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Global Machine

Editors' Introduction

From a studio's perspective, the mobile logistics of screen media production result from a logical calculation of creative costs. Consideration is given to the nature of the script and the types of locations it requires, but no less important are the range of local subsidies and infrastructure, both physical and human, on offer from a number of production hubs vying for Hollywood's attention. A competitive exchange rate doesn't hurt, either. Such factors partially explain how Hollywood has transformed its mode of production into a global machine that assembles film and television projects across an established but largely interchangeable list of locales. As the interviewees made clear in the previous section, these top-down calculations may benefit the producer's bottom line, but they extract significant tolls from the hundreds of workers employed on those sets. While we often hear this dynamic framed as "runaway production," the commentary thus far offers a critical reminder that there also is a quotidian dimension to the spatial reconfiguration of screen media production.

The interviews in this section, which include a studio production executive, service producers, and location experts, continue in a similar vein but broaden the geographic scope of the conversation to include workers in Atlanta, Glasgow, Dublin, Prague, and Budapest. They explain that job responsibilities on sets in their cities are divided between local hires and transient crew, with most of the latter flown in from Los Angeles or London to serve as department heads. We learn from these interviews a great deal about the increasingly complex logistics of global film and television production, which involve a tangled mess of creative demands, local bureaucracies, thorny finances, and cultural differences, a complicated riddle that globe-trotting producers demand their local counterparts solve on their behalf.

More fundamentally, however, these interviews push back against the tendency to pit screen media workers in Southern California (who are losing jobs) against workers in other locations (who are "stealing" them)—arguments about "runaway production" that simply serve the interests of the studios and distract from the structural forces reshaping conditions for all film and television workers, no matter where they are based. While those structures may be experienced differently in different places and at different times, they are no less responsible for the increased pressure workers in distant locales face when securing work from Hollywood. Hearing from some of those "distant" voices is a vital component of the larger conversation we are pursuing in this book.

This section introduces the broad notion of "service production," which has its origins in the commercial video industry but is now a prominent feature in foreign territories playing host to large-scale film and television productions. Often operated by expatriates who are experienced line producers with Hollywood credits to their name, production service firms are responsible for mediating between the needs of visiting producers and the intricacies of local work cultures and bureaucracies. They budget costs (sometimes in multiple neighboring territories) as part of the bidding process to secure contracts with interested producers. They scout and secure locations and book available soundstages. They lock down local services, from catering and hospitality to drivers and dry cleaners. They negotiate access to historical sites; fill out applications for street closures; ensure compliance with local laws and labor regulations; and somehow balance the often-contradictory interests of studio producers, local politicians, and neighborhood residents. Service producers furthermore supply local production managers, office coordinators, accountants, location scouts, and various runners and assistants who work closely with visiting line producers. They are responsible for hiring local crew members to satisfy staffing needs in the camera, sound, costume, makeup, and construction departments, among others, who then are assigned to work under foreign (largely Anglo-American) department heads.

Sometimes when production takes place in more familiar environs, such as London or Vancouver, the labor of the service producer is redistributed to individuals in the production office, location department, and local film agencies. Much like service producers, then, production managers and location experts also find themselves responsible for managing an astonishing number of details, both large and small, that help suture mobile production to particular locations. Production managers, for instance, know whom to call when they need to find the best focus puller; similarly, location experts are masters of arcane details who, for example, help to secure permits for firing semiautomatic weapons in an affluent suburban neighborhood, while also gaining consent from local residents to launch a shootout in their backyards.

Yet these jobs are more than just middle management and paperwork. As discussed throughout this book, the shifting demographics of most film and television crews today pose some particularly illuminating challenges for screen media workers, arguably even more so for the professionals who must somehow solder together foreign and domestic work cultures when Hollywood comes to town. As global interest in locations has intensified and extended to new territories, the escalation of mobile production has exacerbated many of the tensions and complexities in these emerging production hubs.

The social relations of production, for example, are rife with structural inequities. Opportunities for upward mobility for the hair and makeup artist in Prague or the location scout in Atlanta are limited at best. On the other side of the equation, producers now seek out department heads and other technicians who "travel well," industry slang for workers who are comfortable leaving behind an entourage of trusted colleagues in Hollywood for the opportunity to collaborate with technicians and trainees in distant locales. Moreover, basic assumptions about wages, job titles, and professional experience are complicated by the different union structures in places like Atlanta or Glasgow. Cultural tensions arise as well, since local work routines and job categories are often governed by a division of labor different than the studios' usual mode of production. Massaging these differences is an important responsibility for service producers and production managers.

Even the incentives that are designed to attract Hollywood producers demand detailed attention, since they are marked by iterative change and myriad contingencies. No two government rebate schemes are ever the same. A location's fortunes rise and fall as a consequence of those differences. Accordingly, these service producers lobby their governments for more subsidies, making arguments to politicians about economic impact and job opportunities in hopes of sustaining the flow of high-budget work into their respective territories. As small business owners with overhead to consider, it's no longer just their personal fate at stake but also the livelihoods of the administrators and crew members they have brought into the fold.

For production managers and location experts who have built a global reputation, they face a dilemma similar to their counterparts in Los Angeles: while some of them may enjoy hopscotching between Albuquerque and Atlanta, London and Dublin, Glasgow and Budapest, they're also aware of the toll that professional jetsetting takes on personal relationships and family life back home. This dynamic is especially true in locations like Glasgow, that are largely disengaged from the global machine, which means that production and location managers who hail from there must permanently relocate or spend much of their lives on the road.

Global film and television production is therefore exceptionally complex and multifaceted. As one of our interlocutors confided, the work requires you to be a stellar line producer but also a lawyer, a lobbyist, an accountant, a negotiator,

a mentor, and a cultural translator. Service production and the affiliated responsibilities of production managers and location experts demand logistical resolve, creative agility, local resourcefulness, and an oversupply of resilience. At all costs, the labor these individuals perform must keep the production on track, and yet the demands they face underscore the fragility of the whole enterprise—one hiccup, large or small, threatens to bring the whole production to a grinding halt.

Therein lies the precariousness of this labor. Given the distance from Los Angeles, the enduring appeal of a foreign production hub hinges on its reputation for a seamless experience. And thus the careers of those individuals who live and work there are subject to both its perceived amenability and the demands of international producers, no matter how extravagant or complicated. We learned that a common strategy is to say "yes" to requests in the first instance, and then figure out how to resolve them later, often out of earshot of visiting producers who aren't always interested in "logistical complications."

This drive to please is certainly a reflection of personal ambition, but it's also a logical consequence of the ephemeral and itinerant nature of global capital. A location's international standing is vulnerable to even the slightest suggestion of trouble, be it an unstable incentive, a difficult crew, or an uncooperative public agency. Much of this work, then, is proactive and preemptive, squashing problems before they pose a genuine threat. At other times it is reactive and immediate, making peace among a squabbling crew or knowing whom to call when the city throws up one too many bureaucratic roadblocks. It's a challenging and risky business, and yet ironically, much of the labor required to maintain the impression of seamless and transparent production must remain invisible. Returning business is contingent on that frictionless experience, and as these interviews make clear, it takes a tremendous amount of labor to ensure that the global machine runs smoothly.