” is broken down into its constituent elements and placed alongside a social context that includes other, non-symbolic mechanisms. While it is necessary to appreciate the role of technology, organizations, legal codes, status hierarchies, and social networks in the application of “formulas” to the marketplace of potential television shows and motion pictures, “formulas” cannot be reduced to those elements. It is the emergence of formulas from this context in the form of classificatory schemes, success stories, retrospective justifications, story templates, and opportunity structures eliciting market strategies, that make it a distinct causal force. Acting on both the level of general directives and specific properties, “formulas” are applied for different reasons and with different outcomes.

One common theme throughout, however, is the *institutionalization of change*. Namely, how a constant state of cyclical shift can be institutionalized in a social location over time. By differentiating between form and content, between classification and meaning, we have observed how an institutional architecture at the categorical level lays



the foundation for a contained and predictable change. This allows for the co-existence and mutual reinforcement of competing social mechanisms based on socialization (categorical) and communication (intersectional) within the same milieu. In doing so, the presented model allows the bridging of Simmelian formal sociology with Durkhemian cultural sociology.

Further research could examine the institutionalization of change in other industries. Fine art, fashion and music are examples of culture industries which are known to move in predictable cycles. However, as Strang and Macy's research suggests, other industries may interpret and react to market information in much the same way.

### Chapter 3

## *Stars*



“I am big. It’s the pictures that got small.”

– Norma Desmond, the aging starlet in *Sunset Boulevard* (1950)

In Billy Wilder’s Hollywood satire, *Sunset Boulevard*, an ambitious yet destitute wannabe screenwriter, Joe Gillis, becomes ensnared in the deranged fantasies of a long forgotten starlet of the silver screen, Nora Desmond. This archetypal relic of former glory spends her days closeted in a decaying mansion, passing the time by re-watching her old movies every evening and reading her fan mail, which, unbeknownst to her, is written by her butler. Upon a chance meeting, she decides that Gillis is the one to edit her screenplay that will revive her fortunes when she casts herself as the star, Salome. Seeing an opportunity to remedy his financial difficulties, Gillis agrees. As Desmond pays for his lodgings and showers him with gifts, it appears at first that his gambit has paid off. But when their inevitable parting finally arrives, Desmond, in an act of

desperation threatens to shoot herself. As Gillis shrugs off the threat and heads for the door, Desmond turns the gun on him and fires. His dead body floats in her pool under the California sunshine right off *Sunset Boulevard*, the home of Hollywood's first movie studio.

The film offers an emotional and psychological portrait of stardom: the captivating idealized image frozen in celluloid that haunts both the subject and its fans in equal measure. It illustrates the economic rhythms of mass entertainment, where audiences are faddish, whose tastes move in cycles: creating new stars as quickly as old ones are forgotten. There is a sociological dimension too: the opportunities for exploitation, by the studios and by young wannabes alike; or even pity, embodied in the butler who writes her fan mail. This is why this *noir* film of the 1950s remains a favorite in Hollywood today. The world that it depicts and satirizes so brilliantly is alive and well in Los Angeles.

However, this animating social force – stardom – has received little treatment by sociologists. It is too easily dismissed as a fleeting cultural curiosity. The aim of this chapter is to show that far from being something endemic to the oddball world of Tinsel Town, it is an organizing social principle that drives many economic orders. It is a form of what Weber called charisma and it is a principle of legitimacy that is very much alive in modern economic systems.

## **1. Literature Review: Status in Hollywood**

The labor market within the motion picture and television industries has addressed the issues of rent-seeking (Albert, 1998; De Vany and Walls, 1999; Ravid, 1999), typecasting (Zuckerman et al, 2003; Faulkner, 1983), roles (Baker and Faulkner, 1991), reputation

(Faulkner and Anderson, 1987), discrimination (Bielby and Baron, 1986; Bielby and Bielby, 1992, 2003; Christopherson 2008), union participation (Paul and Kleingartner, 1994), and agency representation (Bielby and Bielby, 1999). Yet, the question of differentiation by status in the form A/B lists, endemic to all cultural markets (Caves, 2000), has been neglected in the literature. Typecasting, roles, reputation, ascriptive characteristics, and agency membership may constitute signals (Spence, 1974) that sort individuals into labor market positions, but status, as we will see, allows for a re-ordering of the positions that constitute the market itself. Thus, the oversight of status is significant in that it requires a fundamental re-thinking of the ordering principles of the field itself and is not simply an additional ‘factor’ or ‘variable’ for consideration among others. The question is: how is status acquired and how does it enable and constrain the structuration of the field?

The root of the problem is the general assumption that careers emerge in a linear, non-revisable process of sorting individuals into pre-defined positions in the labor market. Let us take the labor market for actors as an example. Zuckerman et al (2003, p.1038) in their study of typecasting for actors depict the hiring process as such: actors are selected by a talent agent or manager, presented to casting directors, and finally hired by the production company, usually at the discretion of the director or producer. Although this may be true for the vast majority of actor hires, many high-status actors reverse this process. “Stars” frequently have their own independent production companies with producing deals with a studio or network, take a producer credit, and may well package the project itself and hire the director and producer themselves.

This is a not an insignificant detail. Since *all* hires are the results of the assembly of “projects” (Bielby and Bielby, 1999; Faulkner and Anderson, 1987) such as a television show or motion picture, the social process by which those projects move from development into production, by way of a green light decision, is, by definition, the ordering principle of the market. Status is, therefore, not simply a “signal” in the marketplace, but rather a principle of field structuration.

Studies of roles and typecasting have indicated the importance and effect of status, but do not address it directly. Baker and Faulkner (1991, p.284) argue that particular roles, and role combinations (director/producer/screenwriter) enable individuals to “bargain for and gain membership, acceptance, citizenship, and access to resources”. They acknowledge,<sup>18</sup> but do not address, the problem of how role claims are recognized as legitimate by others. In other words, how they go from a ‘wannabe’ director, screenwriter or producer to a ‘bankable’ one; that is, how roles acquire status.<sup>19</sup> In their study on the effect of typecasting on the careers of actors, Zuckerman and et al. (2003, p.1021) find the “question of whether simplicity or complexity is more advantageous turns on whether one has established oneself beyond the point at which a multivalent identity is construed as no identity at all.” They argue that the impact of one’s identity is contingent upon how “established” one has become in the field, which is

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<sup>18</sup> Baker and Faulkner (1991, p.285) claim that “Only when roles are claimed and result in a film project, however, have they been fully enacted.” Yet, this reverses the direction of causality, creating the paradox of a resource that is only realized after it is needed.

<sup>19</sup> In doing so they ignore the institutionalized means by which “credits” are allocated. For example, although a typical studio motion picture will have a dozen or more screenwriters work on the script, only between one and three receive credits, and these themselves are differentiated (‘characters’, ‘story’, full). These credits are allocated by an arbitration conducted by the Writers Guild of America. A similar process is now taking place at the Producers Guild because the category has become so broad, assigned to so many people, that it was in danger of becoming meaningless and thus devaluing the producer role in the field.

another way of saying obtaining/how to obtain???? a certain degree of status, but the role of status and status acquisition remains unexplored in their paper.

The acquisition and loss of status has been examined in motion pictures, but these studies have been limited in their scope. Rossman et al (2010) found that participation in teams that already had high status and with Oscar winning members increased the chances of being awarded an Academy Award. Pontikes et al (2010) examined the effect of blacklisting under the red-scares between 1945 and 1960. They found that ‘mere association’ with those black-listed or implicated was enough to transmit stigma, decrease status and harm their careers. These studies indicate that status is structured at least in part through affiliation networks (Podolny, 1993), but leave open the question of how status is structured in the field and its role in the development and green lighting of projects. Zafirau (2007) conducted ethnographic research at a single, non-core talent agency into the formation of reputations, but the question of how agents and agencies form a status-hierarchy in relation to one other was not addressed. Television has been neglected entirely.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

A theoretical framework is proposed to understand status as a social process. The framework draws predominately on social psychology, ethnomethodology, network analysis, Weber’s sociology of religion, and three areas of Bourdieu’s (1990, 2000) work: his theories of symbolic capital, fields, and practice.<sup>20</sup> Broadly speaking, we can

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<sup>20</sup> The three concepts taken from Bourdieu’s work are conceived of independently from his broader theory of practice. They are integrated into other schools of thought, such as network analysis and psychology, as well as reverse-engineered through Weber’s sociology of religion, which was one of the formative texts for both Bourdieu’s conception of fields and symbolic capital. In this sense, I am proposing a “return to

analytically divide the social process of status into three categories; each orientated to a different research question.

- (i) How is status structured and distributed throughout the social body?
- (ii) How is status practiced by participants in the field?
- (iii) What functions do status perform?

Each question collectively elucidates what might be called, if we can forgive its Parsonian (1968) overtones, a “system of status.” Such a system may not exist in its objective, Parsonian sense, but can be observed as a set of interrelated parts which can be sociologically examined at different “levels” of analysis. Each of these levels emerged organically from inductive qualitative research. Their classification and organization has been presented in accordance with notable theorists, concepts, and schools of thought. We can divide the analysis into the field level structure of status segmentation; the practice of status as a phenomenological, relational, ritual, and agentic act; and the social functions of status as the means of information transmission and social domination.

### ***2.1 Structuration of Status***

The structuration of status is the combination of status segmentation and the sources of value. Status segmentation can be found at the industry level, combining field positions, market niches, and symbolic classifications. Roles, niches, genres, and narratives form the basic principles of structuring the status order in the market, respectively.

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Weber,” where his *Sociology of Religion* forms the theoretical base, whereby newer developments in the social sciences are integrated as they emerged organically in the research process.

<b>Structuration of Status</b>	<b>Practice of Status</b>	<b>Function of Status</b>
<i>Segmentation</i> : Status Order	<i>Agency</i> : Strategy <i>Network</i> : Leakages	<i>Information</i> : Quality
<i>Capital</i> : Sources of Value	<i>Ritual</i> : Performance <i>Phenomenological</i> : Emotion	<i>Power</i> : Struggle

Figure 5: Modalities of status

Underlying this segmentation is an institutional foundation of habits, laws, technologies, organizations, which, through the principle of market, valorize people and things monetarily. “Quality,” in this sense, is a shorthand for the underlying – or “true” – economic value that *should*, in an economically rational world, be reflected in the price. As the pricing of people and of things varies from one niche to another, from one genre to another, from one gender to another, the regularities in the pricing stature become differentiated, and when habituated, become rarified as a segmented market. As quality is not directly observable (Spence, 1974; Podolny, 2005) and market demand is fundamentally uncertain (Caves, 2000), price is based not on quality but on status. This “loose coupling”, at least in the shared mythology of the market participants, is the rational-legal justification of the status order; even as they might, at the same time, recognize (many) arbitrary attributes. It is in the structuration of status as an “order” that it emerges as hierarchy in a shared social space where occupants take both positions in relation to one another upon multiple axes.

The emphasis here on monetary value is useful when separating out status from the rival concepts it is often confused with, in particular, reputation and recognition. Reputation refers to individual characteristics: their ability to work as a team, the



willingness to compromises, to fulfill contractual commitments, in short, those attributes that make one ‘easy’ or ‘difficult’ to work with. A studio executive explains:

With every element that you put on a project, it comes with its own personality, be it good, bad, involved, uninvolved, indifferent, difficult, everything in between; it becomes another variable that you have to deal with ... Are you going to go after a director who is going to have his own thoughts on the movie or a director who is not going to have any thoughts, he’s just a director for hire, he’s known for doing comedies, isn’t going to give you a lot of trouble and is not going to be a problem.

Recognition is acquired together with status, but as status can ‘cool,’ recognition remains independently. Talent can remain a ‘name’ long after they have value in the field, such as directors Sidney Lumet or Peter Bogdanovich or actors Faye Dunaway or Robert Redford who do not work but spend their time winning lifetime achievement awards at film festivals. Respect and notoriety from previous work persists from the past but is not presently valued in the field monetarily.<sup>21</sup>

Quality, those values that should be reflected in price, can be broadly conceived of as analogous to Bourdieu’s (1986) “forms of capital.” Although his notion of symbolic capital, as discussed below, is particularly useful in understanding status, his general scheme of social, cultural, and economic is too methodologically constrictive. A more open, inductive approach is preferred. “Sources of Value” is a heuristic used to bring into relief those qualities, histories, or practices which are valorized in the field. These sources of value – human capital, audience pre-awareness, resources – are conceived by

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<sup>21</sup> Indeed, this is inherent in the literature at large. Status accumulation is considered to move in one direction: for Bourdieu’s symbolic capital is only further accumulated it is never diminished, Merton’s (1968) concept of the ‘Matthew effect’ sees status accumulation as self-reinforcing as positive evaluations are derived by status which also serve to reproduce it. The consensus in the literature that these status positions are stabilized (Berger and Zelditch, 1998)

market participants as ingredients of a “commercial” project. The signifiers, however, vary according to the segmentation of the status order by genre, role, and niche.

## 2.2. *Status as Mythology*

“Everything,” a Hollywood proverb goes, “is perception.”<sup>22</sup> An agent at a core agency explained:

There are studio movies and there are independent movies, but at the end of the day you are looking to make the best version of that movie ... to give that movie the best opportunity to succeed in the market place and be perceived in a way that people in Hollywood, not just the general public, see that person, that writer, that director, as talented. A movie can come out and fail and the director can still get hot off it. A movie can come out and work and the director can get cold off it. It’s just a matter of perception and perception becomes reality ... Take *Clash of the Titans*, that’s a movie that took \$400m world-wide, that did not move the needle for Louis Leterrier. Why? Because people think the movie sucks, they don’t attribute the success to him. There’s a director who has made a low-budget, independent movie in a foreign language but the perception in Hollywood is that a major movie star would want to work with that director. That director is much hotter in a way than Louis Leterrier and he hasn’t even made a movie in [the English] language. It really is a function of perception.

Indeed, the sources of value do not in-themselves translate into value for the individuals implicated. The meaning of success and failure is flexible both in its interpretation and application.

Quality and status are not just “loosely coupled” in a correlative sense. It is not simply that there is a social noise that prevents some kind of platonic observation of quality. They are loosely coupled because status is more than a signal: it is a special

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<sup>22</sup> This quote is often attributed to Mike Ovitz, a super-agent who founded Hollywood’s largest agency, CAA. However, it is often not attributed to anybody at all.

social phenomenon that has its own mechanisms of consecration and it's own unique psychological and sociological effects.<sup>23</sup>

Bourdieu encapsulated this idea with his notion of “symbolic capital.” Unlike his other forms of capital – social, economic, cultural – symbolic capital was realized through an act of social consecration. Drawing on Weber’s (1964) sociology of religion, Bourdieu argued that symbolic capital did not simply refer to the social recognition of capital, but rather, its misrecognition. That is to say, rather than perceiving a child’s giftedness as the result of their social history – their schooling, or parenting – it was perceived as something inherent about the individual (Bourdieu, 1977). This “giftedness” is what Weber termed “charisma.”

However, Bourdieu’s use of Weber to explain the role of education in the reproduction of inequality in the French class system obscures some of the originality and scope in Weber’s writings. Charisma, for Weber, was more than giftedness. It sprang from the ability of an individual to defy the laws of nature – be it not eating or drinking, or surviving out in the wilderness for days on end. This ability, in turn, bestowed upon the prophet the ability to conjure magic, in the form of practical miracles, and in the case of religion, dispense with the “ideal goods” of salvation. I will postpone the question of the role of these ideal goods in the system of status in Hollywood for a few pages, and focus, for now, on the immediate qualities charismatic individuals are endowed with.

In addition to the recognition of human capital, audience pre-awareness, or access to resources, the (mis)recognition of symbolic capital refers to quite separate attributes. The endowment is threefold: the *skill* to create a hit, the *taste* to identify material and

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<sup>23</sup> One of the most quantifiable physiological effects of status measured is on health outcomes (e.g. Williams et al., 2007).

talent of potential economic value, and the *ability* to bring these together as a package and secure a green light. Those who have helped to create hits either in production, marketing or green lighting the movie or television show may become categorized as a “hit maker” at which point their vision is perceived to be in alignment with the popular zeitgeist. Regardless of the initial origins of their value (resource, human capital, or audience pre-awareness) or their role, once they become high-status individuals within the field they are endowed with all of these abilities. These abilities are the practical consequences of the creative “vision” that define the core of charisma. Any of the roles can achieve this status: executives can become “movie moguls”, directors become “film-makers” and actors become “stars”.

Like Weber’s prophets, each of these charismatic roles have defied the odds of reasonable expectations. As demand is fundamentally uncertain (Caves, 2000) where success may be the result of quite random facts (Salganik and Watts, 2008), the ability to score successive hits is perceived as something quite out of the ordinary. Something unquantifiable and utterly unique to a given individual, perhaps the result of events that even the keenest biographer or therapist may never uncover, is responsible for these statistically improbable effects. They call this “vision.”

More prosaically, and perhaps more probably, the notion of “vision” as the explanation of these statistically improbable events is buttressed by the psychological phenomenon called the “law of small numbers” (Tversky and Kahneman, 1971). This bias leads us to mistake a small sample as indicative of results one would observe in a statistically suitable large sample. In Hollywood, even a single hit movie, if it sufficiently captures the imagination of the public and industry denizens, is enough to

consecrate a director, actor, or mogul to the highest rung of the status ladder. However, once that position is obtained, that individual will have new powers to marshal the greatest resources – the best actors and cinematographers, the budgets for special visual effects and marketing, the most commercial properties adapted by their choice of writer – which increases manifold the odds of their second project becoming a commercial success. Charismatic consecration can become, therefore, a self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton, 1948, 1968) and thus serve to reproduce the underlying mythology of the field.

Symbolic capital, consecration, and charisma do not occupy a place in the framework independently. The practice and function of status are the explanatory mechanisms that drive the process of consecration which emerge as the hypostatized status order.

<i>Role</i>	<i>Signifier</i>	<i>Signifies</i>	<i>Practiced as</i>	<i>Consecrated as</i>	<i>Signifies</i>
Writers Directors Producers	Awards Box-office Ratings Credits	Human Capital	<i>Strategy</i>	<i>Status</i>	<i>Skill: create a 'hit'</i>
Actors 'Film makers' Reality Stars	Ability to 'open' Independent brand	Audience Pre-Awareness	<i>Leakages</i>		<i>Taste: spot hits, identify talent.</i>
Agents Managers Executives Producers	Agency rep. Dev. deal Relationships Position	Resources	<i>Performance</i>  <i>Emotion</i>		<i>Ability: get GL, package, attract talent.</i>

Figure 6: Hollywood mythology of status represented as a chain of signification

## ***2.3 Practice of Status***

### *2.3.1 Agency: The Game of Heat*

Status, like most social facts, emerges through the interaction of an individual and society (Giddens, 1984). As the daily cycle of hits and bombs is interpreted through the social lens of the field, the cycle of individuals in and out of positions in the status order becomes routine. All routines become predictable and therefore can be gamed by the savviest of operators. This “game of heat,” where agents, writers, directors, producers, and actors all try to push projects and demands at the time when they will be the most valuable, is the underlying market strategy of the field. As Bourdieu (1986) notes, however, the success or failure of any given *individual* strategy serves an important *collective* function. It reproduces the rules of the game; the mythology that players must buy into in order to play the game. This agentic social process of strategizing serves to reproduce the social order itself.

### *2.3.2 Network: Affiliations & Leakages*

Podolny (1993, 2005) has convincingly argued that perceptions of status can be indirect in nature, derived from affiliations where status ‘leaks’ through social ties. However, Podolny conceives of this process as principally in formalistic terms dictated through the social organization and distribution of ties. From this premise, he makes predictions given on these elements of social structure alone. For example, if there are unequal actors coming into contact with one another, “the higher-status actor will tend to experience a drop in status while the lower-status actor will tend to experience a gain.” (Podolny, 2005, p.15) Although Podolny is certainly correct to emphasize status leakages through affiliations, the impact on status cannot be read from the interaction alone but

only by examining how status is constructed in that milieu. Philanthropy would be one clear example of high and low status individuals coming together that does not equalize status relations but rather serves to reproduce them.

### *2.3.3 Ritual: Performances*

Status construction theory (Ridgeway and Erikson, 2000) conceives of intersubjective interactions as the means by which already existing resource differentials become socially constructed as status. However, they do not perceive the intersubjective interactions as having an autonomous impact on status itself, merely as a means for structural factors to congeal as status beliefs. Yet, although interactions are informed, enabled and constrained by structural conditions, the performances have their own internal, endogenous logic called rituals (Goffman, 1956). In the case of Hollywood, these performances have already been explored in the context of pitches (Elsbach and Kramer, 2003) and agency reputations (Ziafri, 2007). Yet, the relational nature of performance as an intersubjective social process has been ignored by this body of work. That is, how positions in the field are defined in part by the ability for individuals to perform roles and to have those performances as recognized as legitimate by others in order to maintain or obtain the position.

### *2.3.4 Phenomenology: Emotion.*

Structural changes to status hierarchies have long been perceived as the root of anomie (Durkheim, 1933), radicalism (Bell, 1963), and ontological insecurity (Giddens, 1991). These exogenous accounts of emotional change have recently been complemented by endogenous accounts that examine emotion as a social process (Collins, 2004; Goodwin et al., 2001). This dynamic between exogenous structural forces and endogenous

phenomenological responses was central to Weber's conception of charisma, e.g. "magical charisma he felt within himself" and external validation through "proof of their possession of particular gifts of the spirit, of special or ecstatic abilities." (Weber, 1963, p.47) It is hypothesized that emotion serves as feed-back loop that may alter the conditions by which status is assigned and lost: those who get it are changed by it, and these changes may themselves lead to the loss of their status.

### ***3.4 Function of Status***

#### *3.4.1 Quality v Power*

There are two broad orientations to the question of the functions of status. First, there are the social psychologists (e.g. Ross and Nisbett 1991; Davis and Greve, 1997) and economic sociologists (e.g. Podolny, 1993, 1995; White, 1981; Spence, 1974) who conceptualize status as a contingent phenomenon emergent from contexts of risk and uncertainty as an instrument of their negation. As Podolny (2005, p.18) puts it, "the greater the market participant's uncertainty about the underlying quality of a producer and the producer's product, the more that market participants will rely on the producer's status to make inferences about that quality." Status is largely information that is itself benign, but may inadvertently set up barriers to entry, social closure, and structural inequality. Overtime status may no longer function as a proxy for market information as it becomes reified, institutionalized and gains autonomy from its origins: status is only loosely coupled with quality and this linkage is liable to become weaker.

Second, there are those who define status first and foremost as a power relation, legitimized by a 'theodicy' (Weber, 1963) or 'ideology' (Marx and Engels, 1968) as supposedly "natural" differences. This orientation reverses that of the social



psychologists and economic sociologists by asserting that differentials in resources became stabilized and reproduced by fundamentally *arbitrary* definitions of status. This perspective has become central to critical (e.g. Bourdieu, 1986; Mills, 2000) and cultural sociology (e.g. Lamont and Fournier, 1992; Lamont and Molnar, 2002) who examine the cultural and symbolic mechanisms by which status comes to define boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. For critical sociologists in particular, these boundaries are defined by a struggle between groups in the field who attempt to assert their own legitimate definition of value in the field that maximizes their own claim and control over converted resources (Bourdieu, 1992).

However, both of these camps recognize the value of the alternative view. For economic sociologists and psychologists, status is only loosely coupled with quality, allowing for both the introduction of arbitrary definitions and distortions, and the ability of those affiliated with high status positions to extract monetary gains beyond their true price if quality was directly observable. For critical sociologists, the arbitrary value of status is rarely arbitrary in the absolute sense. Even Bourdieu admits, that in the last instance, all symbolic foundations in the field are dependent upon economic circumstances that make their practice materially possible. Therefore, a purely symbolically arbitrary assignment of value must depend in some way upon a supportive economic logic. For the purposes of this paper, these theoretical debates will be bracketed and put to one side. It is sufficient to assume that both information and critical logics are at play; the question is how.

### 3.4.2 *The System of Contestation and Struggle*

Weber's typology of the ideal types of legitimacy has been hugely influential in sociology, history and political science. However, Weber's conceptualization of these ideal types of legitimacy as *economic orders* has been neglected. The prevailing model in economic social of competing economic orders has been Simmelian in approach by examining different network configurations of economic embeddedness. For sure, bureaucratic and charismatic orders have been studied in isolation in organizational and religious sociology, respectively, but Weber's use of them as competing ideal types capturing competing processes in *all* economic orders has been ignored.<sup>24</sup>

This was most thoroughly executed in his sociology of religion (Weber, 1963). As an economy, religion was differentiated by the goods that were exchanged: the laity received the "ideal" good of salvation from the prophet or priesthood in exchange for "material" goods.<sup>25</sup> Weber characterized the ideal-typical religious sphere as a cyclical struggle between charismatic prophets, the bureaucratic or traditional priesthood, and the laity. Prophets never came from the priesthood and always from the laity. Their lay prophecy was, by definition, a challenge to the legitimate authority of the priesthood. If they were recognized by the laity as a visionary prophet they could displace the existing priesthood as the source of ideal goods. However, once recognized, the prophet requires a new priestly bureaucracy of their own to administer the growing laity and to distribute ideal goods. When the prophet dies, a crisis of legitimacy is suffered by the religion as

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<sup>24</sup> Bourdieu drew upon the sociology of religion and the ideal-type of the charismatic prophet to conceptualize his notion of symbolic capital as the recognition of others forms of capital (social, cultural, economic, etc.) as legitimate. Although Bourdieu was correct to highlight the charismatic dimension of status he disregarded the economic orders as a comparative and relational space.

<sup>25</sup> Weber defines this in relation to the ideal type of magic where the demand from the laity was for material needs such as rain, food or the curing of ills. Salvation marks a departure in this respect as it is a product of 'otherworldly' goods.

the unique, individualized source of salvation in the “prophet” must be transferred to an impersonal, bureaucratic administration. Such transfers are precarious and often do not succeed.

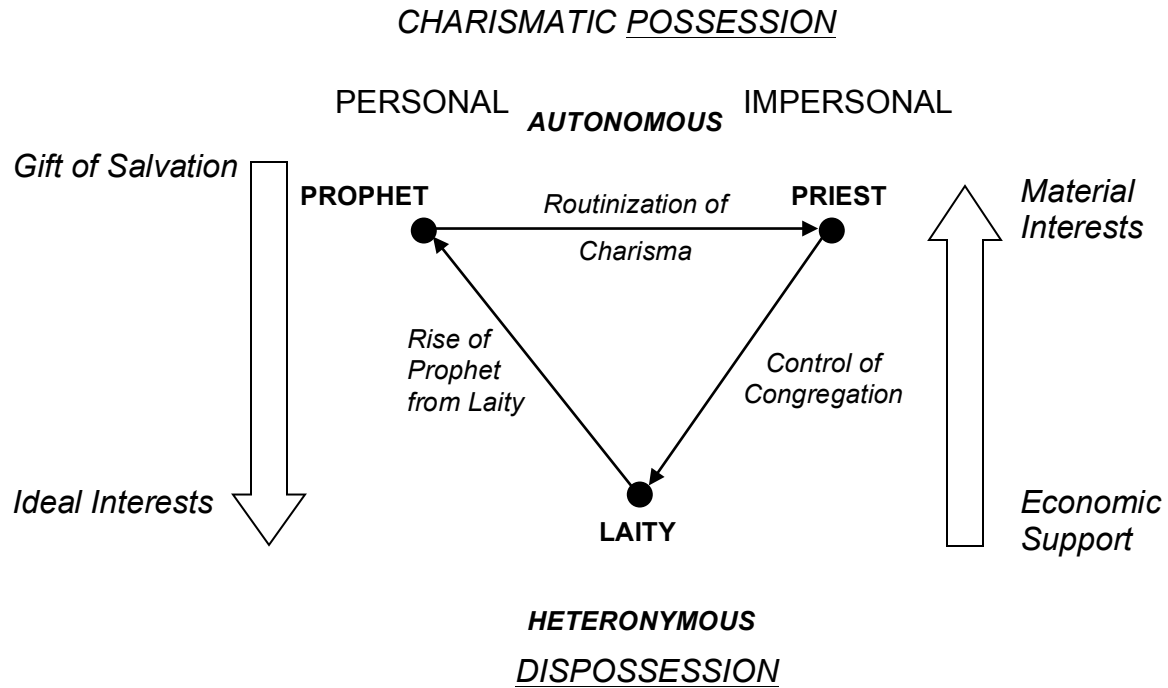


Figure 7: Max Weber’s (1963) economy of the religious sphere (reconstructed by the author).

The recognition of sources of value as valuable can take, as Weber has shown us, at least two different forms: charismatic and bureaucratic. Each consecrates status by radically different and opposing means, while, at the same time, co-existing in competition within a given economic sphere.

It is helpful to think of Hollywood like a religion. There is a shared mythology of the origins of value, central of which is anointment of charismatic prophets. These prophets are able, through the distribution of ideal gifts, to extract material rewards from their believers. This exchange is, however, not only contested, but also the social archetypes by which such contestation takes place. Two rival groups, stars and studios,

attempt to alter the basis of the creation of value in the field by laying claim to two opposing forms of legitimacy, the bureaucratic and charismatic, respectively. This ongoing historical struggle in the field is, as Bourdieu observed, in the long run, always going to be dominated by those with the greatest symbolic capital, as those have greater ability to establish the basis of legitimate value. Thus, although studios have at times reasserted their authority over the field, it has been short lived.

Now that each of the elements of theoretical framework has been defined, the empirical findings will now be integrated in the same order.

#### **4. Structuration of Status**

##### ***4.1. Status Order Segmentation***

Status is tied to positions in the field by the symbolic and material segmentation of the status order. The status order is segmented by roles, niches and genres that enable and constrain the movement of individuals between positions.

##### *4.1.1 Roles.*

Roles are defined formally by guilds, unions, networks, studios, and production companies. They also defined relationally within the field. Although the same roles have remained since the origins of the field, the definitions of roles, the boundaries that establish the terms of entry, and the relations between roles have changed considerably over time and continue to be contested. Faulkner and Anderson (1987) observe that certain role combinations confer greater legitimacy upon those claiming the roles, but they neglect the process by which roles are claimed. As a result, they ignore how different roles are enabled and constrained by different principles of legitimation.

Roles are not created equally in this regard. The role of the producer is the most flexibly defined. One film producer illustrates its fluidity:

Producer is a title that sometimes gets given away for financial reasons as opposed to [the fact] they have actually produced the movie. On the credits you will see a lot of names as producer, but some of those names will never have met the writer, or the director, and never been to the set ... A lot of directors become producers because they want to control the entire thing, some producers become directors, writers become producers because they want to control it more, producers become writers, studio execs become producers, producers become studio execs. There's a lot of changing around. And now there's a lot of back and forth between TV and film.

Roles are often moved through in a career cycle. Agents become executives because they can bring their relationships to the position, and once executives are fired they are often given producing deals on the lot and become producers. Those who wish to become directors may start as writers, hoping to achieve enough success that they will be able to leverage it to secure a directing position, either as a trade for written work or to direct their own work;<sup>26</sup> actors also become directors by the same means.<sup>27</sup> Writers, directors and actors can similarly leverage their value to take up a producing role.

When talent makes this switch into producing, it is largely due to their high-status which they can leverage into a producing role, as one network executive explains:

They have so much cache in and of themselves, and just their names being attached to something can help elevate a project to help get that project sold, or possibly get it on the air. They can write their own things or they can supervise another writer, it helps to sweeten the package of what that show is.

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<sup>26</sup> For example, Oliver Stone, JJ Abrams, Charlie Kaufman, Dustin Lance Black, Alan Ball, John Wells, Ryan Murphy.

<sup>27</sup> For example, Clint Eastwood, Robert Redford, George Clooney, Warren Beatty, Ben Affleck, and Kevin Kossner.

The effects of status leakages enable high-status talent to choose projects and attach themselves as executive producers. The producing credit requires nothing more than the lending of the name, but other roles are tied to scarce sources of value that are not readily transferable. Directing, more than writing or acting, is a role that can be attempted by the leverage of status alone, but if the first or second attempts are perceived to be of poor quality they will not be allowed to direct again except for the lowest budgets.

#### *4.1.2 Niches*

Status is constrained by the market niche the sources of value originate from. They are arranged into a vertical hierarchy of studio movies, independent film, scripted television and reality television. Only the very successful at the top of their niche are able to transfer into the niche above them. However, if they start at a higher-niche it is much easier to move down the ladder. For example, there are two routes to pitching and running a scripted television show: either by working up the ranks established by the Writers Guild within a single television show to the status of a co-executive producer or show runner, or by becoming a writer for a studio or major independent film. Indeed, some of the leading television creators began with success as a features writer before pitching and running their own television shows. These writers were by no means at the top of the features game and only had a few credits to their name, but had established enough credibility to pitch television shows - a privilege that is not open to career television writers until after many years of experience. Yet, television writers earn more than features writers and have considerably more power in the process, but features writing is considered to have a greater status. It is through their higher status in the features world that they are able to enter into the top positions in the niche of scripted

television. Similarly, the most successful television writers have been able to transfer into features writing and directing, usually in the independent film world first at low-budgets. This is still dependent upon role, as one studio executive explains:

It's easier for writers and directors to make the transition from TV than it is for an actor. For actors there is still this weird think where you see an actor on TV and you can't see them on the screen. They can't do both.

Roles can combine with niches to create unique positions such as those of TV pilot directors<sup>28</sup> who are highly valued as attachments to television packages.

#### 4.1.3 Genre

The effect of genre is contingent upon status: genre operates as a principal of constraint and segmentation for all except the charismatic individuals who are able to define and establish new genres. Studio executives reported selecting directors and writers upon the basis of their past work, with the emphasis on their most successful past work, classified through the lens of genre. Similarly, writers and directors reported how quickly they were typecast, as one screenwriter explained:

People say, "oh, he wrote the *Mad Magazine* movie, he can write the *Saturday Night Live* movie ... [Now] you wrote an operetta and then you made a documentary about hillbillies? I thought you were the biopic guy" ... and now I'm pitching a bunch of reality shows because it will be easier for them to combine the two concepts.

The classifications used to segment by genre go far beyond the official classifications used in quantitative studies (e.g. Zuckerman and Kim, 2003; Hsu and Hannan, 2009). These are made up in response to immediate success and failure in the market, as rules of

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<sup>28</sup> The current list being: David Nutter, Andy Ackerman, James Borroughs, and David Semmel.

formulas for creating production slates and programming schedules, such as “revenge thriller with a happy ending”. Typecasting can involve classifications outside of genre, such as hiring writers based on their perceived ability to write “punchy dialogue”, “good action scenes”, “comical moments”, as one executive told me.

Charismatic individuals can even come to create and re-define their own genres. Recent examples would be a “Jonathen Aptow comedy,” a “Woody Allen comedy,” or a “Roland Emmerich disaster movie.” Sometimes these genres are accessible to others beyond the star, such as the Aptow comedy, where the “vision” tapped into the zeitgeist - but once discovered can be reproduced by others. Others are restricted to that one individual who is ‘allowed’ to tell that story, such as Woody Allen comedies which are a form of New York dramedy that is not deemed bankable by others. Others define a genre by their own particular stamp they will place on the material: the combination of awe-inspiring scenes and sentimental endings in Steven Spielberg, of the blending of the absurd, fantastical and the dark in Tim Burton. When they lose their status however, their ability to transcend and re-define the genres is greatly diminished. Paul Verhoeven, who had directed *Total Recall*, *RoboCop* and *Basic Instinct*, told me he was barred from directing adult-dramas after the flop of *Showgirls*, and confined to science fiction. It could be described that the charisma of the high-status actors in itself comes to re-order the classifications of the institutionalized bureaucratic rationalities. It is from this segmented status order that the sources of value emerge.



## ***4.2. Sources of Value***

### *4.2.1 Audience Pre-Awareness*

The extent to which an audience can be made aware of a product independent of its execution is simply a rudimentary form of marketing. This marketing can take a number of forms from basing it upon pre-existing intellectual property such as books, board games or comics, producing a sequel or a spin-off, or using a star, be they an actor, director, or producer. The existing research by economists has focused primarily on actors in motion pictures (e.g. De Vany and Walls, 1999), but this neglects how they fit into a broader marketing strategy and how their value differs across market niches (e.g. domestic v international) and genres of film. They have neglected the question of television entirely.

For studio movies, “stars are pre-branded awareness”, as one executive succinctly coined it. The value of pre-branded awareness is that it can influence the success of a movie independent of the execution and hence is perceived to mitigate risk. This is referred to as the ability to “open” a movie: to ensure box-office on the basis of the above-the-title star alone. Among the executives and producers interviewed, there was a universal consensus that “there is only one movie star and that’s Will Smith,” as one put it, “I’ll qualify that by saying, ‘do people want to go and see the movie no matter what it is?’ He’s the only person who puts asses in seats anymore.” Another adds, “Will Smith can get *Pursuit of Happiness* to \$150m, and *Seven Pounds* to almost \$100m – that movie is just unwatchable.” Other “stars” are considered on a more complex calculation based on role, genre and price. In this category are actors such as Matt Damon, Brad Pitt, Johnny Depp, George Clooney, and Leonardo DiCaprio, and others, where, one executive

explains, one can “trade them out, it doesn’t really make a difference; they’re considered weight and they’re always on the top of our list.” James Cameron, Steven Spielberg, and Peter Jackson were perceived to be film-makers whose name would appear above the title and become central to marketing campaigns, other top film makers could only do this with the right actors as part of the package.

The value of movie stars is contingent upon the genre of the movie. “You know, they wouldn’t go and see Schwarzenegger do *MacBeth* because Schwarzenegger blows shit up,” says one executive. “When he’s blowing shit up he’s worth \$20m because his name combined with the genre of the movie makes it an event.” As well as matching the actor to the correct genre, different genres have different dependence on stars, as another executive notes:

For wide-release films there’s two ends of the spectrum. There’s pure spectacle, star’s optional. No spectacle, need a star. Every movie sits between those two different extremes. When you take a movie like *2012*, John Cusack is in the movie and he’s a very well respected actor, but his involvement was largely irrelevant if you look at the marketing material. They could have put many people in that position. The actual media buy of the trailers and the ads focused on the spectacle. On the other hand you have something like *Ocean’s 11* which is a story that was told in the 1950s, it’s been remade. People rob things all the time, it’s not very interesting. If you just asked the general public I’m going to tell you a story about thieves they wouldn’t be that interested. But you take every movie star in the world and put them in that, and you lighten the morality tale, you add enough bells and whistles then you have a wide-release movie that works.

Cheaper, so-called “genre” movies, in particularly horror, action and teen movies, and to a lesser extent sci-fi and romantic comedies, have dedicated audiences and thereby rely less upon stars. The value of a pairing with a star is usually done by in-house analysis by descriptive, regression or Monte-Carlo simulations, but such calculations may be

informative rather than instructive in the decision to cast a star and at what price. This also varies by studios, each having different marketing strategies and beliefs in star power: Warner Brothers puts stars in everything it can, Fox and Sony are less willing to pay and risk relative unknowns.

Independent film is largely financed by selling the foreign distribution rights to the picture on the basis of the cast prior to production. The cast, therefore, has a different value to the domestic US market than the international market, as one executive explains:

The value of an actor - whether it's to a studio, an international distributor or a foreign sales team - depends on what has come before and whether it's worked before. Will Farrell has never been in a comedy internationally that has worked. When you talk to international sides of companies he's not a valuable entity.

Furthermore, the value of the cast may differ according to the foreign sales agent hired to sell the rights, according to another executive:

You can take the same screenplay with the same actor and the same director and have three foreign sales people go out and sell it. They could get three different prices for the foreign rights. Because it's as much based upon the relationships of the transaction as it is the hard and fast elements.

The lists have a fluid nature because the value of the stars changes from territory to territory. Often the distributors are small, "mom and pop" affairs where their own personal preferences come into play.

Thus, independent film is more dependent upon stars than the studio system. At the same time, the inability to pay full-studio rates means that independent financiers and producers have to appeal to the star's non-financial interest, as one development executive explained:

In the specialty world it's much less concept driven. It's less, "is this a movie people are going to want to go and see?" And more, "we have this great filmmaker who actors want to work with," or, "this is a story that will appeal to this director ... [for example] If there was a script that we liked that had a gritty, liberal guilt angle to it, that also was a thriller, that was about US hegemony in South America and a part that maybe Sean Penn would want to do, then we would option the script, develop it a little bit, and then go to that kind of talent and say *It's the Constant Gardner* thing. It's a thriller that's wrapped in this "we're exploiting Africans for medical testing" or something.

As the head of a mini-major has it, "the only way that we can make a movie is if the script is good enough so that the actors will do it for less." Even within the features film market the role of stars within each niche is contingent upon the marketing strategy, genre and financing. Each of these variables impacts the "value" that a star brings.

In television, stars do play a role in the marketing of shows but in a very different way. Although recognizable actors is preferable in putting together a TV show they have by no means the power they have in movies. Instead, an individual TV show tends to make stars out of the actors. As a result, their fees tend to rise from season to season as they become a key ingredient to the success of that show. Reality television does capitalize on pre-existing awareness of celebrity by giving either former starlets or rising public figures their own shows where their name-recognition is the central marketing message. Like scripted television, reality does manufacture its own stars, as one producer puts it:

There are stars. There is a window from which reality TV stars get forged from non-entities like Jon and Kate. But Jon and Kate are stars of reality TV now, in fact their stardom overshadows their show. In the same way that Brad Pitt overshadows any movie he's in. Their names are above the title.

Another producer, summarizing the latest conventional wisdom of the networks, adds: “they want some celebrity, not necessarily A-List celebrity, but some celebrity to drive the show.” Sometimes the producers or writers of a show will be used as part of the marketing – such as David E Kelly, Jerry Bruckheimer or JJ Abrams – but overall it is rare for this to occur. Other forms of pre-awareness such as franchises (e.g. *Law and Order* and *CSI*), reboots (*Melrose Place*, *V*, *90210*), or books (*Gossip Girl*, *The Vampire Diaries*, *True Blood*) are used but they are not a core strategy.

The difference between television and film comes down to the kind of product that is being produced: films are one-off events with immense marketing costs often equaling or even exceeding the costs of production, whereas television shows are recurring events that build audiences over time. Television networks can promote their own shows by placing advertisements on their network and by scheduling new shows to come after existing hit shows to provide that initial audience. The challenge for film is to get an audience to the opening weekend; the challenge for television is to retain an audience over five years or more. As a result, films require more elaborate marketing strategies of which the cast has long been a central feature.

## NEW YORK MAGAZINE STARMETER: BEN AFFLECK

**Market Value:** In his heyday, Affleck had a string of notable successes: *Good Will Hunting* grossed \$138 million, while Bay's *Armageddon* earned just over \$200 million. Even some of his lesser-regarded movies were nine-digit grossers, like *Pearl Harbor* (which came up just shy of *Armageddon*'s total) and *Daredevil* and *The Sum of All Fears*, with each surpassing \$100 million. But when *Gigli* cratered at a miserable \$6 million, the party was over, and a few years later, when Affleck's *Surviving Christmas* stalled at \$11 million — which wouldn't even be a good opening weekend total for an A-lister, let alone a lifetime gross — his best days were clearly behind him. Maybe he just needed to find the right director. In this case, it was himself: Affleck added a potent \$92 million grosser to his CV with *The Town* by casting himself as the lead.

**What Hollywood Thinks:** This is a propitious time to assess Affleck, but not just because his highly regarded *Argo* is opening. No, it's also the right time because of what happened this week: Affleck took a job as "just" an actor in the Warner Bros. romantic comedy *Focus*, playing a charming grifter à la George Clooney in *Out of Sight*. The deal is especially noteworthy because working as a leading man was an avenue that had all but closed to Affleck until he engineered a second act for himself as a director.

"After *The Town*, he could do anything he wanted at Warner Bros.," says one agent. But there was a catch to this newfound success. As another motion-picture literary agent at a different agency observes, "The world loves him as a director first, star second." Even with his golden status on the Warners lot as a director, Affleck was not the studio's first choice for *Focus* or even its second. Most recently, the offer went out to Brad Pitt, who passed. But the fact that the next stop on the list was Affleck is telling, says our talent agent.

"It's not like they flipped it to someone else at CAA — and there's a million people you could have gone to from Brad Pitt before you sent it to Ben, who's at William Morris Endeavor," explains this agent. "The studio clearly wanted him."

Indeed, the head of production at a smaller, rival studio agrees and says that as an actor, Affleck "has some heat on him" and that after several years in the wilderness living down *Daredevil*, Affleck would be "great in some branded IP [intellectual property], say, as the new *Iron Man* or something like that. You could visualize that and think he'd be awesome in that."

But this studio production chief is quick to note that Affleck doesn't yet trigger a green light on just any size picture. "From \$45 million to \$55 million, sure. But after that, you need some other stars, people with real foreign value."

Figure 8: New York Magazine's evaluation of Ben Affleck's "stock" in Hollywood (Buchanan and Brodesser-Akner, 2012).

One producer notes that Affleck, either by preference or by strategy, has been shrewd about the limitations of his star wattage, "keeping himself in a space where he's only doing movies of a size that support him as a star. Warner Bros. wanted him to do *Justice League*, in which he could have taken a part, and he still passed. I think he knows he's got this second life again [as a director], and what's more, he's good at it."

A third talent agent agrees, saying, "He's starting to become meaningful again because he's on all the hot director lists [with] Juan Antonia Bayona (*The Orphanage*), Nicolas Winding Refn (*Drive*), and Derek Cianfrance (*Blue Valentine*)."

**The Analysis:** As our producer says, "Maybe we have the next Clint Eastwood on our hands — he just won't talk to the chair." Sure, Affleck is early into his directing career — *Argo* is only his third movie behind the camera — but the comparison is apt: Both actor-helpers are in-house favorites at Warner Bros., where they reliably turn out mid-budget dramas with terrific performances and no shortage of marketing-friendly gunfire. And though Affleck's been offered all sorts of directing gigs at the studio, from *Justice League* to *The Stand*, he seems to be sticking to a niche that's working for him: Just this week, it came out that his next film will most likely be another crime drama, *Live by Night*, by *Gone Baby Gone* author Dennis Lehane.

So, his future as a director is assured ... but what of Affleck, the actor? Prior to committing to *Focus* (a comedy written and directed by the *Crazy, Stupid, Love*. team of John Requa and Glenn Ficara), Affleck had been flirting with *Bastille Day*, an indie about a young artist and a former CIA operative who embark on an anti-terrorist mission in France. We're told he's dropped out of that film entirely, though he's got another indie coming up opposite Justin Timberlake in the gambling drama *Runner Runner*. And while he's been marginalized in the final edit of Terrence Malick's *To the Wonder*, you can at least understand why he signed on to the project. Dare we hope that Affleck's back to that strategy of alternating mass-appeal movies and smart indies, which once worked so well for him?

In any case, goodwill abounds toward Affleck, and the town's industry crowd is rooting for him to succeed. As the head of one talent agency put it, "I think he likes being a leading man ... in his own movies. I don't know where his head's at, but he's a really, really fucking good director, and for now, that's enough." The Bottom Line: It's terrific that Affleck has reinvigorated his acting career by becoming a director, but he shouldn't lose, well, focus. We're heartened that he's using *Argo*'s great advance buzz not simply to line up his next starring role but to settle on his next directing project too. If concentrating on jobs behind the camera will mean he works a little less as an actor, well, there's nothing wrong with Affleck becoming choosy, especially after the erratic career he's had. Keep on doing what you're doing, Ben. You're on the upswing.

(Figure 8, continued)

#### *4.2.2. Human Capital*

Each niche stratifies creative control by role, and each role is defined by different skill-sets, yet the signs of quality (or human capital) of skill are the same for each niche. Human capital is universally signaled by past work derived from credits, commercial performance, and critical reception. However, the creative impact of these is mediated by the role as different niches have symbolic definitions of the origins of value that are coupled with relations of power that endower those roles with creative control. A network chief explains the rationale:

It depends on the show itself. If it's a docu-soap series, I want someone whose produced documentaries, someone who has told stories in a popular way. If it's a game-show I want to make sure it's someone who understands formats inside and out. If it's a scripted television show it's always about the writer, always. With each medium we have to ask, who is the key ingredient or artist and do we have them?

The notion of the “key ingredient” derives a theory of value that posits that there is a central creative individual in each of the niches under consideration whose “vision” is translated onto the screen. These notions are the outcomes of historical struggles in the field to define the source of creative value and have shifted considerably throughout the history of the field (as discussed above).

In television, the producer occupies the role of visionary creator who manages the show episode-by-episode, season-to-season. However, in scripted television those taking the producer role are now predominantly writers, with the show-runner being the formal merge of the managerial and creative tasks. “The most important job in television is show-runner,” a TV agent explains, “it's a writer who's become the executive producer



and is now the boss of everything on the show - it's the equivalent of a feature film director: that person guarantees the result.” In scripted television, directors are subservient to the writers who are frequently on set giving them instruction - a practice taboo in film. In some cases the show-runner may also direct the pilot and other key episodes. Directors can add value independently of the writers: there are a small number of highly regarded pilot directors and often a major film director will direct the pilot to create the visual feel and style of the show. Subsequent directors come on set and are instructed by the writer of the episode or the show-runner and instructed to copy the style of the original pilot episodes. As the agent indicated, the reverse is true in film where the director formally controls the project. Writers are marginalized in the process once a director is attached to the project and instructs re-writes from their own preferred writers; although their power is mitigated by the studio and the producers producing.

The assignment of credits is an institutional process governed by the guilds and unions. This is most highly regulated for writers: on television, their credit determines their pay-scale and is decided upon by the network and producer of the show; in motion pictures where it is the norm for multiple writers to work on successive drafts, only a minority are accredited. Anonymous boards of other writers examine the drafts of the screenplay and make a judgment over the origins of the major ideas, which in turn are divided into story, characters and overall authorship. As writers have little control over the development of a screenplay, they often “have to fight for the credit on the movie you're ashamed of”, said one screenwriter. The scarcity of credits for screenwriters means that fees in development becomes another marker of quality. Directing is also regulated: there must be a singular director, and only in rare instances is this a problem

for directing teams. Credits for those television shows and movies that are commercially successful are the most valuable.

Credits and commercial success are perceived to mitigate against risk. “If you like their writing,” a network executive explains, “you’re happy if they have those credits in addition to the writing you’ve read and already like, because it makes it easier to sell to your own management.” Another network executive explains:

Even though you want a new idea or a fresh voice, you still want experienced people to execute it. Here’s the best example I can give you: *24*. Joel Surnow and Robert Cochran were actually fairly journeymen writers, they had been around a long time before *24* came out. For me, that was a perfect storm. These guys had been around for a very long time ... they had experience producing many hours of television, they had been around the block, they know what they were doing. So there’s a confidence that if you can get an idea for them to work, they can execute it, they’re not going to fall flat on their face. But they had come up with the most original idea that anyone had heard of in years: which was that a minute of time on your watch is a minute of time on your television screen. It was genius. It was genius in its simplicity. They weren’t the “freshest” voice to come along, but it was a good idea. It was doubly appealing because they had a good idea and they also had the experience to execute it.

The ability to “execute” is the skill-set required for television writers and movie directors, also referred to as the “craft”.

Those with box-office and ratings success are proven entities and thereby expensive, scarce and inaccessible. Critical acclaim signals the future potential for commercial success and when combined with young writers, directors and actors their fees will be proportionally lower. This can be winning screenwriting competitions, being featured on the Black List, winning awards at festivals, and even the major awards such as SAG, BAFTA or Academy Awards. “If you’re a really astonishingly creative person, who actors are drawn to and want to work with you,” a writer/director explains, “then

you have power to - because if you have actors, actors are the ones who get you the money.” Hence, critical acclaim may have commercial value internally in the field, if not with the audience, and from this value those with commercial potential may be attracted to the project.

Reality television remains within the traditional model of assigning creative authority to non-writing producers, unsurprisingly, because it is unscripted. The quality of reality stars is also an essential ingredient, but the cast almost always consists of unknowns with no previous work to look to. A reality TV producer explains how you search for this kind of quality:

It’s the freakishness, isn’t it? It’s the degree to which your characters leap off the screen. What makes a character leap off the small screen? It’s a big personality that can somehow escape the constraints of the medium. Therefore, increasingly, characters that ‘pop’ is shorthand for borderline insane, certainly eccentric.

Another reality TV producer elaborates:

A lot of people come in here who think their lives are so interesting they have to have their own reality show. And they say, “my life is so full of drama!” And we’ll say, “ok, like what?” And they say, “it’s so full of drama!” “Ok, but tell us specifically, what you mean.” They never can, and we know right away that it’s not a show. The crazy people who make good shows don’t know they’re crazy and can’t help but tell you all the crazy shit that’s going on in their lives.

Producers also use ‘talent spotters’ who select a cast and then present them. Reality television as a niche seeks value outside of the field either as undiscovered “crazy people” or those who have established notoriety in some other field.

#### 4.2.3. Resources

For agents, managers and executives, and producers, they derive value from their resources – social capital and ability to secure financing. They are the formal brokers of the field and as such their value is largely derived from their ties to those with human capital and audience pre-awareness. One development executive describes the predicament they face:

That's where a lot of insecurity in this business comes from. Even with agents and development executives, there's always this insecurity that you don't really know what you're doing. What value do you really have? At the end of the day, is a film going to get made? Yes. But you as an individual working in this labyrinth, what quantifiable thing are you creating? And most people in their day-to-day work are not creating anything.

One agent describes how this realization informed his career choice:

Clients are currency. I'd observed this guy move from one place to another, take all his business with him, and it made him very valuable. He had a number of clients and people wanted that business and this business was loyal to him. Whereas for an executive, it's 'I developed *Heroes* or *The Office*.' Well what did you do? Well, I gave some notes ... That seems like an awfully insecure position to be in. So as long as you have clients you have something very real and tangible you can hang yourself on, and this longevity is tied to talent.

This is why many producers are managers as well: "people want to do business with us because we represent clients they respect," one manager/producer tells me. As a result, the knowledge of names becomes a key signal for aspiring agents, as one former agent's assistant told me:

All anyone cares about: can you remember names? Learn names! It would be really silly, I'd sit there in front of lists of people and their titles of who they were and just memorize them and what would prove to be the most valuable

thing that I had to offer in an interview, was how many names could I work into a conversation.

The access to resources is ultimately signaled by successfully brokered projects, as a former agent explains:

How big was the last deal you did? You're only as big as your last deal and you're only as good as your client list. Everything has to be constantly moving forward. So you almost need an announcement a week that you've done something bigger, larger, more important than others.

A manager/producer puts this in a broader context:

What people are always looking for is somebody who can get things done, who can move it closer to that green light, and then you can create a good project from there. And that doesn't matter if it's an agent, or a manager, or a studio exec, or a financier - you know, people who actually have the ability to get things made - and then, the second part, is to get them made well, that's who people are always trying to get to.

The value of agents, managers and executives is precarious as their value is dependent either upon their social capital in the form of a client list or their position, which provides access to financing and distribution. They frequently misunderstand the source of their value in the field and leave these positions to become producers only to find their social capital was in fact dependent upon their position (see *Chapter 4, "Relationships"*).

Each of these sources of value may correlate, but by no means translate to status. This is because status is an interpretative social process driven by a number of mechanisms. These "acts" (Austin, 1963) come together in what is termed the "practice of status."

## 5. Practice of Status

### 5.1. Strategies: The Game of “Heat”

Field-wide perceptions of value have both a temporal rhythm and an intensity of volume. The intensity of volume of communication concerning the relative value of individuals and the properties attached to them is referred to as “buzz” (see *Chapter 2, “Formulas”*). Yet evaluations constantly change, driven in large part by changes in the sources of value: box-office flops, ratings success, critical failure, award reception and so forth. Given the large degree of randomness inherent in these underlying sources of value (Caves, 2000; Salganik and Watts, 2008), “heat” is a fleeting and temporal property.

This is experienced as periods of being ‘hot’ and ‘cold’. Even the biggest directors have their ups and downs. Oliver Stone took me through his own journey. His Hollywood career was launched in 1978 when he won the Oscar for Best Screenplay for Alan Parker’s *Midnight Express*. The heat landed him his directing debut, *The Hand*. But when this horror movie flopped, he was cold; back to where he started. It took him five years to get *Salvador* and *Platoon* made which then resurrected his career. He delivered hit after hit until he made he made his sequel to *JFK*. “I was cold after *Nixon*, which cost \$40m, I loved that move, it tanked, it made \$13m, domestically.” But with a commercial sports movie he made a comeback with *Any Given Sunday*. This gave him the heat to make his historical epic *Alexander*. “With *Alexander* the truth is we broke even because the foreign sales were big, we were one of the top twenty pictures of the year, but in America and England it was perceived as a disaster,” he said. “Be that as it may, *Alexander* put me in a hole again, I mean, movie prison, that’s to say you don’t work, people don’t come to you.”

The logic remains the same on the business side where value is derived from resources demonstrated in the ability to produce a commercially successful product. Here charisma is assigned less to a creative vision as to ‘taste’ for picking projects and having the right combination of personal chemistry with talent and organizational abilities to ‘pull off’ a movie. As a development executive explains,

*Twilight* just did – and by the way, this is for the artists as well [as the business side] – amazingly well – that’s Summit, that’s Temple Hill, who are the producers on that ... so suddenly those are the hot people. Summit is really hot because people know they have money, and Temple Hill is hot because people know that they took a project that was essentially dead at Paramount to Summit and got it made and now it’s made tons of money

Another leading director, Steven Soderberg, framed it in different terms, “the last hit I’ve made was *Ocean’s*, which was 2007, and since then with *Che*, *The Girlfriend Experience*, and *The Informant*, I’m working into the room suddenly with a lot of art house baggage and not a lot of mainstream baggage.”

The temporal dynamics of heat are somewhat predictable and can therefore inform the strategies of writers, directors, actors and their representation to maximize their value in the field at key moments when it can be monetized. A development executive gives an example:

I got a call from somebody from a big production company yesterday who had sent me a script that was a re-make of a movie that I didn’t really like that much, but he’s like, “hey, I’m going to re-send it to you, we just attached Beck Eisner,” who is the guy who directed *The Crazies* that comes out this weekend. Now, they’ve strategically waited. They probably attached him two months ago but they’re waiting to go out on Friday because they think his movie might do well this weekend so the hope is that all of a sudden this drives up interest. If that movie does \$20m this weekend then the hope is this could be something to bring back this project. They’ve

had this on their development slate for four years, and they've probably tried different incarnations of this four or five times. You see this all the time.

This strategy contains risk: the marketplace may well reject the product that it is offered even under favorable conditions. More often than not, they do. This is because the relationship between the sources of value and recognized, legitimate status is loose (Podolny, 2005).

Nevertheless, the constant attempts by agents, producers, executives, directors and writers to manipulate and manufacture the opportunities provided by heat serve to reproduce the mythology of the charismatic creator in the field. As each of the players come to play the game, they serve to reproduce the legitimacy of the rules of the game they are playing, irrespective of the outcome. In doing so, the status driven social structure of the field is maintained and reproduced.

Although “buzz” or “heat” is perceived to be a social phenomenon driven by network dynamics (Uzzi et al, forthcoming; Ridgeway and Correll, 2006), the individuals in those networks are not acting passively in receiving or dispersing information. Networks do, no doubt, structure the distribution of information, and advantageous positions in the network bring material benefits as social capital (see Chapter 4, “Relationships”). However, these communicative acts (Austin, 1963) are embedded in a series of strategic practices which produces symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 2000). If the strategy is successful, and a sale is made or an actor is cast, their status is elevated or maintained. But even in failure, the symbolic capital of the competitors, who ultimately win out, as well as those in the field as a whole, is reproduced. In doing so, the game of “heat” as an institutionalized status order is propelled forward.



The game of heat is also played against itself, where the mythology that valorizes individuals in the field presents itself as an economic irrationality to be exploited. Just as agents and producers may seek to use heat to inflate the price of an individual or property and secure the deal, so too can they use “cooling” for strategic gain. In these instances, the field is *undervaluing* talent; an anti-Matthew effect. As one former studio-head explained:

Those are things that you exploit. The fact that the Farrelly brothers had failed on *King Pin* made them more interesting to me. The one thing success does is make them unmanageable, and they don't do what you want. If you're a big success you don't listen to anybody ... when people fail, because Hollywood moves away from those people like they're lepers, if you think they're talented, that doesn't go away. Their confidence goes down, but that helps you get them off things that don't work.

Another major studio producer agrees: “sometimes it's really great to get to a director when they're on the skids because then they're collaborative and they do it for a better price.” However, such a strategy is not always possible: the executive must either be in a position of authority (*e.g.* studio-head) or the producer must have the necessary status themselves to bring legitimacy to the project. This is because the legitimacy that is lost by attaching ‘cooler’ talent must be made up for either through alternative sources of authority or legitimacy.

### ***5.2. Network: Affiliations & Leakages***

The “leakages” (Podolony, 2005) of status through affiliation to charismatic individuals is institutionalized in the field through the role of “executive producing”. When charismatic individuals “lend their name” to a project, that is, in the majority of instances, all they do. The function of charismatic status as a mechanism for the creation of value

in the field is most clearly expressed in this instance as the sources of value (human capital, resources or audience pre-awareness), and are by-and-large *excluded from the transaction*. Quality and status are completely de-coupled. The social function of status can be examined in isolation from the social effects of the sources of value.

“Whenever anybody lends their name to a script the general idea is: I like the script, I like the talent, it’s worth lending my name to,” an independent producer explains. “You hope that by that point in their careers they’re not lending their names to things that are frivolous.” Lending their name is primarily an act of choosing driven by their taste that is believed to have the divine ability to spot those projects that have the potential to fit with the popular zeitgeist. This power is reserved, in the mythology of the field, for those consecrated charismatic individuals only.

One writer/director explained how he made his documentary:

[Johnny Knoxville] paid out of his own pocket for us to go shoot for four days and then bring it back and edit it. And we walked in with this 15 minute promo piece to MTV. And before the meeting was even over MTV said “no, problem,” and he named the budget and they actually said, let’s go higher on the project. But if Johnny Knoxville had not been in the room with me they would have looked at me like I was fully insane and told me to get the fuck out of their offices ... he’s a taste maker. It must be cool because we [the network] have no idea what people really like, but they like Johnny Knoxville so he must know better than me.

The tastes of charismatic talent can take precedence over the tastes of the individual with the green light authority. Steven Soderbergh, a top leading director, produced *Insomnia* together with actor George Clooney, and explains the effect of their endorsement of Christopher Nolan as a talented director:

The head of the studio, Lorenzo Di Bonaventura, at the time, didn't want to take a meeting with him [Christopher Nolan] because he didn't like *Memento*. George [Clooney] and I went in and said, "you're an idiot, this guy is super smart, he likes the script, he'll attract talent, he'll do it for a number, come on." And look what he's gone on to do.

Executive producing can also reassure investors in the independent world, as Cary Woods, one of the producers of *Kids* explains:

At the time it had both Gus Van Sant and Marty Scorsese as executive producers ... The significance of that is foreign sales. When you go out and sell foreign sales, the extent to which you have established film makers who are somehow connected in a producerial capacity, gives the buyers, who in many instances buy these films before they're finished, a level of confidence that things are going to be done professionally. Because otherwise they've never heard of anybody else involved.

It is these endorsements by high-status players in the field that allow young, untested players to have their first shot at running a television show or making a movie. It is *not* that these high-status players will mentor or manage these projects, in fact their own human capital, audience awareness or resources plays a very little role, if any at all, but the fact that they are perceived to have a unique vision gives them insights into the marketplace, denied to others.

As the power of affiliation through leakages is dependent upon the status of the individual endorsing a project, the effect is subject to the same logic as heat. Status through affiliation operates through the same windows of opportunities, as one screenwriter explains:

When I had *The Terminal* in production with Steven Spielberg and Tom Hanks, everyone loved the script, and my agent said to me, "you could go into any room in Hollywood now and you could sell a fart for a million dollars." So I came up with this idea called 'the hypnotist' based around this

hypnotist character. I was at this dinner with a producer and he was like, “the hypnotist! the hypnotist! I love it!” So, he called up Jim Carrey and a week later I was talking to Jim Carrey and he said, “I love it!” So we decided to go out with the pitch and we had an offer from Paramount, sight unseen, they hadn’t even heard it, I hadn’t even written it, of a million dollars before we started. Then the whole ball got rolling. It’s all about the sizzle, the potential, it’s all about what it could be. There was a bidding war on it and it sold for way more than a million bucks. And then after we had gone out with all the pitches I checked into a hotel to get away from all this business stuff and told literally no one, no one in the world where I was, and the head of the studio tracked me down and insisted that I sell it to him.

The project in question had yet to be written but it was valued at a million dollars, and eventually sold for more. This was not because *The Terminal* was a hit or had critical claim because it had not even been finished, but because the status of the director and the actor of the package had leaked onto the young screenwriter. “From the moment that film gets going to the first showing of that movie, so about five to six months,” the screenwriter added, as he explained the ‘window’ of opportunity, “if there’s a rumor that the movie is terrible then it ends sooner, if it’s great it could go on for longer.” When heat arises in this situation it is purely derived from a charismatic source of value independently.

As social capital is the value of social relations in the field, the value of social capital is dictated in large part by the status of those affiliated to it. This is most directly observed in the status of agents which is determined by their client list. As a result, agents jockey for status by improving their client lists and stealing clients from other agents, as one former agent explains:

Even inside agencies, they steal your clients. People slowly move in on them. That’s your power, your clients. If they’ve just done an A-List movie they [the other agents] just starting closing in on them and you say, “what the fuck are you doing?” and they say, “oh, nothing,” it’s very common.

They're heat seeking missiles. So if there's heat they will go after them, they'll start showing up on the set, they'll start being friends with them, start calling them directly, there are no boundaries.

A writer/director adds:

At a certain time, your agent may take you for granted, but there are other agencies trying to poach you all the time. Agents are trying to raid each others clients all the time. It's a power struggle. All these agents are just fucking with each other. As someone once said, it's high school with money, and it really is.

Although agents may direct their energies and resources like 'heat seeking missiles', the loss of a client, regardless of their standing, is perceived to undermine the status of the agent. "They'll be like, oh, she left CAA, to go to WME and now she's back at CAA, but it matters because it's a personal attack on you somehow," a former agent's assistant explained, "and maybe they never made you any money, and you never sold one of their scripts."

Social capital itself is also structured by status as status forms a basis for relationships (see *Chapter 4, "Relationships"*). For example, high-status actors want to work with high-status directors, as this literary agent at a core agency explains:

There are people who make ok-movie after ok-movie and they become hot after a while, but there's a stigma on shitty movies. Why? Because actors don't want to work with those people. So if you're a big studio and you need to go get those people, a Brad Pitt or a George Clooney or whoever, you are going to have to hire someone who is groovy enough for them to work with.

This is known all too well in the field, as described by a leading director:

I'm lucky, I can attract actors, I have a good reputation with actors. They know that they're gonna have fun, it's going to be good experience and they're going to be presented well. They know that I'm going to present them with the best version of whatever they gave me. That gives me a hand rail that is not going to go away so long as I can maintain that reputation. That I can call upon people I've worked with before or other people who know me by reputation, that keeps me in the game.

Social capital and status are endogenous, rather than exogenous variables. They exist as two points on a continuum; in tandem with one another. Recognized status in the field gives rise to series of potential, realized and unrealized, affiliations. These affiliations bestow, maintain, and even diminish the status of others. Status is, therefore, like a currency: it exists only to be exchanged. Exchange is the practice of affiliation; it is the means by which the status order is transmitted and reproduced.

The result of this tightly knit web of exchanges between high-status individuals is social closure. High-status individuals only affiliate – or enter into “relationships” – with other high-status individuals. At the same time, “lending their name” through executive producing expands the currency to the uninitiated. It is a form of charismatic consecration, where low-status outsiders are anointed. This surge of “heat” for the individual or project concerned can be manipulated by a skilled operator into a “green light.”

### ***5.3. Ritual: Performance***

Status has a strong intersubjective component in the form of ritualized social performances. These performances are dramatizations of their role into its most ideal form where the source value that allegedly results in status is exhibited and recognized as legitimate by others. As the boundaries that define roles are porous and fluid, where people enter, exit, switch and combine roles, the question of one's legitimate occupation

of role is always in danger of being called into question. Changes in one's role are frequently involuntary and subject to the high degree of 'churn' across field. This unsettling occupational hazard breeds insecurity both in terms of legitimizing one's own role and making sure business transactions only occur with legitimate others.

Legitimate performances are defined along a continuum of roles from business to creative. Even as agencies foster different reputations, they visually present themselves formally, wearing suits and ties in chic and modern offices.<sup>29</sup> They must appear to be fearless, savvy and impossibly busy in order to achieve status as a "hustler". On the other hand, those who are most creative must appear to be unconcerned with financial matters, dress down to the point of shabbiness, exhibit slightly socially awkward behavior and even eccentricity. They are not "hustlers" but "visionaries" who need intermediaries, the producers and agents, to package and produce these visions. "They do want them to be a little strange or a little eccentric or a little weird," one former development executive explained, "I did correlate how strange or weird they were to how talented or creative they were." Producers lie in the middle and must negotiate both of these and usually appear to be the least stylized of the groups.<sup>30</sup>

The ability to perform convincingly is central to the consecration of status at a particular juncture in the development process: pitching. Writers, directors, and

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<sup>29</sup> It is worth noting they are the only profession I've observed in Los Angeles who wear a suit a tie. For example, William Morris Endeavor shares an office building in Beverly Hills with several prestigious law firms. In the elevator, only the agents, and not the lawyers wear ties with their suits, if the lawyers wore suits at all.

<sup>30</sup> This finding is contrary to Zafirau's (2007) study of agencies who constructed the reputation through the binary of professional and unprofessional (e.g. sleek : cluttered :: confident : awkward) which fails to place agents and agencies in relation to the other roles and one another. As a result, Zafirau fails to conceptualize how status is a performance based on the legitimation of the role as contributing value to those in other roles, namely, the supply of business rather than creative services. Zafirau conceives this is the conformity to professional norms in the field rather than an ongoing, fraught social negotiation of legitimacy, status and authority that is in danger of becoming de-stabilized.

producers are pitching their own original ideas and their versions of open-assignments to the network of studio. It is at this stage where the initial heat generated that served as the condition of the meeting becomes profitable. In this respect, the intersubjective performances at the meeting serve as the last stage of consecrating the sources of value in status through the recognition of their legitimacy. This stage is the final barrier between value and status, as one leading director describes it:

A lot of it is how you are in the room. I know a lot of talented people who are, in my opinion, not as advanced or successful as their talent warrants because they're not good in the room. That's not to say they can't bullshit, but it's about somebody feeling good about giving you a lot of money to go and play with. They're pre-disposed to say no, so they must feel really good about something or someone to do that ... They've never seen the UFO but they've got to believe that you've seen it. They have to feel confident.

This observation highlights how status is not simply the aggregate of legitimate sources of value, but that status comes to form its own independent value: that of the charismatic visionary who has “seen the UFO”. While development executives and producers may complain over how “difficult” writers and directors may be in the development process, “they want them to be difficult because it makes them feel like they’re dealing with real artists,” as one executive put it.<sup>31</sup> However, writers and directors are not to step outside of the boundaries of creative visionaries into the hustle of the business by appearing to articulate, savvy or adept at pitching, as one development executive explained:

That's because that's what the producer is for. You're not supposed to make a lot of sense but have this great creative vision and abstract thoughts and then you need the producer to translate that when you're selling. That's

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<sup>31</sup> There are different degrees of difficulty: in this instance the executive was referring to this more in the performative sense: protesting changes, defending their vision, making the artistic or creative case for their position. Difficulty in the inability to compromise, refusing phone calls, double-dealing and so forth was universally condemned and avoided and could damage a writer or director's reputation badly.



their value really, to be this mediator for you and no one likes a writer who is too smooth.

By virtue of their ambivalent position, producers fall between categories and therefore their worth is not well defined and they are subject to feelings of insecurity over their role in the process. Hence, performances legitimate roles and consecrating status but are also about the reproduction of the boundaries that define them in order to provide security and worth to the participating partners of the performance.

The bad treatment of assistants, who are at the bottom of the status hierarchy, has a ritualistic function in reproducing and legitimating the roles and status of those above them. “When times got really bad,” a former agent’s assistant recalls, “it was throwing head-sets, you know, absolute total destruction, screaming, cutting you down, insulting you - everything about you - threatening to fire you, threatening to murder you.” Another agents assistant added, “the whole time I worked at that desk, I kid you not, I did not smile once.” This becomes a rite of passage for those wishing to pursue roles on the business side of the industry (agents, managers, producers, executives); a form of ‘hazing’ as some put it, summed up by a manager/producer:

It’s really a snake pit in here, you’re fighting for survival. Part of the red badge of courage here is did you make it, were you able to survive. There’s a vanity to it: did you work for Scott Rubin? What did he do to you that was so horrible? Did he throw a computer at you, rip you a new asshole, and then the next day buy you something? There was sort of an honor in going through that.

The ‘badge of honor’ of survival is perceived to be a question of whether you can cut it, whether you are tough enough, have the potential to be a hustler. This is often made explicit when people undertake the job of an assistant, as one studio executive recalled:

The guy who was head of the department, his assistant quit, so he promoted me to his desk and essentially was like, “if you can work a year for me, I’ll promote you, but know I fired my last 12 assistants and I’m going to treat you like shit, and it’s going to be fucking awful and I’m going to make it your worst nightmare.

Some agencies and production companies have officially attempted to curtail the worst abuses due to costs of litigation from past employees. However, a general attitude of toughness still pervades even the most agreeable bosses.

The intersubjective nature of the performance does not require physical co-presence (Thompson, 1995). Inaccessibility is a key way in which status is maintained for those at the top of the hierarchy. By simply making “getting in a room” with a high-status individual - be they an actor, director or studio-head - a task in-itself, their role and status is recognized and legitimated. It also sets up the emotional expectations of those who do eventually ‘win’ that meeting so that they project charisma onto the coveted individual in the room itself.

#### ***5.4. Emotion***

As indicated by Weber, the possession of charisma by an individual and the recognition of charisma by a group is characterized by strong emotional feelings. For the group, it is an arc of awe, intimidation and resentment as they move from identification to rejection of the charismatic individual. For the charismatic individual it emerges as feelings of self-confidence, superiority, and the ability to defy conventions by creating one’s own rules. This emotional effect is a mechanism that contributes to the rise and fall of charismatic individuals. As a writer/director explains:

Then, all the people they've [studio heads] been horrible to they have to go and kiss their arses when they become producers on the lot. Most of the [former] studio heads find it really hard. At a certain point they're out of favor and all the people they've pissed off then want to stab them in the head. You know, they say, "be nice to all the people on the way up because when you're on the way down they'll be there."

There is both a structural and a psychological dimensions at work here. The role of a studio or network head is to say 'no' to people and rein in the creative control of talent. As a result, enemies are created and resentment emerges from that necessary group who have been excluded or controlled by the network or studio. Similarly, for high-status talent they are offered many more jobs than they have time to do, frequently switching between projects and making creative demands that curtail the interests of the other parties. The structural nature of the business sets up these antagonisms that are emotionally constructed. He continues:

For some people, if you're massively successful the knives don't come out, but at the stumble, all the people who've been holding on for years to have a go at you come out of the woodwork. Mel Gibson, perfect example, he had pissed off a load of people over the years so when he had his whole episode in Malibu all these people hated him, not just over the *Passion of the Christ*, they hated him over everything. Everyone knew he was anti-Semitic, but when it kinda came out, they really relished in the fact that his "true colors" came out. I'm not talking about my own feelings, I'm talking about how the town perceived it ... The second you stop being successful you get your comeuppance. And so the key here is when you're successful you're untouchable. If you can maintain the success you can be a child abuser. They don't care so long as you're making money for them. When you stop making money for them, that's when the morality comes in.

Hence, when one is at the top of the status hierarchy as a charismatic individual you are 'untouchable' but it only requires a slight decrease in status for your career to end

entirely. This is why Hollywood careers rarely end gradually but suddenly: where one is at the top of the game and then suddenly never heard from again.

## **6. Function of Status**

### ***6.1 Status as Signal: Information and the Mitigation of Risk***

As the predominant theories of status in psychology and economic sociology suggest, status can serve as a signal in the market place. Since status and the sources of value (quality) are loosely coupled, it is no surprise to find that status is deployed as a heuristic in the decision to green light a project. Since demand is fundamentally uncertain (Caves, 2000) and the “quality” of any individual or project is not immediately apparent to those involved, status is used as an informational signal to mitigate risk.

This was shown most clearly in the case of status leakages where the affiliation of high-status to low-status players can help the low-status players “rise to the top of the pile.” One literary agent at a core agency gives an example:

Several years ago, Fox wanted to find a new teen soap. Josh Schwartz was a young features writer who they wanted to develop with. Instead of Schwartz going in on his own, we took McG, who was coming off *Charlie’s Angels* ... we took McG producing and attached to direct [the pilot] with Josh Schwartz writing ... by combining those elements you’ve got something from the very beginning, because these networks develop 60 to 80 dramas a cycle, so you had from the beginning, top of the list, very likely to get made instead of being just another script.

For films, projects can lie dormant on the books for decades waiting for the talent to either commit to the project or to align the availability of the cast at the same moment. Television moves through a year-long cycle where, if the necessary cast is not found by the end of the year, the idea tends to be dumped; only rarely are they resurrected. In both

cases, affiliation with high-status talent, either through direct involvement or through the most arms-length forms of executive producing, is perhaps the most significant factor driving a development and green light decision.

While affiliation with high-status talent is essential for projects to rise to the top of the pile, the likelihood of a green light decision depends on precisely how “high” the high status individual is recognized. A studio executive explains:

At any given time, given a high handful of directors and a handful of actors - attaching them to your screenplay, takes you almost all the way to a green light. For example, if Will Smith finds a screenplay and says this is what I want to star in, you’re almost home. He is the biggest star in the world and everybody wants to be in business with him. There are very few directors of that description. I’d say half a dozen. There’s Spielberg, there’s James Cameron, Peter Jackson, beyond that, you’re just in the mix. There’s people like Ridley Scott, Michael Mann, who you know, still A-List directors for sure, but just because they want to make something doesn’t mean that it’s going to get made. Even Scorsese, and granted some of the stuff he wants to make is a little bit esoteric, he still has to come to the table with Leonardo DiCaprio, and this is what the budget’s going to be, etc. etc.

The impact of the status signal depends upon the way it is contextualized and interpreted in the field. The status order segmentation, as discussed at the beginning of this paper, emphasized the role of niche and genre in categorizing status. As a literary agent at a core agency explained:

It’s all by genre and name. If you go out with a Western then that’s going to be impossible to sell unless you have Will Smith attached. If you go out with a comedy with Zach Galifianakis you can sell that for a lot of money. If you go out with a horror movie there are a limited number of buyers. But if you have a horror movie with Platinum Dunes [Michael Bay’s production company] you’ll have a lot of buyers. It all depends how it’s contextualized in the market place.

In this example, because Will Smith is the “biggest star in the world,” he can take the most commercial of genres, a Western, and secure a green light from the studio. At the same time, the ability for status to signal quality by those not in the upper-most echelon of the status hierarchy, is constrained by symbolic classification of the field by niche and genre. Similarly, just as attaching top talent can lead to a picture being made, it can also lead to it killing off a potential project, as another studio executive puts it: “Sony just bought this thing and Will Smith is attached, it’s just like our project, so lets not try on our project anymore.” Their competing project is perceived to be uncompetitive against one that has Will Smith involved in it.

In television status remains important but does not function to mitigate risk and supply information as it does in motion pictures. Television development and production has more decision points where the product emerges and the probability of success becomes more predictable as pilots can be tested and initial airings can gauge audience demand. “You’re right, having Cameron Diaz does get you to the green light in film,” a network chief told me, “in TV, you can have the biggest star, but if not many people like the pilot, it’s just not going to go to series.” The exception to this rule are put-pilots where the network makes an agreement with the show creator to air the pilot, a privilege that is afforded only to those writer-producers with the greatest status. Despite this, they still do not guarantee a sale or pilot, as one network executive recounts:

JJ [Abrams] came out with a big spec this year ... his name meant that all of the presidents of all the networks were in the room and because he was in the room, all the presidents read the script. Typically you wouldn’t ask a network president to read a spec-script, but everybody was really engaged, but ultimately only one network bought it.

The network that did buy the show, NBC, had a larger development slate than usual as they had to re-program their prime-time 10pm time-slot beginning in the fall 2010 following the cancellation of the *Jay Leno Show*. NBC purchased material from the highest-ranked TV creators, JJ Abrams, David E Kelly, David Shore, and Jerry Bruckheimer, indicating that networks in precarious positions will use status as a central means to mitigate risk.

The decision to green light a project is highly sensitive to the status of those affiliated to it. Even those at the top of the totem pole face strict scrutiny. Most top talent can bring projects from the bottom of the pile to the attention of those with green light authority. However, even within that elite pool those valued highly enough to compel a green light decision with their involvement alone is slender. Their ability to mitigate risk in the eyes of decision makers in this risky business also bestows upon them great power to shape the destiny of this project-based industry as a whole.

### ***6.2 Status as Power: Autonomy and Dependence***

As high-status and charismatic individuals are able to create value and mitigate risk by their own personal decisions, they are able to exert considerable power over the field and achieve autonomy from the demands of the studio, network and the participating individuals. The clearest expression of this relationship of autonomy and dependence is the green lighting of commercial material known as “passion projects”. As one executive put it, the star “forces this down a studio’s throat because it’s the only way they’ll do the other tentpole movie that they have to do.” Another studio executive adds, with reference to major film star:

Not to say that we would have done any project that he asked for, because we wanted him for [a major film franchise]. Because those franchises were such breadwinners for the studio, we wanted to make sure that he was happy. That's why we gave him space on the lot, he was able to bring in 14 people to work for him, and had a lot of power over us. It's all about leverage.

These production deals further the interest of the stars: it allows them to develop their material with the studio, take an additional fee as a producer, and exert more formal control over the process. As another studio executive explains:

We'll go to Leo [DiCaprio], who has a production deal here, and we'll say, 'what are you interested in?' and he'll say, 'I'm interested in being a spy,' 'ok, cool'. So then you go out and find a spy movie that interests both you and Leo and then you say let's develop this into a movie and then you build it around them ... We has a production deal with George Clooney until very recently, and he'd bring us material and say, 'I think this could be a very interesting idea,' and we'd say, 'ok, if you agree to star in this then we'll develop it for you.' So we'd then develop that idea around him, around his thoughts, what he wants to do, and hopefully it's as commercial as possible, because you know actors and directors will want to do less commercial pieces because they're more challenging and interesting, and it's harder to make it for the budgets that they need.

While the number of development deals and passion projects has been drastically reduced since the recession, those deals remain in place for the most sought after talent.

In addition to their ability to force green light decisions on material the studio believe to be "uncommercial," stars are able to exert their power to upend the formal relationships of control in any movie or television show. In any given project, creative control is usually dictated by role: the show-runner in television, the director in film, the producer in reality TV. However, the attachment of a 'star' actor who has greater status than the principal in-charge will alter the power dynamics, particularly in the realm of



feature film, and whose power can only be mitigated by a charismatic director, who number far less than actors of comparable status.

As attracting such stars is fundamental to the project rising through development to the green light decision, writers, producers and directors anticipate the kind of parts stars wish to play and include them in the script. As one screenwriter notes:

They're vain. It's better to write for a big male lead than a big female lead, because movies are male dominated. If you have a big female lead, you better make sure the male lead is pretty damn good because you'll never get a male movie star to take a back door ... If you're going to write big roles for stars that are very active, they push the action and are not passive people, and ideally there's a scene in there that's their Oscar scene, that they can sink their teeth into and it's their moment to shine.

He gives an example of such an instance from one of his own films:

Richard Gere on *Autumn in New York* pushed to have the script re-written, and it was re-written really poorly, because even though he was the lead, the star-maker role was the young girl and he hated the fact he had to compete with Winona Rider. He wanted all the jokes, everything geared to him, he hated anyone telling his character anything, he didn't like that his character was clueless at times. It was about the education of a grown man's soul and he didn't want to get educated. He wanted the guy to just be confused and see the light so he micro-managed the development process.

Indeed, often star actors will have their own writers, called 'closers', who will re-write the voice of the part to embody their own brand. In this sense, the stars dictate the kind of parts and stories that can be told.

Status as a distribution of power and autonomy is often directly relayed orders, deference, or the assignment of blame. One screenwriter explains:

There is just a presumption that because you're in a certain slot in the hierarchy you're going to bow down and give other people what they want.

I remember once when I was offered to write something - and I didn't want to write it - being told that the head of the studio really wanted me to write it and this was conveyed to me - and I said, is this a threat? It's not a threat threat but those people think they're going to get what they want.

Another screenwriter elaborates this dynamic:

I knew a major star. The producers came to me with this project, it was a play, a romantic comedy, and they said we want you to write it. I said that's nice, it's an interesting piece, and I know so-and-so, who would be perfect for the lead. "Oh, my god, you know that person? It would be amazing." So we go and pitch this to him ... and his manager, and they love it, "ok, we're on." I leave them my little three-pager. The network was happy, we went into development, the producers were like, "thank you, thank you." ... I did the treatment, we sent it to the star, we didn't hear back and the network executive said, "that's ok, that's ok, we love it, go forward, write the script." So I write the script and on the Sunday night, the broadcast executives, and the two producers, one of them is in tears, "we're going to win an Emmy Award, this is like a work of art. It's beautiful, it's brilliant, don't change a word, we'll shoot it as is." Monday morning, less than twelve hours later, ageing movie star wakes up and actually reads those three pages I left on the table, and it dawns on him it's a romantic comedy. He decided he didn't want to do a romantic comedy so he called his manager and said, "what the fuck? It's a romantic comedy." And the manager's like, "no way, you've got to be kidding me. Someone pulled the wool over our eyes!" So he called the network executive, and she's like, "no!" and she calls the producers. The producers call me, now these two women, who were like my best friends until that moment, were using every curse word I've ever heard and some I'd never heard before, saying, "we're not paying you for that piece of shit, you're going to re-write that script and not make it a romantic comedy because you've just cost us our Emmy award." I called my agent to report all of this, and he says, "I've already heard all of this, they're right." They're right? This was still in my early time here. "You came here on your own volition, no one forced you to come here, these are the rules of the sandbox, it's star driven, your star just said he doesn't want to do a romantic comedy, he hates them, and you delivered a romantic comedy so you're wrong." And I said, "the play's a romantic comedy!" "Nobody cares. You are wrong."

This example starkly illustrates how the stars create value in the field. Their power and autonomy forces other players to come into line with their judgment, either by changing their own point of view in-line with the visionary or as a conscious strategy to stay on the

right side of the star. In fact, the power of stars is so immense in the development and green lighting process it is widely acknowledged that agents and executives do not even read scripts, but just glance at the affiliated talent and the genre. “We’ve green lit films we haven’t seen the script to,” a studio executive admitted, “normally that’s kinda silly.”

### ***6.3 Status as Power: Struggle and Subversion***

The power of stars in the field does not go uncontested. The contours of this struggle can be expressed in Weberian terms, as a conflict between bureaucratic rationalities employed by the studio or network and the status order. Bureaucratic rationality established the rules, forms and parameters for the vast majority of those projects in development (see *Chapter 2, “Formulas”*), but those charismatic individuals are a source of authority, legitimacy and value that overcomes and subverts those rules, even re-writing them not only for themselves but for others as well.

This struggle is part symbolic: the battle between the whims of talent and the search for formulas that can capture audience taste and reproduce it in a movie or television show. It is also economic: studios struggle against the stars’ demanding pay package. After all, as their position in the status hierarchy is a signal of economic worth that position itself entails an incredible monetary premium over and above any “real” value. Studios are in a constant struggle to diminish that premium their signaling function provides.

In the wake of the great recession at the end of the 2000s, there was a coordinated effort by the studios and networks to re-assert themselves against the perceived ‘excesses’ of the 1990s and the early 2000s. Production deals were dramatically cut, back-end deals were scaled back, the number of movies and original series in production

has been reduced, and using pre-existing intellectual property is being used as a substitute for talent with pre-branded awareness. “If I can get fired by Sony three days before shooting a Brad Pitt movie,” a leading director explained, “everybody is on the block now, no one is safe.” Despite this push back, high-status and charismatic stars still serve as sources of value, supply market information in development for ‘hot’ projects, and are perceived to mitigate risk at the green light decision.

However, that struggle too can be subverted by the logic of the status hierarchy. A consequence of the status order is the creation of an incentive structure that runs at the level of the field overriding those of individual organizations. One development executive explains this paradox for the studios as organizations:

Movie executives are paid ok ... but the talent is paid a huge amount of money. So you have this very odd thing: if I'm the president of production at Universal making \$2 million a year, I deal every day with Michael Mann and Will Smith and people who make a lot more every year. You know if you're the president of production at Universal you're going to be fired, it's just guaranteed. And when you're fired you're going to move over to their creative side, the talent side essentially, and become a producer. You want to have made friends with all of those high-priced people so they can essentially hire you to produce movies for them. Scott Stuber was president at Universal and he made *Miami Vice* for \$150m, and all these expensive movies with these fancy filmmakers. And then when he left his job at Universal, he got to produce *The Kingdom*, which was another movie that Michael Mann produced, and he gets a lot more money as a producer than as a studio exec. So what that means is that your incentives as a studio executive are not aligned with the company as a whole.

This further increases the power and autonomy of the stars over the studios as organizations, as they are able to offer the individuals governing the studios greater rewards over the long-term than the studio is.

## **7. Conclusion**

This chapter has explored the structure of the status hierarchy, the reproduction and transmission of status, the psychological impact of status, and its economic function in a critical capacity. Contrary to the existing literature, it has been demonstrated that status is not simply an additional “signal” among others, but is an ordering principle in the market. This comes, in part, from the institutional arrangement of the field, where the labor market is organized through the creation of one-off projects – be they motion pictures or television shows. High-status individuals who are recognized as charismatic have a singular social power in the field to create these one-off projects and, as a result, are themselves ordering principles of the market.

This chapter also contributes to the literature on status by bringing Weber’s sociology of religion into the analysis of a modern economic market. Weber’s model brings into relief the contestation between stars and studios not simply as a monetary transaction, but one of the legitimate sources of value. From the rational-legal standpoint of the networks and studios, “hits” are created primarily through replicable formulas, where human capital, audience pre-awareness, and resources are the component parts of such a formulaic project. Stars, on the other hand, have the symbolic power to reshape the very definitions of the formulas themselves, modeling them out of their own image, and by personalizing them to their “giftedness” or “vision”, control them. This charismatic basis of legitimate value informs the dominant mythology of the field. Historically, the stars and the studios have each had their period of dominance. Yet, it is the ability of stars to ameliorate risk, to become a living embodiment of a market signal, that has made their presence intrinsic to the green light process. And, as a result, this has

ensured their crucial role in which projects are green lit, and in turn, how the field becomes structured.

Chapter 4

*Relationships*



“I had to get in, to meet Margo! I had to say something, be somebody, make her like me!”

– Eve Harrington, *All About Eve* (1950)

When *All About Eve* came out in 1950 it resonated so strongly with members of the Academy of Motion Pictures that they nominated it for a record-breaking fourteen Oscars.<sup>32</sup> It tells the story of a famous Broadway star Margo Channing, played by Bette Davis, who, on the eve of her fortieth birthday, fears her appeal as an actress is destined to wane. One night at the theater, she is approached by a young fan, Eve Harrington. Eve tells a moving story of the death of her husband in San Francisco, how she saw Margo’s play there, and followed the theater tour across the country. She confesses

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<sup>32</sup> A record that wasn’t matched or surpassed for the next 47 years until they considered James Cameron’s *Titanic* in 1997.

through innocent eyes that she is an utterly subservient devotee to this Broadway actress. Charmed, Margo takes her on as her new assistant. Soon, she is driving wedges between Margo and the men in her life, her husband and director, and positioning herself to be her understudy in the new play she is headlining, *Aged in Wood*. Eve invites the critics to attend a performance and at the same time conspires for Margo to miss the performance. Devastated by the new adoration for her assistant, Margo withdraws from the play, leaving Eve to play the starring role. But one theater critic has gotten wise to Eve's scheming: how she entered Margo's coterie through a web of lies, that she had never seen Margo on tour and had never had a husband. She pleads with the critic, explaining it was the only way she could break into Broadway. He decides to blackmail her, for his own ends. As the movie closes, we see Eve bump into a sweet, innocent looking girl standing outside her apartment. She agrees to let her in and hire her as her first assistant.

The resonance that such a story had, and continues to have, with the denizens of Hollywood, is about the crucial role that relationships have in achieving success and what a devilish game it is to play. Yet, the role of social capital in cultural production has yet to be explored. Although some network ideas such as metaphors and methods have been recruited (e.g. Giuffre, 1999; Godart and Mears, 2009; White, 1993; Aheier et al., 1995), social capital has not been one of them. This is surprising since cultural markets are made up of connections between artists, musicians and writers to their gallerists, record companies and publishers, who are brokered by agents, managers or mutual acquaintances, and depend upon the services of technical specialists such as marketers, publicists, and technicians (Becker, 1982; Caves, 2000, 2005). How social capital - the "investment in social relations with expected returns in the market place" (Lin, 2001,



p.19)<sup>33</sup> - enables and constrains this process as a social mechanism is a lacuna in the current research.

Motion picture and television production is no different in this regard to the other cultural industries. Despite attempts by large conglomerates to synergize the production process of movies and television shows within a single corporate structure, they have so far failed to own and control all the constituent elements. At each step, outside firms and individuals are brought in, from the initial assembly of projects that enter into production, the technical assistance required through production and post-production, to marketing and distribution of the finished product (Scott, 2001, 2005; Lotz, 2007). Thus, the field of television and motion picture production adheres to the network form of organization, where participants “pursue repeated, enduring exchange relations with one another and, at the same time, lack a legitimate organizational authority to arbitrate and resolve disputes that may arise during the exchange.” (Podolny and Page, 1998, p.59) The ties that emerge from repeated, enduring exchange relationships have been hypothesized to explain gender inequality (Christopherson, 2008), recurrent hiring (Faulkner and Anderson, 1987) and the effects of agency representation on writers’ careers (Bielby and Bielby, 1999). However, in each of these studies ties are not observed directly but are hypothesized as the causal mechanism in order to account for the statistically patterned phenomena. The study of the social ties themselves in motion picture and television production has not been investigated directly.

This chapter asks, what constitutes a “relationship” in Hollywood, how are they maintained, and what are the conditions of their activation? A number of contributions

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<sup>33</sup> There has long been a tendency to merge many competing concepts in sociology, economics and political science underneath the heading of “social capital” (Portes, 1998, Lin, 2001), yet most theories converge upon this simple premise.

are made to the understanding of how social capital is put to work as a mobilized resource within social structure. First, brokerage is considered not just as a function of location in social structure but as a legitimized and legitimizing role in a field, embedded within organizations that have their own autonomous interests, incentives and practices which run counter to the interests of the client. These conflicting interests can lead to *brokerage failure*, which in turn, creates a competitive advantage for those players in the field who can broker relationships unofficially. Second, ‘relationships’ are not reified things-in-themselves but formed through a dialectical process of the subjective evaluations of past exchanges between individuals in the field. Relationships are considered to be emergent phenomena from an exchange regulated by social structure, market information, and emotion. These are not envisaged to form competing multiplex networks; the order of relationships is conceptualized as multiple and contingent – always open to re-formation - as the sequence of exchange unfolds. Third, the social practice of the ‘relationships’ is characterized by three significant disconnects: the *asymmetry* of interpretation between participating parties; the possibility for the residual interpretation of the relationship to become out of *sync* with the current basis of exchange; and the creation of ‘bets’ due to uncertainty over the *sequences* of the composite acts that make up the social exchange itself. Each of these implies general principles for the formation and activation of social capital that has so far not been treated in the current literature.

### **1. Literature Review: Modeling Social Capital**

Social capital theory has focused empirically on hiring (Flap and Boxman, 1999; Fernandez and Weinberg, 1997), information diffusion (Burt, 2004; Granovetter, 1973), social closure (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988), trust and reputation (Putnam, 2000; Lin,

2001) and brokerage (Burt, 1995, 2005). Yet, the issue of how social relations become “activated” or “mobilized” into social capital (Lin, 2001) has so far received little attention (Smith, 2005). Part of the problem is methodological as the study of “ties” lends itself well to the quantitative modeling of correlations between measures of social structure and a variety of outcomes from health (Christakis, 2007) to hiring (Flap and Boxman, 1999) to ideas (Burt, 2004). However, the qualitative data into the *social process* by which social capital is mobilized as such is less readily available. There are two in-depth qualitative treatments of this process. Desmond (2012) examined the creation and deployment of “disposable” ties among the black and white urban poor when facing eviction. Smith (2005)’s study into job referral decision-making among the urban black poor as predicted by tie strength, the social-economic status of the neighborhood and the individual’s reputation and status. Despite a shared qualitative approach, Smith and Desmond operate using different epistemological assumptions. Smith adopts a typical “mechanism” approach to social capital consistent with the broader literature, while Desmond’s treatment is more akin to the “social process” approach adopted by this thesis.

Smith’s position, consistent with most “social” capital research, rests upon the existence of an empirically distinguishable resource referred to as “social structure”. Yet, what counts as “social structure” is not theoretically defined throughout the literature; to quote a number of different approaches: a “network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition” (Bourdieu, 1985, p.248), “some aspect of social structures” (Coleman, 1988, p.98), “specific social structures” (Baker, 1992, p.161), or “the set of elements of the social structure that affects relations among

people” (Schiff 1992, p. 161), or “resources embedded in a social structure“ (Lin, 2001, p.29) or a “location in a structure of relationships” (Burt, 2005, p.5). As a result, many different measures of “social structure” have proliferated, from shared memberships or affiliations, to rates of interpersonal communication or explicit labeling (e.g. “friend”, “acquaintance”).

This open-endedness has led to reliance upon methodological rather than theoretical definitions of social structure as a resource. The lacuna in the theoretical exposition of social capital is at the heart of two important critiques of social capital theory that have yet to be resolved. First, the measurements of “ties”, as both the description and explanation, “‘ruthlessly abstracts’ the formal or ‘objective’ dimensions of social relations from their cultural and intersubjective contexts” (Emirbayer and Goodwin, 1994, p.1427).<sup>34</sup> That is, the reification of the observed ties as a thing in-itself rather than as an emergent property of more complex social processes. This reification is driven primarily to the methodological bias studies of social capital, to mistake the unit of measurement for the social process itself.

Second, the problem of endogeneous causal explanation where “the estimated effect of social capital simply reflects the selection effects based on the myriad of nonrandom ways in which people become friends.” (Mouw, 2006, p.80) More specifically, “If individuals choose friends who are similar to them, then one may reasonably suspect that the effects of many social capital variables are overestimated because of unobserved, individual-level factors that are correlated with friendship choice and the outcome variable of interest.” (2006, p.99) This is the proverbial cat chasing its

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<sup>34</sup> Although this particular critique is made of what Emirbayer and Goodwin term the “structuralist determinist” branch of network analysis, I hold that in most studies of social capital that seek to draw links between a given network of ties to a preferred outcome adopt this “ruthless abstraction”.

own tail: chasing the elements that predict ties that are in fact the constituent element of ties.

Indeed, it is precisely because the notion of a “tie” is reified that the issue of endogeneity arises because the “tie” is separated out from the social process from which it emerges. This is evident in Smith (2005) who excludes the process of the formation of ties from her model of social capital activation. As a result, the possibility that individuals strategize to *form* ties with those most likely to help them get a job is excluded from the analysis. This is because a ‘tie’ is considered to be a fixed resource that ‘acts’ in the social process incidentally to the interests or strategies of those involved. It may well also be that status is implied in who can form ties with those making it endogenous to the explanation of which includes status as the mechanism that is used to explain tie activation. This paradox is not intrinsic to the overall aims of social capital but rather the epistemological preliminaries that presuppose variable specification.

Desmond’s (2012) ethnographic account of “disposable ties” among the urban poor brings together the agentic, cultural, and material elements of social capital into an account of tie formation and use. Examining the case of finding a lodging through finding roommates when undergoing eviction, he finds that often chance interactions between strangers at a bus stop or street corner can form the basis of highly useful if fleeting social ties. The pressure of needing to find new lodgings quickly, the small pool of potential roommates, and the strategic use of gift-giving and exchange, create a context where such intense, disposable ties are possible. While this is an insightful recruitment of the ideas of Malinowski (1922) and Mauss (1954 [1925]) to understand

social capital among the urban poor, no general theory of social capital that could be deployed in alternative social contexts is explored.

In order to examine the social process of social capital activation the component parts of a “tie” - or for the purposes of this study, a “relationship” - must be disaggregated. Burt (2005, p.12) observes a distinction that provides the basis for solving this dilemma: “there is a network residue to social history, a network in which individuals are variably connected as a function of prior contact, exchange and attendant emotions.” This distinction between ‘a network’ and ‘social history’ is a fundamental one, but remains undertheorized by Burt, who takes the social history as a direct predictor of the network in his research methodology and thus subsumes the distinction in his research. Instead, these two elements should be kept separate as two dialectic elements.<sup>35</sup> There is an objective, history of intersubjective *social exchange* between individuals, and then there is the *subjective interpretation* of the social meaning of the exchange, the residue that construes the social exchange as a “relationship.” These perceptions are socially constructed within the social milieu through normative definitions of what constitutes different kinds of “relationships”, when they can be initiated, what the appropriate terms are of the social exchange, when they should be broken off. They exist in a dialectical relationship: as the normative perceptions of relationships structure the possibilities for exchanges, and different exchanges structure the possibilities for their interpretation. This was indeed Mauss’s (1954 [1925]) insight: that more important than the actual

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<sup>35</sup> The dialectic of the objective and subjective is central (though each in very different ways) to the theories of Georg Hegel, Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens. In this respect, I make no claims of originality. However, the aim here is not to provide a theory of action or practice but a way of conceptualizing social ties for the purposes of addressing the issue of social capital. The result is to simply import from these rich theoretical traditions conceptual tools to make up for the theoretical lacuna in social capital theory.

goods that were exchanged was the symbolic significance that such an exchange had. The obligation to give, the obligation to receive, and the obligation to reciprocate the gifts were not simply norms to be blindly adhered to through some kind of mechanistic acculturation, but a strategic game to be played of gifts and counter-gifts. It is this complex fusion of the subjective and objective elements, combined with a great number of exchanges sequentially unfolding over time into an uncertain future, that forms the basis of an understanding of social capital as an agentic transaction.

Current measures of social capital refer to different parts of this process. Explicit labeling is measuring the subjective interpretations of a whole history of social exchanges from one of the exchange-parties' point of view. Shared memberships of affiliations refer to the material basis of exchange, the positions in the social structure that open individuals up to potential exchange partners. Rates of interpersonal communication measures the frequency of social exchanges but does not address the normative framework in which those exchanges take place. It is therefore no surprise that issues of endogeneity arise when variables are hypothesized to interact with elements intrinsic to the social process by which ties emerge. Culture and agency are not external variables that "interact" with ties, they are intrinsic to the social process of ties through the agentic strategies that underpin the basis of exchange and interpretation.

Social capital activation as a social process is hypothesized to be characterized by three interactions of the component parts and the participants of the exchange. First, is the *asymmetry* of interpretation of the basis of the social exchange between the participating partners. Each of the exchange partners may understand the transaction differently and ascribe different symbolic and emotional meanings to it. This may be a

product of miscommunication, but it may also be strategic intent where one partner gives off misleading signals of their motivation to the other parties. Second, is the degree of *synchronicity* between the contemporary basis of social exchange and the residual normative definition of the exchange relationship that has accumulated over past interactions. In other words, a “relationship,” or sequence of successful transactions in the eyes of both parties, is dependent, at least in part, upon either held or anticipated value in the field. That is, if a relationship is based on the fact that one party is an agent and the other is an executive, and the agent loses their position, then the normative definition of the relationship – “we have a strong relationship” – may become out of sync with the objective foundations of their exchange. Third, is the unfolding transaction between the parties over time and the accumulation of social debts and credits as temporal *sequence*. These debts and credits manifest themselves as moral feelings of obligations of things owed. Yet, all too often, these debts are never repaid and the credits given never incur any interest or reward.

The proposed model of social capital, and its application to the substantive area of interest, Hollywood, will proceed in three stages. First, it will be shown how the strategic value of social capital as brokerage results from the failure of the formal brokers in the field to broker on behalf of both the buyers and the sellers in the marketplace. Second, different objective basis of exchange will be considered: position, quality, status, emotion, and context. Third, the importance of the three disconnects in social capital – synchronicity, asymmetry, and sequence – will be shown to be the basis of the strategies for social capital activation in the field. Last, the conclusion will link these empirical findings to broader debates about social capital.



## **2. Brokers, Brokerage and Brokerage Failure**

In order to examine how the field takes on a network form of organization, it is necessary to draw the distinction between network brokerage as a function of location in the social structure and formal brokers as a legitimate role defined in the field. Although Burt (2005) in his seminal work on network brokerage notes that some roles have formal roles as brokers he does not address it empirically by exploring instead how managers, primarily, may occupy locations in the social structure that bridge structural holes defined by relations of interpersonal communication. However, the presence of formal brokers in the field is not incidental or additive to the process of network brokerage but structures significantly how “relationships” come to form social capital. When network brokerage takes place within Hollywood agencies it is subject to the potentially conflictual incentives, interests and practices inherent in the organization which may lead to *brokerage failure*. This creates a competitive advantage for those players in the field who are able to form and use relationships independent of the agencies and deal directly with other players. It is this central dynamic that orders the organizational arrangement of brokerage in the field.

### **2.1 Core Agencies**

The formal brokers in the field of television and motion production are the ‘core’ agencies (Bielby and Bielby, 1999).<sup>36</sup> They are the Creative Artists Agency (CAA), William Morris Endeavor (WME), International Creative Management (ICM), and the

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<sup>36</sup> The core agencies also represent clients in other fields, such as sports and publishing, but they are by no means dominant or formal brokers of those fields. The single study on agencies by Bielby and Bielby (1999) estimated that representation by one of the major ‘core’ agencies was advantageous to a career but did not examine how agencies achieve this.

United Talent Agency (UTA). Core agencies are defined by their representation of the major in-demand talent, number of agents, financial reach and regulation by the State of California. Agencies are frequently described as the ‘brain of the industry’ where market information on the supply and demand for properties, capital and labor is collected, and organized and distributed throughout the field. In the last thirty years ‘packaging’ has emerged as a fundamental revenue source for the agencies, as agents assemble these resources as economic units to be sold to financiers, networks or studios, and often take an additional commission for the service. The role of ‘agenting’ is defined as ‘signing, selling and servicing’. One agent elaborates:

To advocate and represent my clients to the best of my ability in terms of securing work, as we like to say, trying to move the needle, you know, further their career, find out where their value is in the market place, and try and build careers, both at the high end and in terms of emerging careers. Figuring out how to put them to work, in areas where they will be compensated but as a way to further their career as opposed to a detriment to their career. It a way you’re an in-house producer: you’re managing their career, you’re advising them, finding out how to get their movies made at the studio, incentivize the studio so that they will made the movie, and set them up in a position from which they can succeed by managing the system and all of the moving parts. It can be incredibly complicated.

The brokerage abilities of the core agencies can be of vital importance to moving projects forward, as one producer explains with regard to an unusually “ambitious” project:

When you have a project like this, it’s going to take someone like CAA who has their tentacles in stuff in all different ways: they represent well known actors, and directors, they also represent producers, they also in essence have the ability to force things on certain distributors and studios alike. The only way it’s going to happen is to have someone like CAA on board because we need access to the very top people and not be in the middle.

However, the actual practice of brokerage by agents is refracted through the incentives, interests and practices of the agency organization that employs them. As a result, the practice of brokerage may depart from the formal definition outlined above as the interests of the clients represented and those of the agents are misaligned, resulting in brokerage failure.

### *3.1.1 Favoritism to Highest-Earners*

The core revenues of the agencies are derived from packaging television and securing large pay-packets for their top earning talent. The agencies are incentivized to structure potential deals around their top talent and devote their resources to servicing that talent. As one would expect, those at the top are very satisfied with representation, as one of the leading directors in Hollywood told me:

Most of the one's I've dealt with I've gotten what we're trying to do and why we're trying to do it this way. I have to say, from Brian Lourd to Patrick Whitesell, those are two people, for instance, that are at the top of their respective agencies, that have been very helpful in designing the deal that I think is the best deal for the movie, and it means thinking outside of the box a little bit.

Likewise, those who are not the top earners frequently find their interests relegated. For example, one screenwriter explained how his agent forcefully reprimanded him after getting into a disagreement with a high-ranking studio executive at a pitch meeting, concluding “they have projects with this studio, so if they have to throw me under the bus, they’ll throw me under the bus and not themselves.” In another case, a writer/producer recalled the common agency practice of shunting their clients off their own projects to make space for higher-paid clients:

They saw [it] as a valuable property, and advised me if I wanted to get it made and make the most money, the smart thing to do would be to take a step back, hire one of their clients, an A-List screenwriter to adapt it, and take a producing credit ... it was pretty self-serving agent reasoning. An agent has a lot of clients, they have a lot of million-dollar writer clients ... and so if they could get one those writers, they'd make more commission off of that, and a commission off the rights.

This preference for high-income earners, and their valuable relationships in the field that ensure those earnings, is rarely made visible in examples such as these. For the most part it is done behind the scenes where the most resources are allocated to the most valued clients who are also offered the most lucrative projects first. This is a routine organizational practice.

### *2.1.2. Promotion of Commercial Projects*

It follows from the first principle that agents are incentivized to present only the most commercially valuable projects to their clients and keep them on a course that leads to their fees rising as their career progresses. As one studio executive who was a former agent's assistant explains:

Agents and managers are trying mould the careers of the talent they're representing. So they're not going to let everything through the door. They know that Spielberg needs an action picture this fall: that's what he's going to need to catapult him back out into the commercial thing. But you as a producer, you know that your project about the 1920s potato famine would work if you could just get Spielberg and you know what Spielberg has an obsession with the 1920s potato famine, so you could make this a movie. If you bring that story to an executive and they send that to an agent the agent is not going to give it to Spielberg because that's not what he needs to be doing right now.

Agents are able to exercise this control over their clients' careers because, as another former agent's assistant explains, "those clients don't even read the projects that are

offered to them and if they do, they read very, very few. So it leaves a lot of room for the agents to make these decisions of what projects are worthy and what my client should see.” However, when clients do find out that offers or material sent to them has been passed up and they wished to take it, they frequently and publicly fire their agents as a result.

### *2.1.3. Limited Windows of Attention*

Beyond the highest-earning clients, agents also devote resources to those new clients they have just signed. “When the agents were good they were very good, but I think something sets in where they take you for granted, they’re tired of talking about you, they’ve sold you to the people they know,” a screenwriter explained, “it’s like a marriage, it grows stale.” Clients eventually learn this over the years and develop strategies to maintain their agents interest and use these limited windows of attention for their advantage. As another screenwriter put it: “and you know when you go from one agency to the next that you have about six months to a year when you are at the top of their list and then you’re just another client. So you need to move at a time when those six months can be used to propel your agenda.” A common strategy is play agents off against one another by switching agents back and forth in order to create a competition for their attention. A former assistant explains this from the agents’ perspective:

The agent I worked for had fifty clients ... and for the year I was there he spoke to twenty of them on a regular basis. There were some I’d never spoken to on the phone, I’d never met or saw come in. And then he had one that called and he was like, “I haven’t really spoke to you, I don’t hear from you, you don’t send me anything and I’m going to let you go.” And then all of a sudden he cared, he cared so much because losing a client would look so bad.

As agents derive their status from their client lists they have an interest **in** not only maintaining high-status clients but also the perception that there is demand for their agents services from other clients. Thus, even if a low-status client leaves this may undermine the perception of demand, not just to other clients, but to other agents both within their home agency and competing agency whose esteem they require to operate as effective brokers.

#### *2.1.4 Overload*

Agencies are highly pressurized environments often referred to as “boiler rooms” with hundreds of phone calls made and emails written each day. As a result, even when the previous three principles are met brokerage failure can occur, as one writer/director recounted:

We went to Johnny Depp’s company to see if they would come on as producers. We sit in a room with Johnny Depp who is allegedly a pretty big movie star. He [Depp] loves it, he’s laughing his ass off. My agent never calls to follow up with the company or with me. I was like, “wow”, I don’t know what more I can be doing with my career than hanging out with Johnny Depp to get you excited about my career. I don’t know what the agents are thinking. The one time I can say there’s no questions, the agent should be like, “wow, how did the meeting go!” Nothing. I waited like ten days for the agent to call and then I fired her.

Such an occurrence is a constant problem for the agencies to broker effectively, as one former agent’s assistant put it:

It’s 24 hours a day, if one little thing is wrong in some letter you might not sign the client, so agents are constantly living under that stress. You have the phone ringing off the hook all day, literally fifty times a day, and if you forget one phone call that could be a huge fucking deal, that could be the difference between making a movie deal or not. They may be like, “oh shit, they didn’t call me back, I’m going to go to the next guy.”

Not just agents can fail in their capacities of brokers, but it is endemic of other organizations as well, as one screenwriter eventually learned at a production company:

[Akiva Goldsman] has a [producing] deal on the [studio] lot and he has these development executives who are taking meetings constantly, all the time. And invariably, everybody I know has had the same experience. I went to a few of the meetings and eventually it occurred to me that I stood a better chance of talking to Akiva Goldsman at Ralph's about an idea than his development people have of getting in a room with him and pitching him an idea.

This illustrates how the mismatch between official relations and actual relations are not constrained to agencies, but are an aspect of all organizations. Given these incentives and errors, the other players in the field look to their own relationships in the field in order to pursue business.

## ***2.2 Scarcity of Information as Comparative Advantage***

As official brokers have their own incentives in controlling marketing information and access, there is a competitive advantage in acquiring it independently of the intermediaries. In addition, the value of information is temporally and spatially structured: the sooner new information is known and the fewer people that know it, the greater its value. One studio executive drew an analogy to the finance industry:

It's all information arbitrage. It's exactly the same thing as Wall Street. This whole idea of creating shareholder value is paper value for the large part. It's not like you are building an assembly line that can build toothpaste faster than anybody else. It's all just ephemeral.

An executive at a mini-major explains how this works in practice: "if I know that Steven Spielberg's project is falling apart and no one else knows and I also know that Steven Spielberg wants to do a talking dog movie and I have one – then that is the ultimate

information asymmetry,” he adds, crucially, “if I have the relationships to get to him.” This asymmetry is based upon knowing the supply of newly available talent, their interests and a product that would meet those interests, and access to each.

However, information asymmetry alone does not automatically translate into profits as the same information informs different strategies. The executive continues:

You can tell ten people who actually know what they are doing that Akiva Goldsman is interested in directing. Akiva Goldsman won the Academy award for *Beautiful Mind*, he’s one of the biggest screenwriters in town, he’s never directed before. You can tell those ten people that piece of information and they can have ten very different reactions. One can be out to lunch and do nothing. One can have a reaction of, oh well, if he’s looking to direct then he’s probably available to do a re-write so I’ll send him something to do a re-write. One of them can say, hmm, Akiva did *Beautiful Mind* as an adaptation, I should find a book that is very cerebral and send it to him to adapt and direct. One of them can say, I know Akiva, he’s a total fan boy, what he probably wants to do is a young, hip comic book because he loves comic books and that’s how he grew up. There’s asymmetry of information and there’s asymmetry of action.

The last scenario motioned again underscores the importance of social capital. Competitive advantage is achieved by reducing the number of relationships and intermediaries in relation to the source that bestows it the most value. Once market information is made public through other channels, such as trade publications, blogs or agency bulletins, the advantage is lost.

Furthermore, the ability to act on information also depends upon being able to access the key players involved without going through intermediaries, as aforementioned in the Spielberg example. This comes down to having a specific kind of relationship with those individuals, as one television producer explains:



You're talking to them [network executives] about a show or about a cut, you're on the phone to them. And over the course of that the relationship grows, it evolves. So maybe one day they say, "we want to do a show about this," or you may be able to say something to them and they'll really consider it, rather than being in that pile of unsolicited things from unknown people. So the relationship is the filter mechanism. So if I called Lauren Zalznick [head of cable network Bravo] tomorrow [and say] "I really want you look to at this," she will. Whereas there's a whole ton of people trying to get to her with stuff and she just won't look at it.

The value of direct access is derived from the breaks along the chain of command within companies. The development executives who field pitches are rarely those with green light authority and are frequently out of sync with them in terms of information. Direct access to those at the top of the chain of command, those with green light authority, provides more accurate market information and thereby increases the probability that a successful deal will be made. Thus, social capital is the ability to acquire information and access through relationships and the competence to execute a strategy that results in a successful deal being brokered.

However, often these conditions are not met: the receiver of information does not have access, or possibly even the interest or incentive, to strategize to broker a deal around it. Information, as a result, has different values to different players in the field. This asymmetry of values informs the very basis of information exchange through relationships, summed up by one studio executive like this:

You need people who have access to information but not vested interest in protecting that information ... So I'll have a lunch catching up with my buddy who works at Mandate. And you might just be in conversation and be like "we're trying to put together this movie or this thing," and they'll say, "I was talking to my friend at Universal and they're doing this thing." That's interesting, we were just talking about it this afternoon at my office. Then you email the company head, "you know that thing we were talking about doing?"

Universal is doing the exact same thing but they have a totally different approach to the idea and how they are going to cast it.”

Over time, the trading of information builds up social credits and debts between players in the field, which can then be used as leverage at key moments to successfully broker deals when there is a perceived profit in doing so. Before turning to this sequential dimension to relationships, we must first understand what the *basis* for social exchanges that come to constitute the relationships are.

### **3. The Basis of Social Exchange**

Relationships are not reified things in-themselves but the outcome of the dialectic between subjective evaluations and objective social exchanges. In the field of motion picture and television production, there are a number of possible bases for social exchange that form “relationships” to be activated as social capital. At the most rudimentary level, it is a question of the subjective perceptions of interests in entering into a social exchange. As one studio executive explains:

If people have an incentive to do something, they will do it. If somebody does not believe it is in their best interest to return your phone calls, they will not return your phone calls. So if you can't get them to return your phone calls, what you have to do is work out a way to dramatize an idea that it is in their best interest. And sometimes that's as easy as calling a friend who knows that person, and if it returns the favor to that friend, then they will return your phone calls. And it's also like when you interact with people having one little iota of value. If it's with an agent you can say, “I'm a really big fan of this screenwriter you represent.”

Thus, although we may term the basis of exchange ‘objective’, such definitions of what counts as a plausible basis for exchange are themselves constructed – often consciously

so – in the field. Interest in this instance is, therefore, the *perception* of the sources of future value. These sources, I will now discuss in turn.

### **3.1 Position**

Certain positions in the field have a structured set of potential exchanges with other positions. This is because these positions are integral to particular exchange relationships to other positions in the field. “I will field a call from [an agent] from someone I haven’t met,” a network executive explains, “I never don’t field the call. It may take me a little while to get back to them.” Each position, therefore, contains a number of potential relationships with other positions waiting to be initiated. This process of initiation takes place when individuals first take over a new position, as one studio executive explains:

I don’t know anyone at such and such a company, I should call someone there. People will call you and say, “I heard you got promoted, lets get lunch together.” Every producer needs someone to sell stuff to, so if you’re a buyer you get a lot of incoming calls from producers saying “hey, lets sit down sometime.” Agents, managers, whoever you don’t feel like you know, if you read a script you like, it’s a great excuse to call the manager.

When people are promoted into new positions they arrange breakfast, lunch and dinner “dates” as the first step in initiating a new relationship. Not all “dates” work out and a relationship is not established despite the possibility for exchange, although there is an overriding pressure to do so, as one executive put it: “there’s a real incentive for everybody to hit it off because in this business you never know – who may be of no value today may be of incredible value tomorrow.”

Often these positions do not necessarily imply an immediate basis of exchange, but offer the first potential set of relationships that may lead to exchanges when more

resourceful positions are obtained. This takes place at the bottom of the hierarchy in particular, with the formation of an assistants' "college class", as one manager explains:

When you start working, you start as an intern. You meet other interns, and you have people that you worked for while you were an assistant, and that's your first contact base. And when you become an assistant, you have other assistants, and you have these people you're boss is talking to all the time, there are other people that work in your company, that's your year. It's like being in college and you have your year.

One moves up through the hierarchy of positions with one's college class anticipating that they will move into other high positions as well. These potential relationships by position are restricted largely to those positions within organizations that either bring people into contact at a key stage in their career (e.g. the 'college class') or those who are the gatekeepers to resources embedded within organizations (agents, managers, executives) such as finance, distribution, clients etc. For those not in these positions, primarily the talent-portion of the field, it is status that establishes one's potential relationships.

### ***3.2 Status***

Status serves to differentiate those who are not defined in the field by their position within an organizational hierarchy. Yet, the principle of operation is similar: one's place in the status order by-itself establishes a set of potential relationships as one's value is signaled to the market (cf. Podolny, 1993) through critical acclaim, box office or ratings success, a notable spec-script sale, affiliations with other high-status talent, and others (discussed in depth in *Chapter 3, "Stars"*). For example, one major producer, who had a string of box-office hits in the 1980s, told me how after his first hit all the doors to the major talent were suddenly opened up to him by the agencies. A TV producer had a

similar experience after making a single show for a premium cable channel, telling me, “once you make something for HBO then you’re off.”

Status does matter in sorting positions contained in organizations by arranging those organizations in a hierarchy of perceived exchange value. A development executive explains the shift she experienced when she was promoted from being an assistant at a top agency to development executive at a start-up film finance company:

When I was going to networking parties it would be, “who do you work for?” And whether I realized it or not, I was placing people on these levels of importance ... so when I was on the other side of that when I no longer worked for this big name or this big guy, people weren’t so willing or interested in talking to me unless I then said, “we finance,” and then they were like, “oh, wait I care, and now I’m going to call you.”

Although she moved up in position, she moved down in status as her new employer’s name did not signal value to the market place. Affiliation with high-status talent is also a means to set up initial meetings by the same logic. Often they are aware of this and try to leverage it instrumentally, as one manager/producer told me:

We pick one person at every single company in town and set up a drink with them. And the way I was taught to do it was, my boss [a manager] gave me his top writing client at that time, and I called everyone of those people and said, “it’s about this writer,” so that would guarantee that they would call me back, and if they had any projects that he would be right for, and by the way, I’m the new manager over at my former company and could we set up a drink.

Status can also come to enable and constrain other types of relationships within the field, including friendships. Often when people experience large, sudden increases in their status, they are faced with the choice of whether to bring people up with them or leave them behind. Status differentials alone can create problems for relationships, as one

screenwriter recounts: “when someone is much more successful than somebody else, it’s much harder for the less successful person to stay friends with the more successful person. Not the other way around. The more successful person doesn’t mind, except that the less successful person is so uncomfortable – jealous, begrudging.”<sup>37</sup>

### **3.3 Quality**

Quality as human capital, a valuable property or trustworthy exchange partners is difficult to observe and is thereby a source of risk. However, if quality is revealed in the exchange this creates an incentive to repeat the exchange, as one executive puts it:

Because making a movie is really hard, and there is so much luck involved, and there are so many moving parts, the one thing you can count on is that, “oh, I’ve worked with that guy before. I know him, I trust him.” And as much there’s going to be all kinds of really difficult shit going on in the process of creating this product - at least I know when I call him that we’re going to have a straight conversation about something and not worry about some dastardly thing going on.

A screenwriter explains how this works in practice:

Most of the work I do is repeat business. They like the work I do for them, we have a relationship. I’ve done a bunch of stuff for a [top director], some things he’s directed, some things he’s produced. But we already have a short hand for knowing how to work together, we know what the rhythms of that are, I know certain things I like he will like. And there are screenplays he knows that interest him that would be good for me, and he’ll call me up.

Indeed, repeat hiring of actors, directors, cinematographers and producers is a statistically observed pattern (Faulkner and Anderson, 1987) driven, this finding would suggest, by mitigating the risk involved in new social exchanges.

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<sup>37</sup> This echoes a finding by William Goldman: “An ancient survivor told me: “When I was a fifteen-hundred-a-week writer, it was understood that I didn’t associate with another guy who only got seven-fifty. And the twenty-five-hundred-dollar guys didn’t want me contaminating them. And it is the same with the other jobs – top directors knew top directors, big stars didn’t pal around with unknowns.” (1983, pp.43-4)

Yet, often quality is not revealed in the exchanged but signaled by other means *prior* to the exchange. Agents, directors, executives and producers are constantly seeking out various forms of quality, and when they see someone's work they like they try to engage them and form a relationship. "You're constantly like, who's good? Who should I know?" an agent at a core agency tells me, "you could call people, you say, "I read your script, I loved it, why isn't something happening with it? What are you guys doing?" Having a high-quality screenplay, for example, can be the basis for forming new relationships as well as continuing old ones. As another screenwriter told me "[a producer] read it and optioned it, and then commissioned me to write this new script ... he never knew me before." A writer/director offers another example:

Johnny Knoxville, it turned out, had been a fan of these documentaries I shot back when I lived in Kentucky and had been taking copies of these documentaries to parties and showing them to people and someone at the party said, I know [him], do you want to meet him? He asked if he could give Johnny Knoxville my number and I said sure, and we end up becoming friends ... and he was like let's do a project together.

Quality is differentiated from position and status as human capital that has not yet been recognized by the field, by appealing to an esoteric personal taste or being the correct 'fit' in a working relationship.

Quality, position and status are all essentially information transmitted that signals potential exchange partners. They are what I term the *material* basis of exchange, those bases of exchange that are defined for the purposes of official or professional work where some profit to either party is expected over the long term. "[Relationships] only go so far," an agent puts it, "you can be a really nice guy and be totally ineffective at your

work and your relationships will not last very long.” An independent film producer offers an example:

The importance of relationships is in direct disproportion to your talent. The less you have, the more relationships you need. It’s just that simple. Let me give you an example, the guy who created *Family Guy*, Seth MacFarlane, not a particularly well liked guy in the creative community, kinda has a sense of humor that shits all over everybody he works with, couldn’t possibly be more in demand. He’s very talented. Doesn’t go out of his way to cultivate relationships, to put it mildly.

However, the spectrum of human relationships is not limited only to that of material profit. Relationships not based on material exchange that are nevertheless present in the field, can be conceived as having an emotional basis such as friendship, kinship or sexual relations.

### **3.4 Emotion**

The basis of emotional relationships is defined as an exchange based upon personhood - the unique qualities attributed to that person independent of any value they hold professionally. Despite the formal opposition between emotional and material relationship it is common for relationships that are defined normatively in emotional terms to enable material exchanges. As one writer/director openly admitted to me, “I started dating a girl in the industry, one of her friends helped me get this new agent. Basically, any success I had wasn’t based on talent, it was about fucking the right person.” A former studio executive recalled how his boss at a studio would act compulsively on these kinds of friendly interactions in casting roles:

He’d come in and say, “great news, I went out to dinner last night with all these – I’ll use dead people for this example - with Frankie Howard, and now we have playing the lead in *Nixon*. You’d say, “Frankie Howard can’t



play Nixon,” “I know, but I just like him.” But it didn’t matter because Frankie Howard is playing Nixon.

The inverse can take place as well: materially defined relationships can include emotional exchanges, and when it does, can improve the material terms of exchange for the person who offered the emotional ‘gift’. It can be as simple as reciprocating the emotional offering for work, as a screenwriter recalled:

[The producer] drove me crazy with his nutty little nit-picky comments and one day, in just the right mood, I said to him, “you know, you kinda drive me crazy, but you care, and I really appreciate how much you care.” Because of that remark ... when [the producer] got another assignment from the studio, he said, “let’s get Henry.” Now, if I hadn’t said that he wouldn’t have done that. But I was nice to him once, not even thinking instrumentally.

Although there is not always a free exchange between the emotional and the material, as a screenwriter explains:

One of my oldest friends runs a movie studio ... at the level of friendship, we’re actually friends, at the level of work, even though he hires writers and I’m a writer and I’ve never worked for his studio. And I don’t think it’s because he’s deliberately black-listed me, I think it’s just because the two things are just different. But that doesn’t make me think his friendship isn’t real. It’s just different.

Such negative cases are rarely observed in the field. Instead, groups of friends, famous families and power couples are frequently observed occupying the most converted positions in the field and whose success is always suspected of being the product of nepotism and favoritism.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> It is more likely that these emotionally based relationships may provide key points of access, information and legitimacy as initial opportunities. Few are in positions with the resources at their disposal to maintain someone’s unprofitable career over the long term.

The definition between what counts as purely ‘professional’ relationship and an emotional relationship is often blurred in the actual practice of social exchange in the field, as a development executive observed:

And there is this grey line between is this a professional or a personal relationship, it makes it very difficult to construe ... The first twenty or thirty minutes of any meeting I’ve been in is people talking bullshit, shooting the shit, trying to build these connections and relationships ... they’ll talk a little bit about family or where they vacationed ... half of it is cracking jokes and talking about other people in the business and then there’s this gossip that happens for 20 minutes and nobody is comfortable talking until you’re thinking, we’re kinda pals and we’re kinda friends.

A television producer put this down to the intensity of working relationships and how important the extra element of emotion connection was in continuing that relationship over time:

Being nice to people, finding the people who you can bear to talk to and want to hang out with, so you want to be in a relationship with. There’s no point in being in a relationship with someone that you can’t abide just for the sake of it, it’s quite tough to fake it over a number of years.

The different rates of exchange between parties is normatively defined by the categorization of the “relationship” that the partaking parties can mutually agree upon. Relationships defined emotionally have lower, even negative, expectations when the parties engage in a material exchange with one another. Thus, having an emotional overlay to a relationship can improve the value of social capital, as a development executive explains:

It doesn’t work where I’m the top of an agency or the top of a studio and therefore I can call the top of any studio or agency and have the same access. It’s not like that ... This is when personal relationships come into

play. A lot of these people who have these really strong relationships, you'll often find, came up in the industry together or have some kind of back history together or worked at the same place together or are part of the same social group, and those who have the strongest ties, those that go beyond I'm an agency head and you are a studio head. There's usually something else that making that relationship really strong.

It is important to note that the reverse can also be true, when the attempt to initiate an emotional exchange is not wanted, let alone reciprocated, by the other party. In this instance, the social capital of the non-reciprocating party can be undermined significantly. A number of respondents, all female, recounted stories of being put in positions where advances were made on them while they were assistants by the male bosses and their resistance created an environment where they had to leave.

### ***3.5 Context***

As the preceding findings indicate, the structuration of social capital in the field by resources enables the social closure of potential relationships to those who already have access to key resources. Those who would most benefit from relationships are also those who have the least resources and thereby have the fewest 'potential' relationships, foreclosing their ability to obtain more valued positions in the field, access to the high-status talent, and the most useful information. As a result, context is crucial for overcoming the barriers resulting from the spatial distribution and segregation of resources (Small, 2009; Beate et al., 2009). Namely, that quality may never be discovered, emotional relationships never given the chance to develop, or the starting points that lead to high-status positions or the acquisition of status remain elusive. However, context is only a *means* for initiating social exchange that may result in a relationship, it is not a basis for social exchange itself. This, in the parlance of the milieu,

is the literal “getting one’s foot in the door,” but after that a basis of social exchange is still required for relationship formation.

In the workplace those with unequal status and position enter into interaction in the division of labor. The initial job of an intern or an assistant is the common entry point into these contexts, but often acquiring them depends upon emotionally based relationships, friends or friends of friends who have contacts on the “inside” that can arrange for an interview. Once on the inside, they can be promoted within the organization, or if they work for a high-status actor, writer or director they can be promoted to the lucrative role of a producing partner as they have built up both trust and detailed knowledge of their tastes and expectations for selecting and managing their projects. One studio executive explains how she was offered her job while an agent’s assistant without having to interview from someone who “used to call my boss all the time, they were good friends, so I guess that’s how, she would come over and I’d take her to the meetings she needed to go to, when she’d call she’d chat with me every once in a while.” Within the work context, social events are organized to facilitate the forming of new relationships, such as the baseball league of television writers, their researchers and assistants where each show forms a team and plays against the other every Saturday. Other settings, such as the set, have long been places where new relationships are formed, as one agent explains with respect to his job: “the classic thing in sitcoms was go to the taping, each week there’s a taping of the multi-camera sit-com and all the writers are there and you shoot the shit, and if you have a client there you meet the other people there.” The workplace is, however, also constrained at the same time by the normative expectations and roles imposed upon the participants which at the same time limit the

extent to which these can occur. “The agent would be like, “thanks bro!” if he was in a good mood,” a former agent’s assistant recounted, “but then I’d say, “hey, bro! I’ve got a call for you,” he’d be like, “hold on a second – what the fuck? I’m not your bro! I’m not your friend, I’m your boss, your employer!””

The major Los Angeles based film schools are instrumental in overcoming these initial barriers. Often producers will contact professors and ask for recommendations to view the work of a new ‘hot’ writer, get auditions from actors and screen the show reels of directors. Internships to the major core agencies, studios and production companies are allotted to the film schools for their students. Most significantly, major players from the industry frequently give either guest lectures or teach semester-long classes. One writer/director explains how this kick-started his career:

What was great about it was the president of William Morris was teaching a course there called the Art of Persuasion. Bill Gurber who was head of Warner Brothers at the time was teaching a producing course. From London, where I was living before, Hollywood seems like this foreign, strange looming planet and suddenly here were the people that were running things. It de-mystified it. And ultimately I got signed out of William Morris and Warner Brothers green lit my first movie. It’s all about connections. Had I not gone to UCLA I would have just been another English person in a pile of tons of scripts.

Yet, access to film school itself requires financial resources that many who wish to enter the business do not have and thereby can come to act as a mechanism that perpetuates social closure upon a different axis: wealth.

The spatial concentration of the industry in Los Angeles county (Scott, 2002, 2005) enables serendipitous contexts of interaction where the barriers of resources and the workplace are removed. This is referred to within the milieu as the mythical “valet

queue” phenomenon, as one writer/director explains it: “how many towns in the world are there where you have a minor social interaction at a valet stand or a tennis court, or whatever – every single social interaction is fused with the possibility of the person you’re interacting with somehow bettering your agenda?” The spatial concentration enables a certain social serendipity: neighbors, gyms, restaurants, parties, hotel bars, coffee shops, charity events all become important spaces for the advancement of social capital. These chance interactions allow the possibility for the basis of social exchange to emerge or, even, be dramatized in such a way that new relationships may be formed.

#### **4. Strategies for Social Capital Activation**

As already indicated certain ‘gaps’ are liable to open up as relationships emerge in the practice of social capital activation. The resulting strategies in turn have a number of second-order effects upon the functioning of the market that defines the field. It is to these three gaps that I will now turn.

##### ***4.1 Synchronicity***

The objective and subjective dimensions of the social exchange may not be in sync as the basis of the exchanges and are subject to change by exogenous factors. This makes the residual, normative valuation of relationships that accumulates over a series of exchanges inherently precarious. As one manager explains, “you have to be nice to everybody because you never know where people are going to end up, that person could be running a studio someday and you never know where that new script will come in from.” The reverse is also true - those of value today may be of no value tomorrow. Indeed, there is

a strong perception in the milieu that the social hierarchy is in a state of constant and unpredictable flux, as a TV producer notes:

And we've seen it happen so many times, where the person comes from nothing and makes it to the top of the tip. It's a great equalizer in that respect. Here the ground isn't that solid beneath your feet so no one really knows where they stand. I've heard lots of stories that studio heads were former hustlers on Santa Monica Boulevard. Today's rent boys, tomorrow's studio heads. From giving head to being head.

The constant churn injected by the market place of commercial success and failure, critical acclaim and disgrace, impacts all of the multiple hierarchies of positions across the field from the executives who green light the projects to the producers who make them to the actors that star in them. Regardless of the actual statistical rates of 'churn,' it is the widely held perception in the field of fluidity that propels people to keep relationships open-ended.

The desire to keep relationships opened ended has been institutionalized in the field as rituals of relationship protection by imbuing interactions with only 'positive' communications. This protection is not to maintain ongoing exchanges *per se* but rather to preserve the possibility of any future exchange by leaving the relationship open-ended.

As a development executive puts it:

Directness is not valued. It's how many ways can we dance around this and keep it vague. Because, I don't know, someone else will want you next week and I don't want to have said no to you. You don't want to be the person who said no to something that will go on and be great. Because that's how people get fired.

That is, even if there is a social exchange that could benefit both parties, if one of the parties feels in some way aggrieved this serves as a serious impediment to the exchange taking place.

As a result, rituals have emerged to maintain good “relationships” with those people where at least initial exchanges have taken place, however small. These rituals of purposive positivity are most explicit in the requirement that all parties say “yes” to whatever is under consideration even if the decision is “no”. New players in the field are not initiated into these rituals and as a consequence misunderstand the functional dimension of the exchange for actual market information:

I finished the pitch and he said, “I knew it! You’re the right person to write this, I want you to start right now.” And that morning I just signed a deal to do an independent film. Should I say yes? Or should I tell the truth? I still didn’t know. I was new enough to Hollywood that I didn’t know how to answer that question. So I said, “look, this morning I signed a deal to do an independent picture, and by the time the deal is worked out –” “Get the fuck out of my office! Why are you here wasting my time, get the fuck out!” ... By the time I get to my car in the parking lot my agent is on the phone, “you fucked up! You fucked up!” “I gave the best pitch that I could have and I just answered the truth!” “My job is to negotiate your availability, if they wanted to buy you out of that indie film, they would have bought you out of it but now you fucked it up.” So that’s how I learned always to say yes.

Those whose job it is to say ‘no’ professionally - the ‘buyers’ in the business - have a subtly different account, downplaying the aspect of misinformation, as a studio executive at a mini-major puts it:

There’s a difference between saying, in the simplest terms, “I didn’t respond emotionally to this screenplay as much as I was hoping to or laugh as much as I wanted to. And how are we going to do fix that?” And, “this screenplay sucks.” That’s basically the same information delivered in two different ways. The way that you conduct yourself in business here, it’s as



important to be conscious of your manner and how you say things as it is that you are right.

Yet, this is not the experience of the most of the respondents interviewed. As a screenwriter defines it, “until my name is on a piece of paper and my lawyer has also seen that piece of paper it’s not a ‘yes’.”

Contrary to the executive quoted above, often this was not simply a case of decoding the ‘same’ information as even those with decades of experience in the field can misunderstand the message communicated. As a television producer noted:

The Eskimos are supposed to have 27 words for snow. ‘Yes’ can mean many different things and can even mean ‘no’. So you need to decode when ‘yes’ means ‘yes’ and when ‘yes’ means ‘get the fuck out of my office and never call me again’ ... I remember when we first moved out here, during the first round of meetings, I thought, “my god, why didn’t we move out here sooner, we’re going to be making ten shows tomorrow because everyone said ‘yes’ to everything. Even today people were saying, “this is definitely a green light, we’re definitely going to do this show,” I was like, it’s not a green light at all, it’s probably not even going to happen.

However, this producer with decades of experience decoded the “yes” in this instance incorrectly: the show was in fact green lit a short while the interview. In this instance, ‘yes’ did mean yes. While there is always a degree of uncertainty over when ‘yes’ means ‘yes,’ there are ritualized cues to say ‘no’ without saying ‘no’. One manager/producer illustrates this point by first quoting an executive in her re-telling of the event,

“We loved them, I can’t believe they brought in that Danish pastry it’s so delicious, I’m eating it now, we’d love to do something with them. But, you know, improv[ization] is really hard right now, but let’s do something else together,” so I push it a little, “they do board games, do you want us to come in with a board game pitch?” “Well, no, it would be better to just send the board games over and we can do a conference call?” That’s a big no, is it not? I know it’s a no, but that’s how it has to be done ... So there’s a code

and language, and the agents are put in the middle to soften the blows. Here's an easy example. We went to one place ... the guy in the meeting broke the rules. He hadn't looked at the DVD we'd sent him, then he looks at it on his computer and goes, "this is a parlor game, this is nothing, I don't understand how this could be a show." He says that to the creator of the show. He's [the creator] is never going to go in there again. I'm never going to go in there again. He's dead. He's dead to me because he broke the rules.

Violating the rituals of the relationship offends talent and can create blowback for the managers and agents who scheduled the meeting. The agents in turn, therefore, have an interest in keeping the executives within the bounds of acceptable passing, as the manager/producers adds: "I've heard agents scream at the top of their voices when they've got a pass, and that's not what executives want. They don't want to have a war-like relationship with any agents because they don't want to bite the hand that feeds them."

Some of this can be mitigated by feelings of security in the relationship, that saying "no" or being honest in general will not by-itself endanger the relationship. As a top director explained, "now that I've made five movies with [the studio], even though I don't agree with the process or the decision, at least I know them well enough to have an honest conversation about it and I don't take anything in this business personally ... It's the people, it's the level of familiarity of having made several movies together." In these instances there is less paranoia about harming the relationship in such a way as to block future exchanges.

The rituals of maintaining relationships 'open-ended' in such a way as to allow for future exchanges may produce the opposite effect in practice by creating ill will. As

another TV producer recounts when he had previously interviewed for a job at a television network:

I kept calling them for three weeks, what's the deal, what's the deal? A guy I know ended up getting the job ... They never called to tell me I didn't get the job, I had agents call them, nothing, nobody returned my call. Forward two years, I'm [producing a show] ... and this agent calls me and says, "I have her script ... she wants to be on the show so badly," and it was the woman who never called me back after 50 phone calls. So I called up the agent, and I said, "you know that script you sent me? Well listen to this!" and I held up the garbage can and threw the script into it.

The result of these social rituals is the creation of two tiers of interpretation: those who do not understand the rules of engagement and thereby either damage their standing in the community or have their self-esteem undermined when they realize they have in fact been rejected, and those who understand the rules of the game and are able to both decode messages and play by the rules to keep on the right side of the important parties. These rituals of interaction thus act as a mechanism of social exclusion by covertly undermining those who do not understand the rules of the game. Furthermore, given that most plays in the industry have come to understand these rules of engagement, the rituals of positivity become self-defeating in their social function – the preservation of relationships – and only serve to add noise and confusion into the market place.

#### ***4.2 Asymmetry***

The subjective evaluations of the nature of the relationship may be asymmetric between the exchanging parties. One of the parties involved in the exchange may misunderstand the nature of the exchange and as a consequence have a divergent understanding of the relationship. This misunderstanding usually requires disguising a purely material interest for an emotionally based one. This concept is similar to that of misrecognition

(Bourdieu, 1977, 1980) as the disguise of interested for disinterested action, but in the current usage it is a result of interpersonal relationships rather than the located field-level of class relations. This asymmetry means that there can be no 'objective' measurement of a 'tie', as each exchange relationship consist of at least two, potentially asymmetric, definitions of that relationship. As the terms of exchange in emotional relationships are favorable to those based upon quality, position or status, players have an interest in disguising their material motivation for emotional ones to increase the rate of return of their social capital. As one writer/director observes:

Everyone comes to this town with an agenda. It's not like in London where people are just hanging out. The whole thing is very hard. This is why people come here and they think it's so plastic and disingenuous because it is; it's built that way. It's always, 'can this person help me, is this person of use to me,' or when an older producer goes out with a younger actress, it's always, 'will this guy give me a role' and the producers are thinking, 'will this girl fuck me if I help her get a role.' That's what goes on. That's why you see impossibly beautiful women with impossibly ugly men because it's a system of barter that goes on.

This observation is the conventional wisdom of 'the town,' - the true motivations behind relationships are consciously disguised, but in the actual practice of relationships this broader knowledge is often absent from the specific context of one's own exchange relationships.

For those newly arriving in Hollywood it can be a disheartening process of initiation, as one screenwriter recalls:

There was a director who wanted me to do something. We had a meeting and then he said, 'I'm having a screening in home theatre tonight, you should come to that.' And then it was, 'why don't you join me and my wife for dinner,' it was like I was his instant best friend forever in a way that made me very uneasy. We then had creative differences over which way the

project should go and then I never heard from him again; and the high school student inside me thought, “I thought we were friends!”

For those who have been playing in the field for a long time, the rituals of positivity become a habit, casting every exchange relationships in emotional terms where the line between business and pleasure is permanently blurred. As another screenwriter noted:

When I came to this town initially I got confused because everyone in this town is just so fucking nice. At least in Toronto and New York, where I had spent some time, you knew if someone didn't like you, because they'd say 'fuck you', and you knew if someone liked you. But here it's impossible to tell. Everyone's going to say yes to you, you're always fabulous and you're always brilliant. I believed people when they invited me to their sons' bar mitzvah and said, 'we're going to be friends for life,' and then of course, when the project we were working on didn't get a green light it was my fault because I wrote it, so it has to be my fault. And then they drop you and I was devastated by those initial kinds of dumping people by people.

The moment of 'revelation' is not random. Screenwriters experienced this on a single-project basis: when the project started the exchange was framed in emotional terms but when the project ended without success the true basis of the relationship from the other parties point of view was revealed as materially based. There are common events that alter one's value in a social exchange, such as switching one's job or coming to a disagreement over the project that reveal the asymmetrical interpretations of the relationship as one of the parties breaks it off as the basis of exchange is no longer profitable to them. In a typical experience, a senior network executive describes what happens when this shift is made: “I had just quit my job as an executive and went to become a producer. I was trying to hire some writers, get us some meetings, but nobody would return any of my phone calls.” When one holds a position in development in a network or studio people are clamoring for access because they are the gatekeepers.

Executives misunderstand this as forming relationships beyond the material basis of social exchange, that their relationship has some emotional independence from it, and as a consequence are surprised that this interpretation is asymmetric.

Yet, this is not always the case as some do not harbor any doubts about the material nature of the relationships, as one producer who moved from a development position explained:

A lot of those relationships evaporate, but I'm not surprised by most of them. There's a grey area between business and leisure. So you go and have dinner with an agent and you learn a lot about each other, that's fine. I'm surprised how many have [evaporated] ... The only people I feel disappointed in are those that I thought I was genuinely friends with, I knew their kids, I knew their wives, we would go out together, and they don't return my call. I have no problem with it but I wish we'd never known each other like that.

An in-demand director echoed these sentiments: "You can kinda feel that when somebody is trying to be a friend for a reason that is not genuine." This leads some in the industry to draw a sharp line between their emotional and their work lives, as one screenwriter explains:

People with whom I work think it's really good not to be too friendly. I don't think it's good to be too friendly with anyone in this business. It's good to be friendly, obviously, professional, but because everyone is so reactionary – if you're this big producer, and I'm your really good friend, and you and I get to know each other really well at a certain point you may be in a position where you feel it necessary to throw me under a bus, and you will use whatever personal information you have on me to do that. It's like espionage in the cold war.

In this instance it goes beyond the issue of using an emotional definition of the relationship to improve the terms of exchange, by using information gained in those emotional exchanges as leverage against them.

Some positions are by definition antagonistic. This is especially evident among the “college class” in agencies that are allegedly, as indicated above, the initial contact base for new entrants into the field. “I met a lot of people, I made a lot of friends and I put that, you know, in quotes ... because they’re not your friends,” a development executive who once worked as an agent’s assistant explained. “If an opportunity arises from which they can benefit from something that is happening to you they will seize that opportunity - it’s basically friendship without any trust.” Another former agent’s assistant gave examples of what those opportunities might be:

You have friends but you’re also in competition with these people. There are some people who will purposely try to sabotage each other, clownish shit, try to make you look bad. For instance, there was this one day ... we were supposed to get this package and it never came, it was missing and no-one could find it, and the blame was sort of falling on me because I was sitting at his desk, and he’s like, ‘did you lose it or something, what the fuck?’ It was found in the coatroom of the mailroom beneath some coats. I don’t know what happened but the going theory was that someone was trying to fuck me over, I mean, who would ever put a package there? Or somebody would be doing script coverage, get up for a minute, and someone would come up and delete all their work so they’d have to re-start it and waste an hour of their time.

The misalignment of interests between agents and their clients, as a result of brokerage failure, means that the asymmetry of interpretation must in some way be disguised for the relationship to continue. Agents have scripts from which they work in order to dramatize the benefits of their relationship, as one former agent reported:

It’s so easy. You start calling them, becoming friends with them, show up on the set of their movie and then you take them out to dinner, and then at some point they’ll say to you, “I don’t want to leave my current agent” and you say, “no, no, no this isn’t what this is about, I just think you’re really great. I just want to get to know you, I promise I’m not coming after you.” Or, the egos are so fragile you don’t even have to be that discrete about it,

you go, “are you happy where you are? Are you really happy?” Or the other thing that you do that is extremely common, is that you say to actors, you go, “did they put you up for *Transformers*? Because, you’re like perfect.” [They] go, “well no, they didn’t.” Then you say, “did you meet Jim Cameron for *Avatar*?” [They] go, “no, they didn’t.” “Because we represent all of these directors, it doesn’t sound like you’re being taken care of.” That’s the deal. Or, they pretend that they have such access to the top studio people they can make things happen just like that [clicks fingers]. That whatever your misfortune is, and every writer, actor, director always feels like they’re in a period of misfortune, that they’re misunderstood and not nearly popular enough, that somehow an outside person who has nothing to do with them and has at least 30 other clients is going to take them out of their period of misfortune and make them millions, open doors for them, make things easy, make them more famous.

Indeed, a screenwriter repeated this script almost verbatim, “God, did your agent not offer you such-and-such, that would have been the perfect job for you, why are they not showing it to you? Come over here! We have all the good directors, you should be taking this job! We’ve all heard this.”

Importantly, this is the misrepresentation of the material basis of exchange for a set of relationships brokered by the agent that can overcome the constraints imposed by quality, status or position. Indeed, it is precisely this notion that “relationships” can trump the material basis of the exchange that leads to field-wide perception that “relationships are everything.” This is not the case, as the former agent continues:

If you’re a writer, an actor or a director you have a certain standing in the creative community. If you’re Kathryn Bigelow and you’ve just won the Oscar for *Hurt Locker*, you’re getting scripts, you’re even getting comedy scripts. But the agent will pretend that they can get you on a path that will get you that in a shorter? period of time or that it should have been you anyway.

The rare instances where agents will have access to the top people and will have built up the appropriate social debts with them, is largely restricted to the ‘super’ agents who will



only use these means for the highest-earning clients represented by the agency. The power of “relationships” as an instrument by itself is actively misrepresented in the field, further building the foundation from which they become misrecognized as forces in themselves separated out from the material base upon which they were built.

Social capital theorists have presumed that trust is an important condition of social capital in that it enables risky market transactions by sanctioning those who break market rules. Yet, in the field, there are antagonisms between positions and incentives to disguise the nature of the relationship that simultaneously undermines trust and at the same time forms the basis of social capital. Indeed, the entire issue of “trust” intrinsic to emotional relationships can be a means of disguising one’s true interests, enhancing the value of the social capital of the deceiver at the expense of the deceived, and using the vulnerabilities people exposed in emotional relationships against them when the opportunity arises.

### ***4.3 Sequence***

The temporal sequencing of social exchange entails the creation of credits and debts between the acts of offer and reciprocation. The emergence of social credits and debts is contingent upon the normative categorization of relationships under which the exchange is taking place. This temporal uncertainty inherent in exchange provides the participants with an opportunity to strategize by placing bets on how a particular offer will be reciprocated. It is a risky strategy as the range of possible outcomes is vast, from those in high-status positions who can accumulate credits and never repay, to those who feel an obligation through their debts, and reward the debtor with considerable interest.

How these bets are made is contingent upon the roles in the field that the players occupy. Executives, agents, managers are constantly exchanging information, talent, properties, and positions. Each time new information is offered, an agent's client is attached to a project by an executive or producer, a new piece of intellectual property is acquired, or a job is offered to them within their own organization, a new social debt is acquired on the assumption that it will be paid back at some future date. One development executive at a production company explains this system of "little favors":

I think a lot of Hollywood is about holding a lot of data right in the front of your head. And knowing who to give it to, and at what time, so they can be useful to them. It's a system of little favours. I don't think people develop good relationships because they're super friendly. I think they develop good relationships because: "hey, you know this little thing we've been working on, it's not working for us, but it might work for you because Walt Disney needs this kind of product." Or something like that. If that movie goes to that person, then you have their undying gratitude forever. And at some point, one of those people you've placed a sort of bet with is going to become a head of production and say to you, "do you want a producing deal?"

This "bet" is constituted two fold: that the exchange partner will be a position to reciprocate in the future and that when called upon they will feel the obligation to reciprocate. The objects used to place this bet can be substituted for one another: important information one day can be exchanged for a job the next. The executive continues, offering an example of such a transaction:

There was a financier named Steve Samuels who had gone to college with Rick Hess, who ran the independent finance group at CAA. Steve made a ton of money in real estate and came out to play Hollywood. And there was a script that had been around for a little while that had Alec Baldwin attached called *Michael Clayton*. And somehow this guy at CAA had got the script to George Clooney, and got Alec Baldwin punted off of it, and nobody knew that yet. It was an available script, nobody owned it. When Baldwin was attached to it, it had no value, with Clooney attached, it had enormous value. So this

guy, Rick Hess, says to his former roommate at college, why don't you option this script? And the rest is history ... Here's an instance where that little piece of information will create an infinite loyalty from Steve Samuels and it also gets Steve Samuels to throw a load of money into the CAA system.

This instance is not just the reciprocation of a gift. The information offered in the first part of the exchange proved profitable which, in turn, signaled that the person was in possession of *quality* information. Thus, the reciprocation is reinforced by both the repayment of the debt but also a belief in the 'CAA system' itself to create future profits. It is this overlay of the normative force of subjective feelings of the obligation to reciprocate with the objective basis of exchange that produces social capital as the result of a 'bet'.

These bets placed between individuals to further their social capital have larger, often unintended, consequences upon the field. One writer/director summarizes how the trades between executives impact the decision to green light individual projects:

Reasons movies get made and don't get made are largely because of the personal relationships between the people in power. All this bartering goes on. A big agent will say if he's got a client he's going to lose: if you give client A a job which means I won't lose him, then I'll make sure client B will be in the thing that you need to do. All of this stuff goes on all the time. The big producers, the agents, the studio heads are doing personal deals with each other. This is why it seems so random in terms of what gets made and what doesn't get made.

Therefore, the properties that acquire attachments, financing and distribution enter into production, in large part, as an effect of the trading of social credits and debts between the gatekeepers of those resources. This system of reciprocal exchange has the potential to be incredibly profitable for the individuals concerned with the unintended effect that certain projects enter into production and others do not.

The inverse, of course, is equally true: that the failure to reciprocate an exchange can also massively impact the development and green lighting decisions. One of the most visible and far-reaching examples of this in recent years was the falling out between Jeffery Katzenberg and Michael Eisner. In 1994 Frank Wells, COO of Disney, died in a helicopter crash and Katzenberg, Disney Studio's chairman, felt Michael Eisner, the CEO of Disney, owed him the job. Their relationship had gone back many years since their time together at Paramount, where Eisner was COO and Katzenberg the head of production, and they joined Disney together. When Eisner passed Katzenberg up on the position and subsequently withheld his multi-million dollar bonus, Katzenberg established his own studio, DreamWorks, with David Geffen and Steven Spielberg. DreamWorks and Disney entered into a long protracted battle of competitive development where movies were made to undermine the rival studio, going so far as to include characters and lines that openly mocked their top executives (LaPorte, 2010).

Exchanges between executives and producers with writers, directors and actors are riskier as the demand for the top talent out-strips the supply. As a result, the high-status and in-demand will always be able to enter into profitable exchanges with any producer or studio they choose. The challenge then, for executives and producers, is to build up "relationships" with talent over the long term by both amassing social credits in addition to making the transaction materially profitable. The deepest forms of relationships between studios and talent is when "you break them, you make them a star," one executive explains, "so you have a relationship through that." Betting on talent by nurturing unknown stars and giving them their first opportunity at a crucial point in their career is a small investment that can reap magnificent rewards, such as Quentin Tarantino

at Miramax/Weinstein Company, Stephen Spielberg at Universal or Clint Eastwood and Christopher Nolan at Warner Brothers (Biskind, 2004). However, as executives become more risk-adverse the nurturing of untested talent has been scaled back considerably, with an ever-rising bar of what talent must do to prove their quality before a studio will bet on them.

The industry norm is to transfer money to talent and their teams in the form of development deals, where in-demand producers, actors, directors and writers are given offices on the lot, overhead for their staff and usually a first-look producing deal. One studio executive explained the purpose of the deals rather bluntly: “[It’s about] stroking the egos of talent and making them feel important because they constantly need to be made to feel important.” “We want to kiss their ass,” another studio executive adds, “a production deal is about keeping them on the right side.” In television, these offers tend to go to writers in order to make sure that they have allotted time in their schedule to produce work for the network. As a network executive says: “If we like a writer so much that we’ll just make a deal for him, and just figure it out later ... you don’t want to potentially lose them if you do like them.” These deals are more important for movie studios that rely upon a narrow portion of top talent to work on their most commercial projects. As a studio executive explains:

Not to say that we would have done any project that he [a major star] asked for, because we wanted him for [a major film franchise]. Because those franchises were such breadwinners for the studio, we wanted to make sure that he was happy. That’s why we gave him space on the lot, he was able to bring in 14 people to work for him, and had a lot of power over us. It’s all about leverage.

Indeed, the dependence of the studio upon particular stars, especially when they are intrinsic to a lucrative franchise, allows the star to use this inequality to set the terms of exchange where they continuously amass debts with no sure promise of repayment. In the last few years the scope of these deals have been greatly reduced, cut by 50% since 2000,<sup>39</sup> as another studio executive explains:

Always, it's part of the deal, you know, that old saying, 'do one for us, we'll do one for you,' ... It still happens, it's now a little bit harder, we'll still do one for you but we'll pay you a little bit less. But the fact of the matter is you have to keep them engaged. Because if you're not going to make that movie, somebody else is going to make that movie, and that star will probably feel some kind of indebtedness to that studio and create a relationship there. So you'll always doing this balancing act between making the most commercial movies possible and keeping the talent happy.

Sometimes this extends beyond the talent in question to pleasing their gatekeepers at the top agencies. One former studio executive and agent recalls:

I had been an agent so I knew how much people cost and I knew about deals. Consistently a [major studio] was going after the worst writers, and they would over pay for them, and I would say, "you don't have to pay them that! I know what he gets paid!" They would prefer to overpay, to stay on the right side of CAA, overpay for these clients, they would not check the market value of somebody. [The studio head] wanted to feel protected by CAA, but he was so not protected, no one is protected.

Beyond the specific instances of development deals, money for development is spent on projects outside of these deals for the same purpose. Often this is just instrumental, to keep talent onside by keeping a stream of cash flowing to them. Occasionally, they have the unintended consequence that the movie gets a green light. For example, one

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<sup>39</sup> In 2000 292 deals were reported on the Variety Facts on Pacts report, in Sept 2009 that number had dropped to 152 (Variety, 2009). The bulk of this figure, however, refers to producing deals by studios which are not of the same nature as the vanity deals offered to key talent to keep them "on side".

development executive recounted how such a development deal for it's own sake was set up:

There was a project that we considered, it was based on a book about a tiger in Siberia that was killing people. It was a true story. It was supposed to be *Jaws* set in Siberia. Guillermo Arriaga was going to write the screenplay, who is a big, big screenwriter and Brad Pitt wanted to star in it, and Darren Aronofsky, who had just directed *The Wrestler*, wanted to direct it. And normally, in a situation like that people would be clambering over each other for the opportunity to do those three people favors. Even if they didn't believe in the overall project, it's a way to give those three people money you want favors with. And finally Focus Features ended up paying Guillermo a fraction of his fee to do some work. That's the way things are going, everything is so expensive ... the relationship is a lot more valuable than whatever monetarily they're losing by putting money into this project that is going to be shelved or put into turn-around. At that point it's not about the project, the project is out of the window, it's about their interpretation of what it is that's going to still keep that talent working with them and it's this appearance of 'we're still investing in your project, we still care about your project'.

Since conducting this interview, that very project did in fact get the green light, as *The Tiger* in May 2010. This underscores the notion that the formation of relationships represents a series of bets where the outcomes are not known and may indeed turn out to be better than expected even for those that were anticipated to lose in the short term.

## **5. Conclusion**

The nature of "relationships" in Hollywood is paradoxical. Relationships are at once a function of social exchange and also the means by which that exchange is subverted. Relationships are central impediments to blocking projects from going forward yet projects can move forward as an accidental consequence of them. Relationships are recognized as principally materially based while in the same moment misrecognized as originating from the emotional bond between two human beings. Relationships are the

currency of brokers who seek to dramatize their importance yet relationships without any institutional supports quickly dissolve and fracture. These paradoxical forces that appear to be pushing “relationships” – both in social practice and as a theoretical construct – are in fact constituent elements of a dialectical social process. The contradictions of the concept and the practice lies in the contradictory nature of the characteristics that constitute it.

Such a recognition of social capital as a paradoxical concept does not lead to a postmodern epistemology that dismisses any ‘reality’ of the concept in practice. Rather, quite the opposite has been the case. By disaggregating social capital into a process of social exchange and subjective evaluation under conditions of uncertainty, *regularities* across a wide-range of phenomena have been observed: the comparative advantage resulting from brokerage failure; the potential exchange relationships inherent in quality, position, and status; the use of emotion as a strategy to increase the rates of return in social exchanges; the creation of rituals of positivity that inject misinformation into the market; the unintended effects of debts and credits that create a seemingly random patterning of ‘green lighting’ to those involved. Each of these outcome can be traced back to an constituent element of the social process, but moreover, their emergence is the outcome of dialectical back-and-forth between different exchanges, with different partners, whose resources in the field are constantly in flux.



## Chapter 5

### **Conclusion**

“Hollywood is the only place where you can die of encouragement.”

- Pauline Kael, *New Yorker* film critic from 1968 to 1991.

The aversion to saying “no,” driven by the fear that today’s nobodies will be tomorrow’s somebodies, is perhaps the most distractive and consequential trait of the strange social milieu of Hollywood. It is what makes development not just “hell,” but a kind of creative torture: where ideas are brought to die a long and painful death: each day, as they get closer to the shining beacon of the green light, it somehow moves ever so slightly further away.

But why this torture is endured, even by its most “successful” citizens, is that sometimes the impossible happens and the beacon is obtained. As this thesis has demonstrated, the routes are charted, if somewhat dangerous. So far, the map is incomplete. Each chapter is a fragment, albeit an overlapping one, through the development maze. In the conclusion, these fragments will be brought together through three very different stories.

I will borrow the technique used by Vaughn (1997) in her study of the Challenger launch decision. Each story will first be told in full. Then, the story will be re-told and interrupted as the analysis from the preceding three chapters is applied. After each of these stories has been considered, I will offer some concluding remarks and compare the proposed model of cultural production to the competing approaches.

## **Number 1: The Tale of Robin Hood**

For the screenwriting duo Ethan Reiff and Cyrus Voris, the Robin Hood tale seemed perfect for their next script. The tale combined Reiff's love of medieval history and Voris's fanboy fascination with comic books and superheroes. It was a popcorn action movie and historical epic all at the same time. What's more, they had a killer premise: "For us, the big hook - the big idea - was 'let's turn it around'," Voris later explained. "Let's tell Robin Hood from the other guy's point of view. Let's make the Sheriff of Nottingham the hero instead of the villain. The title of our original screenplay was *Nottingham*." Their tag line was "there are two sides to every legend."

In January 2007 their finished script hit the in-boxes of studio executives and movie producers across Hollywood. The answer was unanimous: *pass*. But then four days later something strange happened. Out of the blue, Bryan Singer, the director of *The Usual Suspects* and *X-Men*, called their agent and said he wanted to pitch it to Warner Brothers. Suddenly a script that had been pronounced dead-on-arrival was now one of the hottest properties in town. And when Russell Crowe announced he wanted to play the part of Nottingham, a full-scale bidding war broke out between three rival studios. Crowe had just finished *American Gangster* at Universal with producer Brian Grazer and wanted the same team in place for his next picture. So Universal dutifully coughed up the \$1m to secure the rights, with an extra half million thrown in if they made the movie. Ridley Scott had always wanted to make a sequel to the period epic *Gladiator* with Crowe and saw this as the perfect opportunity. He signed on to direct immediately.

For Reiff and Voris, their dream was coming true: two of the biggest stars in Hollywood wanted to make their movie. Plans were being drawn up to fly them to

Crowe's farm in Australia to make adjustments to the script. But just before they were due to leave, their phone stopped ringing. And then they heard that Universal was looking for screenwriters for a project called "Robin Hood". They realized they had just been fired off their own movie.

It turned out that Crowe didn't want to play Nottingham after all. He wanted to play Robin Hood. "When I read that particular script, and no disrespect to the guys who wrote it, but it kind of read like *CSI: Sherwood Forest*," Crowe explained, "and I just wasn't into doing that." Scott hated the script even more. "It was fucking ridiculous," he said, laughing, "it was terrible, a page-one rewrite. If you're going to invest in a Robin Hood story, why call it Nottingham? You'd end up spending 80% of the publicity budget explaining why it's Nottingham, not just Robin Hood. It doesn't make any sense."

Universal ended up paying a host of screenwriters \$6.7m to turn *Nottingham* into the 2010 movie *Robin Hood*. What's more, it's actually pretty typical studio behavior. Every year the studios spend tens of millions of dollars purchasing pitches and spec scripts which they then set about immediately rewriting. The studios claim that they are buying the premise – the "big idea" – but as we saw with *Nottingham*, that is not always the case. The big idea was the first thing they scrapped. So why did Universal pay two writers \$1.5m for something that nobody really wanted? After all, nobody owns the rights to a Robin Hood story – it's public domain – so you don't have to pay anyone anything for the privilege of making one.

### **Anatomy of a Spec Script: The Tale of Robin Hood Retold**

For the screenwriting duo Ethan Reiff and Cyrus Voris the Robin Hood tale seemed perfect for their next script. The tale combined Reiff's love of

medieval history and Voris's fanboy fascination with comic books and superheroes. It was a popcorn action movie and historical epic all at the same time. What's more, they had a killer premise: "For us, the big hook - the big idea - was 'let's turn it around'," Voris later explained, "let's tell Robin Hood from the other guy's point of view. Let's make the Sheriff of Nottingham the hero instead of the villain. The title of our original screenplay was *Nottingham*." Their tag line was "there are two sides to every legend."

From the perspective of Reiff and Voris, two screenwriters already in the Hollywood system with an agent at a core agency and Showtime mini-series to their name, they were well aware of the ingredients of a "marketable" pitch. Namely, to add a fresh "twist" to an already commercially proven idea. The Robin Hood story has been made countless times with the benefit of nobody owning the rights to the story. They were able to leverage the name-recognition of the story and the protagonist without spending a penny of their own money.

Switching the antagonist to the protagonist is a well-worn formula used in many spec scripts floating around town, although, it should be noted, few of those have actually been green lit and produced. Their attempt to place it within the domain superhero/comic book genre is perhaps more of a marketing gimmick for their pitch rather than intrinsic to the project they proposed. It is an example of how those on the "supply end" – writers, directors, producers – attempt to frame their existing projects to meet the perceived market demand from the studios and networks. It should be emphasized that the "big idea" was, in fact, a simple reworking of somebody else's idea. That is the definition of a big "hook" – something that can be pitched as fresh and not as original. Fresh implies a twist on a proven concept, originality provokes fear of an idea untested.

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Despite producers, directors, and writers' attempts to meet the anticipated demand of the producers and executives who purchase specs for development in the studio system, most fail. This is a neat example of the difficulty of "selling out" in Hollywood. It is often assumed that if only one could abandon one's artistic aspirations, a quick buck is to be made from a quick formula job. But Hollywood is, almost by definition, a market overflowing with people trying to sell out without finding any takers. The price of their souls, they all too often find out, isn't very high. The Devil isn't even willing to drop a few thousand to option their salvation. A Hollywood cliché states that one must really believe in the material one makes in order to sell it. Indeed, as has been noted, the ability to convey a charismatic clairvoyance, that the person pitching the project – be it a director, writer, or producer – has, in the words of director Steven Soderbergh, "seen the UFO," is essential to secure a sale. That may be why, however sincere or cynical Reiff and Voris may actually be (we can never know), their presentation of self is projected to be a sincere one. Alas, none of this alone was enough to secure a sale, let alone a measly option.

But then four days later something strange happened. Out of the blue, Bryan Singer, the director of *The Usual Suspects* and *X-Men*, called their agent and said he wanted to pitch it to Warner Brothers. Suddenly a script that had been pronounced dead-on-arrival was now one of the hottest properties in town. And when Russell Crowe announced he wanted to play the part of Nottingham, a full-scale bidding war broke out between three rival studios. Crowe had just finished *American Gangster* at Universal with producer Brian Grazer and wanted the same team in place for his next picture. So Universal dutifully coughed up the \$1m to secure the rights, with an extra half million thrown in if they made the movie. Ridley Scott

had always wanted to make a sequel to the period epic *Gladiator* with Crowe and saw this as the perfect opportunity. He signed on to direct immediately.

Here we see the power of status-drive perception. Formulas might get you in the room and they may be the basis by which purchased properties are developed. But the auction nature of a sale depends upon the creation of heat and buzz. Here we see how a screenplay that had no interest initially based on its fundamental quality – the strength of the concept, story, and characters - becomes the subject of intense interest with the rare event of a bidding war between three rival studios. A bid from a single studio is rare enough, but three is reserved for only the hottest properties.

The initiation for this escalation is a single signal from a single participant in the field: director Bryan Singer. The affiliation to this high-status director was enough to change the evaluations not just of executives, but of other top talent as well: Russell Crowe, Ridley Scott, and Brian Grazer. The heat that descends from the stars is so enormous that it was able to resurrect a dead property into a living one with multiple buyers and, rarer still, an immediate green light. This demonstrates the power of stars to bend the lines of our perception. The evaluative categories used to assess properties exist only in a fluid gravitational field distorted by passing stars.

For Reiff and Voris, their dream was coming true: two of the biggest stars in Hollywood wanted to make their movie. Plans were being drawn up to fly them to Crowe's farm in Australia to make adjustments to the script. But just before they were due to leave, their phone stopped ringing. And then they heard that Universal was looking for screenwriters for a project called "Robin Hood". They realized they had just been fired off their own movie.

Being removed from the very project that one has created is an intrinsic part of the development system by the movie studios. Unlike television, where writers who pitch ideas are the ones who go on to oversee and then run the show (with a handful of exceptions), in the development of motion pictures, screenplays are continuously rewritten by writer after writer as they go through development. When these rewrites are continuous and appear to have no green light in sight, the property is said to be in “development hell.” In reality, they are in a holding pattern, waiting for a star to take an interest to elevate it to the top of the pile where it can be considered for a green light. But even this is precarious, as agents will attach their clients to properties in order to increase their fees on a competing project that they actually want to make. Even the signaling by stars, therefore, can further prolong purgatory. “Oh, Gweneth Paltrow is now attached to my Chinese project,” a screenwriter said to me as he glanced at his email. “Congratulations,” I said. “This is the sixth time a star has been attached, it’s been around for 12 years, it’s never going to happen,” he informed me.

Despite the almost mandatory nature of studio rewrites, it is instructive that Reiff and Voris were surprised that they had been fired off their own film. This points to the power of the mythology of the writer-as-creator. This thesis has been full of “surprised” characters who learnt that their assumptions about the rules of the game were shattered, while at the same time, at another point in the interview, explicitly acknowledged those very rules. This kind of cognitive dissonance is at once a contradiction in the field between theory and practice and, at the same time, an animating force that propels people forward. After all, how could one undertake the enormous risks of playing the Hollywood game if there was not some hope that it would pay-off? And as Marcel Mauss

has long noted, the rewards are never just monetary. The \$1.5m the writing duo were paid was only one form of compensation. The recognition, the authorship, the joy of seeing one's idea sealed in celluloid and projected onto the silver screen goes straight to the heart of the mythology of the field. And this mythology persists even as the participants know that the system of development and green lighting is entirely at odds with it.

It turned out that Crowe didn't want to play Nottingham after all. He wanted to play Robin Hood. "When I read that particular script, and no disrespect to the guys who wrote it, but it kind of read like *CSI: Sherwood Forest*," Crowe explained, "and I just wasn't into doing that." Scott hated the script even more. "It was fucking ridiculous," he said, laughing, "it was terrible, a page-one rewrite. If you're going to invest in a Robin Hood story, why call it Nottingham? You'd end up spending 80% of the publicity budget explaining why it's Nottingham, not just Robin Hood. It doesn't make any sense."

Here we see the disconnect between the stars and the market for properties. Screenplays are more about concepts to be rewritten than they are about "good writing," as even the best writers are rewritten, but they are also a means of bringing high-status individual participants in the field together. Here, we see the concept, the characters, and the story, all reduced merely as a means by which to broker a deal between Ridley Scott, Russell Crowe, Brian Grazer, and Universal Studios. Without the impetus of a potential Robin Hood movie, none of these players would have come together, even if it had been to make a completely different movie altogether.

Perhaps more importantly, the competitive nature of the bidding war between rival studios and rival directors suggests that the screenplay was not purchased in order to make *Nottingham* but rather to stop potential rivals from making a competing Robin



Hood movie. Once the rights were secured to a competing idea another altogether different Robin Hood movie could be placed into development without the fear of competition. The \$1.5m paid by the studio is a drop in the ocean for the enormous value of bringing together these three high-status individuals and for reducing the possibility of a competing movie, which would have entailed tens of millions of dollars in additional marketing costs.

From this vignette, we can see how screenplays can take on many social meanings and functions. Screenplays are endowed with a mythological importance of their own: there is good writing and bad writing, there are commercial screenplays and unmarketable ones. Agents, writers, and producers often work together on crafting a screenplay that will find its maximum value in the market place, secure a sale to a studio or financier and maybe a green light as well. But this bureaucratic game is ultimately usurped by a charismatic one; one where value derives not from the ink on the printed page but by the charismatic pull from orbiting stars. And when it comes to the gritty business of upping an actors fee, stopping any competing properties, or brokering a deal between high-status individuals, then the screenplay becomes merely a means to an end, where the value of its internal content is reduced to zero. In such a marketplace, where value is defined purely in relational terms, and each screenplay is routinely rewritten, it is difficult to imagine what a definition of a “good” spec screenplay would look like.

## **Number 2: The Origin Story of South Park**

When I interviewed Brian Graden he was the network chief of MTV. He had risen to fame developing *South Park*, working out the strategy for VH1 that made it a bit hit, ran

MTV, and set up the gay network, LOGO. I was his second, perhaps even third, 'breakfast' meeting at a restaurant in West Hollywood. He speaks quickly and deliberately, answering precisely the question you pose, cataloguing much information in the process. He recalls his time in the early 1990s, when he was a television producer looking for the next big thing.

Trey Parker and Matt Stone had completed a student film at the University of Colorado – Boulder called *Cannibal the Musical*. They managed to get a screening of it on the Paramount studio lot. Brian went along and "thought it was genius, the funniest thing I had ever seen."

Over the next four years they worked together to get a show on the air. All their attempts were failing. They had another student film, this one was animated entitled *Santa versus Frosty*. "I was just trying to find an excuse to give them money so I was like "here's two thousand bucks, I'll send it out as my Christmas card." He sent it out to 400 people on his contact list over email and didn't receive any feedback whatsoever. Undeterred, "I gave them three thousand bucks and said let's make a new one," but this time he only sent it out to 30 close friends.

They sent the card around the television networks and took some meetings. The main criticism from the executives was that the show didn't focus on a single family, like the *The Simpsons*, and therefore wasn't commercial. Eventually, they got a pilot order from Comedy Central, a tiny, niche channel that nobody had heard of.

They spent the next fourteen months in a studio apartment above a grocery store in Westwood writing and animating with paper and glue their pilot episode, "Cartman Gets the Anal Probe."

Once the pilot was completed they tested it with a pilot audience. The results were not good. “It tested worse than any show I had ever seen in my life, after years of focus groups,” Graden remembered. “I think it got a one and half out of ten.” He had to break the news to Trey and Matt - “Okay, I have to tell you the truth ... we’re never going to get picked up.” In all his years working for the television networks, he had never seen something that tested so badly picked up. “We made three people cry,” he continued, “three women cried saying it was just inexcusable to have three graders say those kinds of things, they just weren’t getting the satire.”

To their astonishment, Comedy Central green lit the series, ordering six episodes. When the first episode premiered “it came out with a 6.2 rating, which was the highest rating in cable ever, the highest on Comedy Central by a factor of 20. And it was only then that I realized that the Christmas card had been copied millions of times. Today, with YouTube you know how many people have watched something, but there was no YouTube then. It was a viral video before there was such a thing.” *South Park* went on to become one of the biggest shows on cable ever.

### **Bureaucratic Irrationality: The Paradox of Mythological & Rational Thinking**

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Parker and Stone, through their own ingenuity, had managed to get a screening. This created the possibility of being “discovered,” the opportunity that somebody might recognize their talent; or, human capital. This could form the basis of a relationship, which in turn, could be converted eventually into social capital when the benefits were

realized. Graden, although only a low-ranking television executive at the time, became that crucial relationship. This demonstrates how social capital is not just a product of status, but how both status and social capital share a common dominator: the perception of value. This perception does not need to be collectively recognized and consecrated in the field, but only in the eyes of a single individual. It was on the basis of that perceived quality that a relationship was formed. Graden was also making a bet: that their talent would, down the line, pay off.

Over the next four years they worked together to get a show on the air. All their attempts were failing. They had another student film, this one was animated entitled *Santa versus Frosty*. “I was just trying to find an excuse to give them money so I was like “here’s two thousand bucks, I’ll send it out as my Christmas card.” He sent it out to 400 people on his contact list over email and didn’t receive any feedback whatsoever. Undeterred, “I gave them three thousand bucks and said let’s make a new one,” but this time he only sent it out to 30 close friends.

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Comedy Central took on the risk of going around the formula because they were on the margins of the field, had never done a scripted television show before, and had little to lose by commissioning such a tiny animated pilot. The costs, both in terms of the opportunity costs of each slot in a network schedule and producing a pilot with union crews paid at network rates, were a fraction of those for the big four networks. Comedy Central’s airtime was not bringing in much revenue and they could operate outside the usual contractual arrangements that make network television so expensive. To overcome

these enormous costs, the networks search for formulas that have not only been tested but fit a format that can be repeated at least 100 times to ensure syndication. The political economy of television in the 1990s and early 2000s created a new space of smaller cable channels that were able and willing to take risks that the networks could not afford.

Once the pilot was completed they tested it with a pilot audience. The results were not good. "It tested worse than any show I had ever seen in my life, after years of focus groups," Graden remembered. "I think it got a one and half out of ten." He had to break the news to Trey and Matt - "Okay, I have to tell you the truth ... we're never going to get picked up." In all his years working for the television networks, he had never seen something that tested so badly picked up. "We made three people cry," he continued, "three women cried saying it was just inexcusable to have three graders say those kinds of things, they just weren't getting the satire."

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The story shows that despite the reign of formulas which dominates the network schedules with shows on cops, lawyers, and doctors, executives will, occasionally, green light a program even when the formulas and the testing are against it. The personal, idiosyncratic tastes of the executives and the personalities of the creators do, on occasion, matter. The bureaucratic organizational structure of the networks and studios only creates probable programming. Every once in a while, the iron cage fails to contain a new idea.

It also shows us that the functions of the pilot process are not just to evaluate, but to justify. Both movies and television shows are subject to audience testing and all to

often tested shows, bomb and movies that test badly, do well. Even the most basic statistical assumptions show that small audiences of hundreds, never thousands, are totally inadequate at predicting success. This is without considering the impact of marketing campaigns, audience interactions (Salganik and Watts, 2008), and the timing of the release. In interviews with executives, writers, producers, and directors alike there is a cognitive dissonance - a miscreognition – where they admit to the flawed nature of the system while defending it at the same time. This points to the larger theme explored in this thesis: the paradoxical nature of Hollywood as a place where both mythology and rationality co-exist side-by-side.

### **Number 3: The Rise of the Dumb Toy Movies**

In interview after interview, the *Transformers* franchise is given as the prime example that encapsulates most perfectly the reigning formula of the time: it was high concept, could be made without any stars, it could appeal to all four audience quadrants and the international market as well, it was rich with merchandising opportunities, and filled with potential prequels, sequels, and spinoffs. It was the formula that every executive was using when evaluating competing tent-poles that could flush the studio coffers with cash. But I'd also heard through a screenwriter that when *Transformers* was first pitched to these very same executives, they didn't want to hear about it. So he kindly put me in touch with Don Murphy, the legendary producer of *Natural Born Killers*, *Apt Pupil*, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, and now *Transformers*, to tell the story.

Before the comic-book craze hit Hollywood, Murphy had been a comic book fan and gone to the ComicCon convention held in San Diego every year since the mid-

eighties. In 2002 a new wing was opened to showcase toys from Hasbro, Mattel and others. But they weren't showcasing new toys. "As I walked around I noticed there weren't any new toys," he recalls, "it was Transformers, it was GI Joe, Bastards of the Universe." He couldn't understand why in the twenty-first century toy companies were displaying product lines that were twenty-five years old.

"What's with all this 80s crap?" he kept asking himself. "So I walked around for another two hours and it just kept haunting me, why – what is this? Then it struck me, oh shit, its right in front of your eyes." In the eighties, he realized, toy companies would pay for TV shows featuring the toys as extended infomercials. "If you were eight, nine, ten in the 80s, and you watched *Transformers* or one of these shows, this is your nostalgia now. Now you're 28, you've got a kid, or two kids or whatever, and a family, this is what you remember – this was your *Star Wars*. Not me, I'm 44, that's not my *Star Wars*, that was your *Star Wars*."

He searched for a toy he could option the movie rights for. First, he looked at *Heman*. It was cool, he thought, but "it's got this strange – especially for small children – the whole homoerotic thing going on in it." Then, he looked at *GI Joe*. He got the rights, Sony wanted to make it, but then Bush invaded Iraq and the deal was off. When he broke the bad news to Hasbro they suggested he try *Transformers* instead. He worried the technology wasn't ready yet. "I don't know," he thought aloud, "maybe we could do toasters and shit, but an actual car? It has to be so *cool*." So he went to his VFX team who had worked on his last movie and they said, "we'll figure it out."

Convinced he had a giant hit on his hands that the studios would be clawing over each other to have, he demanded to pitch directly to the head of every studio. "Every one

of the motherfuckers passed, every single person.” Most of them just said, “it’s a dumb toy movie.” It was a cherished television series, he argued, it has a mythology, it has characters, it has a fan base. No one bit.

The day after his final rejection, the phone rang. It was the head of Regency Pictures, a major financier for Fox, who wanted to know if anything had happened to *Transformers*. Then, New Line called and wanted to see if the rights were still available. Paramount was on the phone, any news with *Transformers*? And then DreamWorks called asking if they could take another meeting. “In Hollywood, all you need is one,” Murphy explained, “if you’ve got two, it’s hookers and gin time. We got four!”

What had happened, Murphy later found out, was that each of these middle-aged studio heads had gone back to their development executives and told them about the pitch. A generation younger, they saw the commercial potential immediately.

But with DreamWorks, something unexpected happened. The pitch had gotten to Steven Spielberg (who co-founded the studio) and, through his large extended family, which includes many adopted children of different ages, he already knew all about *Transformers* from them. “You’ve probably heard that truism in Hollywood,” Murphy said, “what Steven wants, Steven gets.”

However, before the green light could be given, a suitable director had to be found. “What happens in a movie like this,” Murphy explained, “it’s so expensive - that they generate lists, and they’re very short. Six names.” The first pick was Michael Bay and he was reluctant. He didn’t get it and didn’t want to do it. “Steven wanted Michael and Michael doesn’t look up to anybody except for Steven.” Co-financed with Paramount, DreamWorks green lit the movie.



After the movie and its sequels became box-office hits the new formula became, Murphy says, “let’s do a dumb toy movie!” Indeed, after Universal Studios bought the Hasbro board games *Monopoly*, *Operation*, and *Battleship*, they were all put into development. *Battleship* was rammed through at a \$200m budget. “That was the wrong lesson they learned. The lesson wasn’t, ‘we passed on a stupid toy movie, oh my god it made a billion dollars, let’s go make stupid toy movies.’” What made *Transformers* successful, Murphy believed, was a generation that was invested in the characters, the story, the mythology. “I mean, *Battleship* is just moving pegs, what are you doing?”

### **Inventing Formulas: Imitating what can be Imitated**

Before the comic-book craze hit Hollywood, Murphy had been a comic book fan and gone to the ComicCon convention held in San Diego every year since the mid-eighties. In 2002 a new wing was opened to showcase toys from Hasbro, Mattel and others. But they weren’t showcasing new toys. “As I walked around I noticed there weren’t any new toys,” he recalls, “it was Transformers, it was GI Joe, Bastards of the Universe.” He couldn’t understand why in the twenty-first century toy companies were displaying product lines that were twenty-five years old.

“What’s with all this 80s crap?” he kept asking himself. “So I walked around for another two hours and it just kept haunting me, why – what is this? Then it struck me, oh shit, its right in front of your eyes.” In the eighties, he realized, toy companies would pay for TV shows featuring the toys as extended infomercials. “If you were eight, nine, ten in the 80s, and you watched *Transformers* or one of these shows, this is your nostalgia now. Now you’re 28, you’ve got a kid, or two kids or whatever, and a family, this is what you remember – this was your *Star Wars*. Not me, I’m 44, that’s not my *Star Wars*, that was your *Star Wars*.”

He searched for a toy he could option the movie rights for. First, he looked at *Heman*. It was cool, he thought, but “it’s got this strange – especially for small children – the whole homoerotic thing going on in it.” Then, he looked at *GI Joe*. He got the rights, Sony wanted to make it, but then Bush invaded Iraq and the deal was off.

The most important role of producers working within the studio system, such as Murphy, is to bring new material to the studio. They are the filters between book publishers, video

game companies, agencies, all the other sources of intellectual property and the studios. Murphy's job is to find something in the zeitgeist, such as an underground cultural trend, and figure out how a motion picture could be made for this undiscovered audience in a way that can be understood by the studio executives who would be needed to green light it. His production deal was with Sony, so they had the right of first refusal. When the political climate changed, he realized the same calculus would be made across Hollywood and it was time to abandon the project.

When he broke the bad news to Hasbro they suggested he try *Transformers* instead. He worried the technology wasn't ready yet. "I don't know," he thought aloud, "maybe we could do toasters and shit, but an actual car? It has to be so *cool*." So he went to his VFX team who had worked on this last movie and they said, "we'll figure it out."

Superhero and comic book movies had been around since the eighties, with *Superman* and *Batman*. With the introduction of CGI in the early 1990s, new kinds of story telling were now possible: from the dinosaurs of *Jurassic Park* (1992), to the science fiction world of *The Matrix* (1999), and eventually epic fantasy battles in *Lord of the Rings* (2001). *Spiderman* (2002) was a watershed moment as it showed that superhero and comic book movies were now a practical reality. It was precisely at this moment that Murphy was pitching *Transformers*. It was still at the boundary of what could be technically possible given the technology available. When he realized that it could be possible that was when the commercial potential of cars transforming into robots became apparent to him.

Convinced he had a giant hit on his hands that the studios would be clawing over each other to have, he demanded to pitch directly to the head

of every studio. “Every one of the motherfuckers passed, every single person.” Most of them just said, “it’s a dumb toy movie.” It was a cherished television series, he argued, it has a mythology, it has characters, it has a fan base. No one bit.

The day after his final rejection, the phone rang. It was the head of Regency Pictures, a major financier for Fox, who wanted to know if anything had happened to *Transformers*. Then, New Line called and wanted to see if the rights were still available. Paramount was on the phone, any news with *Transformers*? And then DreamWorks called asking if they could take another meeting. “In Hollywood, all you need is one,” Murphy explained, “if you’ve got two, it’s hookers and gin time. We got four!”

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The strategy of circumventing the development executives for the studio heads is to bypass gatekeepers and get as close as possible to the green light authority. It is a way to get past the usual “development hell” that the layers of studio bureaucracy all too often create. This privilege is usually only afforded to the directors, producers, and actors of the highest status. What is usually a key advantage for the high-status player, in this case, turned out to be a mistake, as Murphy himself quickly came to realize. The divisions in the studio hierarchy were also generational divisions. By bypassing the generation who would be the most enthusiastic about the project, although they also had the least power, he had failed to recruit the project’s potential cheerleaders. It was to his good fortune that the idea went “down” the hierarchy to those who understood the mass appeal of this franchise.

But with DreamWorks, something unexpected happened. The pitch had gotten to Steven Spielberg (who co-founded the studio) and, through his large extended family, which includes many adopted children of different ages, he already knew all about *Transformers* from them. “You’ve probably heard that truism in Hollywood,” Murphy said, “what Steven wants, Steven gets.”

Here we see how the generational divisions were also coincidentally present in the Spielberg household. He personally understood the commercial importance of the material. At the apex of the Hollywood hierarchy, his preferences were enough to secure the green light, as long as his desired talent was willing to come on board.

However, before the green light could be given, a suitable director had to be found. “What happens in a movie like this,” Murphy explained, “it’s so expensive - that they generate lists, and they’re very short. Six names.” The first pick was Michael Bay and he was reluctant. He didn’t get it and didn’t want to do it. “Steven wanted Michael and Michael doesn’t look up to anybody except for Steven.” Co-financed with Paramount, DreamWorks green lit the movie.

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Here we can observe the interplay of the charismatic and bureaucratic modes of legitimacy. What was first rejected as a “dumb toy movie” was, at the behest of Steven Spielberg, quickly moved into production. When it became a hit, a new rule was created: that toys could become hit movies. This shows us the cycle of how new formulas come to be, and how the antithesis of bureaucratic rationality, charisma, is a fundamental and inescapable part of that process. While it was a rare instance where personal idiosyncrasies in taste led to *South Park* getting the green light, with *Transformers* we see the primary means for upending the formula: the power of charisma. This allows studios

to take enormous risks, a bet in the hundreds of millions when marketing costs are taken into consideration as well, which can open up the possibility for a hit, and with that, a change in the formula.

However, it also shows us the limitations of these two modes of legitimacy. Charismatic stars, by nature, as Weber noted, are defined by their uniqueness, their irreplaceability. This is why the monetary premium is so high: the supply can be counted on two hands. Bureaucratic formulas on the other hand, are defined precisely by their ability to be imitated and reproduced. That means that when creating a new formula what is imitated is only the part of the product that lends itself to imitation. The audience's love for characters cannot be reproduced, but creating movies out of toys can be. Out of the hundreds of elements that may go into creating a hit movie – from the chemistry between the actors to the timing of the release – formulas are drawn only from those elements that can be reproduced. This does, almost by definition, ensure that the elements that made the original so popular are not included in the copy. In a context where studio and network executives are constantly seeking to curtail the power of stars, these elements that also serve as marketing platforms, such as popular board games, become all the more attractive.

At the same time, the denizens of Hollywood look on aghast as the studios pour hundreds of millions into dumb toy movies while drawing up pitches for those very movies. They see the madness and cannot help but participate in it. In the summer of 2010, a video made for internal use was leaked from the agency WME. It satirized their own agents as looking for any kind of brand they could to build a movie out of. Their eventual pitch: “Pinkberry: The Musical in 3D,” combined every hot trend that was

surging through Hollywood that summer. When it was leaked it went viral but nothing changed. Hollywood embraced the satire of itself and then went on with business as usual.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Out of the tens of thousands scripts, properties, pitches, and nascent ideas out there, how do you know which million dollar bet to make when the business model tells us that “nobody knows anything?” The answer of this dissertation is that there are two distinct epistemologies, two ways in which ideas become valorized as legitimate, worthy of consideration, and ultimately, investment. These are the two social processes where people “know about movies.”

The first, formulas, is drawn from bureaucratic legitimacy: the notion that ideas can be ranked hierarchically according to their ability to conform to objective criteria. Within this, however, is something profoundly irrational: that the formulas used were weak sorting mechanisms as the categories were too broad and too vague to distinguish between similar properties. All too often, the language of bureaucratic justification was used as a way to justify the exclusion of ideas from low-status sellers or idiosyncratic reasons rooted in personal taste. At the same time, this system, because of its routine regularity, is open to subversion from agents, producers, writers, and directors who simply reframe their existing projects to conform to the ruling tropes of the day. That is not to say, however, that formulas are not important. The dominance of comic book movies and TV shows featured around the lives of cops, lawyers, and doctors, shows a

bureaucratic production of mass entertainment, just as Adorno and Horkheimer had observed seventy years earlier.

Even the rigidly bureaucratic rules of the television networks and movie studios are bent by the gravitation pull of the stars. Those very justifications may serve the function of simply providing rational-legal legitimacy for picking charismatic individuals over low-status ones. It is not just a trade-off between one form of knowledge and another – rational formulas and the visions of charismatic artists – but the emotional, psychological, and physiological power that status wields. The high degree of uncertainty, the importance of stars in the economics of box-office success, all helps to perpetuate a star-driven status order.

Yet both the positions of a star and the reign of a formula are both highly contingent affairs. The all too human personality quirks of the stars, the ever changing audience tastes, and the enormous technological and legal upheavals of the political economy of the entertainment industry, all serve to create a dynamic environment. The law of small numbers magnifies and refracts these hits and misses from data-points to be averaged to grand pronouncements that can elevate and destroy even the most entrenched formulas and beloved stars. This fluidity informs the basis of strategies as the game of heat is played but it also, at the same time, creates an environment where the impact of wins and losses become all the more extreme. More importantly, these bases of legitimacy are the basis of struggle between the studios and the talent, where each – whatever the practice – attempts to impose their own legitimate definition of value for both financial and creative dominance.

Within this chaos and uncertainty where position, status, and wealth are constantly in flux, peculiarities in the social structure emerge. This can be observed in the structuration of social capital which emerges from the material and symbolic resources of the field. As these sources are in flux, so too is the nature of social capital, and, in the parlance of the field, those crucial “relationships” required to broker the projects that make up the economic units of the field. This opens up strategic opportunities and challenges. It turns, what would be regular and habitual decision making, processes into bets on changes to the social structure.

These bets, at any given moment, have different probabilities of success. These probabilities emerge from a matrix of possibilities made possible by the emergent social processes at the field level. At the same time, this betting game is not exogenous to this matrix but rather an endogenous and endemic component of it. Development and green lighting is not the product of a set of decisions, framed by cultural criteria, market prices, or psychological biases, but, ultimately, by the temporal sequencing and spatial disruption of bets. A writer bets on an agent who bets on a producer who bets on a studio who bets on a director who bets on a star who bets on the director who bets on the studio who bets on the bets made by other studios, stars, and agents. Just as casinos have card counters using formulas and charismatic lucky players, this betting game is animated by different principles of betting, and, on top of that, a struggle over the definition of legitimate bets.

This way of thinking about the production of popular culture differs markedly from the existing schools of thought. Bourdieu’s dualist model on the surface has some similarities, with its focus on art for the sake of commerce and art for art’s sake. But



Bourdieu is, in many ways, locked in by his own conceptual scheme of defining the field in terms of a polarization of cultural and economic capital. What Bourdieu is missing is precisely what the Frankfurt School was so correct to emphasize: the consequences of bureaucratic organizations on the production of art. Their limitation, of course, was their neglect of star power in Hollywood, the charismatic legitimate order, and how that could usurp the power of the bureaucracies. Furthermore, this macro picture of interacting social processes is obscured by the middle range mechanisms approach which begins by isolating and measuring the importance of “causes”. This is the strength of the two aforementioned approaches, which situate the analysis on multiple dimensions with multiple processes in play. The qualitative methodology employed by the social process approach has allowed for a more inductive interrogation that addresses both the macro-field level structures with the micro-level interactions.

In many ways, the approach of this dissertation has been a return to Weber. How motion pictures and television shows are green lit is largely down to the classic Weberian categories of status, legitimacy, and power. Yet, this return has been from a contemporary perspective where the latest insights into these categories has been reintegrated into Weber’s open-ended, inductive approach. In many ways, this was a function of the subject matter: the exchange of ideal and material goods which Weber observed in religion is a self-evident and explicit part of the creative process. Further research could examine how this interaction between material and ideal goods unfolds in non-creative industries.

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