

Working Below the Line in the Studio System: Exploring Labour Processes in the UK Film Industry 1927-1950

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Processes in the UK Film Industry 1927-1950**

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Abstract

Drawing on archived interview material from ten participants in the BECTU Oral History Project this paper gives voice to largely unheard below-the-line technical employees in the UK film industry. It considers the extent of personal contacts and network groups as a source of labour market intelligence between 1927-1950. The paper also assesses the degree of stability present in the labour market across a number of selected film industry occupations in order to provide a comparison with the precarity which characterizes the contemporary film labour market. This provides an historical context to debates surrounding the organisation of work in the sector, examining both continuity and change in a way that can provide a greater understanding of these issues as they are experienced today. The paper argues that the British film industry has never been a stable, 'job-for-life' sector, nor have its labour processes followed mass production lines. We suggest that epoch based assumptions (a Fordist past, a flexible future) are inadequate for understanding the historical context of work in an industry where continuity is as evident as change.

1.0 Introduction

As governments and policy makers in developed economies have promoted the creative industries for their employment growth potential, academic interest in them has led to the emergence of a growing body of literature (Baker and Hesmondhalgh 2011). However, much of the literature has either ignored the past or generalised it as a time of stability against a current world of either flexibility (Florida 2002) or precarity (Standing 2011). This narrative is particularly true of the film sector where flexible specialisation theory has played a key role in promoting, we argue, the myth of a Fordist past, emphasising its status as an early exemplar for the contemporary transformation of work (Christopherson and Storper 1989, Jones 1996). To uphold the claim that an industry has transformed we must be able to provide a credible description of its past and this paper argues that, contrary to the flexible specialisation narrative the British film industry has never been a stable, 'job-for-life' sector, nor have its labour processes followed mass production lines. We suggest that epoch based assumptions (a Fordist past, a flexible future) are inadequate for understanding the historical context of work in this industry (Blair 2001, Dawson and Holmes 2012, Blair and Rainnie 2000).

The period 1927-1950 marks the British Studio System, a time during which the country's film industry was dominated by two large, vertically integrated combines (ABPC and GBPC - later Rank) and studios were owned by a mixture of these and other discrete production companies which created feature films, providing employment to production workers over a sustained period of time in the same studio (Ellis 1982). This past is in marked contrast to the contemporary industry, where workers encounter a much more precarious labour market, characterised by almost 100% freelance work (Randle, Leung and Kurian 2008).

However, while we are beginning to create accounts of modern day creative work (see

Baker and Hesmondhalgh 2011, McKinley and Smith 2009, Banks, Caldwell and Mayer 2009) accounts of work during this earlier period are rare, making it difficult for us to provide the evidence we need to assess the characterization of the time as one of stable labour markets for below-the-line¹ (BTL) production workers in an industry subject to mass production methods, lengthy apprenticeships and strong trade unions (Christopherson and Storper 1989, Jones 1996 and Florida 2002).

2.0 Early studies of film: the missing labour process

Studies of the film industry from an economic history perspective have focussed more on the consumption of film than its production while film or media studies have focused on the product: the content and meaning of films. Notwithstanding the fact that 'the split between intellectual labour and more manual or technical labour is central to the division of labour within the cultural industries' (Wayne 2003:18), it seems surprising that sociological descriptions and labour histories have neglected accounts from BTL workers - the majority of those working in film. Despite the volume of literature on film as a whole and the cooperative nature of the labour process in film production, BTL workers have been largely ignored while authors have focused on accounts given by the above-the-line (ATL) 'creatives' and 'talent' - the Directors and Stars, many of which have come from biographies of major players rather than academic study. More recently there has been some recognition of the absence of labour and the labour process, with studies which acknowledge the cooperative nature of the film-making process, counteracting 'a bias towards analysis of the consumption of cultural artefacts' (McKinley and Smith 2009:11).

In this paper we explore the nature of BTL work in the British Studio System through the experiences of a sample of ten workers taken from the BECTU oral history archive. All worked in manual and technical trades and represent a small sample of many neglected trades in the film sector. The full extent to which this type of labour has traditionally been dismissed as relevant to the study of the industry is exemplified by an influential ethnographic study of the Hollywood film industry (Powdermaker 1950). Interviewing 300 film workers, Powdermaker excluded BTL workers from her study arguing; 'these have relatively little influence on the content and meaning [of films], and so were not studied in any detail' (1950:10). On the rare occasions historical literature does refer to BTL workers and the labour process it is often via comments from producers and directors rather than production workers themselves. The only grades in BTL positions

¹ The costs of film production are divided between above-the-line (ATL) and below-the-line (BTL). In the production phase of film-making the costs for creative talent and management are generally regarded as ATL. These occupations include directors, producers, writers and actors. Those regarded as BTL include the majority of occupations in film production, from heads of department such as: directors of photography, art directors, chief sound engineers and grips (lighting technicians) down. In the Hollywood Studio System, BTL costs traditionally meant on-going costs, with BTL workers on permanent or at least rolling temporary contracts, while ATL costs were those added for the expensive 'creative talent' project by project. Where the line is placed between BTL and ATL workers varies, a recent text argues, '... both over time and according to national and institutional context, but it has played a central role in shaping employment practices in every major centre of film and television production' (Dawson and Holmes 2012: 2). In the American film sector the term below the line has become a source of identity for technicians in film crews (see for instance trade magazine "*Below the Line: the Voice of the Crew*"). In the UK film sector anecdotal evidence suggests it does not have the same widespread use, however our early research suggests the division of labour either side of the 'line' follows the American example. If it is to be used as a 'line' that marks the division of labour between conception and execution, in a way that Labour Process Theory were to define it, the various levels of below the line work would suggest some have more impact on the conception stage of production than others, for instance heads of departments such as cinematographers and art directors.

to receive some attention in accounts of the past, are heads of department, such as directors of photography and art directors - the BTL 'big players'.²

3.0 Constructing histories of the film sector

The lack of historical data on labour processes in the film sector has left accounts of the past susceptible to histories constructed to fit contemporary transformation debates. This narrative is dependent on a Fordist account of the studio system, which we describe presently. However we first examine transformation theory, its origins and the impact and influence it has on theories around flexible labour markets.

3.1 The Transformation Narrative

Flexible Specialisation theorists have argued that the vertical disintegration of the US film sector is indicative of a shift from mass production to flexible specialisation providing an exemplar to many industries in developed countries that encountered a similar transformation from the 1980s onwards (Christopherson and Storper 1989: 331). Flexible Specialisation means individual firms making a specialised product in a flexible labour market (1989: 331). This involves a deregulated labour market with a large number of small firms offering diversified products, temporary employment and flexible hours. Moreover BTL workers are expected to demonstrate further flexibility: adapting their trade to certain 'specialisms' or diversifying their skills.

FS theorists argue that two events transformed the US film industry from mass production to flexible specialisation: the 1948 Paramount Supreme Court decision, which ruled that the majors could not own cinemas; and the growth of television, which reduced cinema audiences, making the return of investment in production from exhibition less predictable. These events prompted the vertical disintegration of the Hollywood majors, which had previously controlled the production, distribution and exhibition of films and led to the growth of independent producers, as the US majors attempted to cut costs in production (Christopherson and Storper 1987,1989). Christopherson and Storper (1989) along with Jones (1996), incorporated Piore and Sabel's (1984) concept of 'solar firms', which described how small specialised firms would be subcontracted by larger firms, into their analysis of the US film industry. The process of subcontracting is central to flexible specialisation theory and forms the basis of a wider transformation theory, being seen as 'the dominant corporate structure' in developed countries (Wayne 2003: 71).

The transformation narrative depends on a Fordist past for legitimacy and commentators writing about the creative sector seem particularly attached to this narrative. There is a paucity of empirical data on the history of labour processes in the sector, which, we argue has resulted in a tendency to generalise the past as stable and rigid contrasting it with the present which is flexible and precarious. As one key exponent puts it 'The old employment contract was group orientated and emphasized job security, the new one is tailored to the needs and desires of the individual' (Florida, 2002: 135). However, by contrast, we are warned that 'A world of change is presented increasingly devoid of continuity with the past, in which the new is unprecedented rather than merely contemporary' (Doogan 2009: 2).

² For instance see biography of Freddie Young the famous director of photography: Busby, P. (1999) *Seventy Light Years*, London: Faber and Faber

3.2 The new “flexible” below-the-line worker

The shift to flexible labour markets in the US was replicated in the European film sector by the 1950s as centralised studios, owned by production companies engaged in continual production, declined and studios either closed down or were hired out for one-off productions (Ellis 1982). The new flexible studio structure required flexible BTL workers on freelance contracts who were able to adapt a specialised skill and use it in a variety of contexts working for a range of small specialised firms. So for instance a make-up artist would specialise in wax model making and use that skill for a diverse range of projects in various films, TV serials and commercials (Christopherson and Storper 1989). In this uncertain labour market a core and periphery of BTL workers emerged, whose positions were determined by the number of hours they could obtain as freelance contractors. This was dependent on their reputation in the industry, which was built through word of mouth from work on past projects. To become a core worker with more choice in the labour market, film-workers needed to improve their reputation through the development of their human capital (Jones 1996), demonstrating the necessary technical and entrepreneurial skills to have a successful career in the industry.

In the production stage of film-making vertical disintegration transformed head technicians who had acted as supervisors in the studio system, effectively into head hunters, who would hire a freelance crew in their respective departments for the duration of a film production (Christopherson and Storper 1989). This notion was explored further in a study of UK film workers with Blair (2001:154) commenting that previous work had a ‘tendency to atomise the labour market’ and arguing that the debate should focus on the importance of social relations within the teams of freelance contractors hired by head technicians, in what she termed ‘semi-permanent work groups’. While management, in the shape of the producer, negotiated contracts with individual workers, the teams were assembled by heads of department (HOD’s) such as the Director of Photography (DOP). Moreover workers in different positions were often dependent on those above them for work, so a DOP would pick a camera operator who in turn might select a focus puller. A study by Reid (2008) highlights the link between studies of the contemporary film sector and the British Studio System, pointing out that semi-permanent work groups were beginning to be formed in the 1950s as the studios became four-wallers.³ Camera and sound crews were put together by HOD’s and were formed from working relationships in the studio system (Reid 2008). We argue later that research suggests this process originally developed in the British studios during the 1930s.

The emergence of this new type of work organisation in the film sector, in both the American and British context, has been seen as a coping strategy in an unregulated labour market (McKinley and Smith 2009). Deregulation as the studios became four wallers has resulted in a culture of ‘structured uncertainty’ (Randle & Culkin in McKinley and Smith 2009: 112) whereby freelance workers develop a range of strategies to maintain a career in the industry. Today entry is often dependent on personal contacts followed by a period of internship and working for free (Randle, Leung and Kurian

³ ‘Four-Wallers’ came into being with the break-up of centralised studios formally owned by a production company that employed production staff on continuous contracts. Studios became four-wallers as they transferred ownership to a company that hired out the space to production companies and no longer made their own movies or they hired out staff to external companies. Some such as Rank at Pinewood Studios kept a small staff in post-production, but all the studios no longer employed workers, either in principle photography, scenario, or art departments, on continuous contracts, by 1959.

2008). Developing a career requires building a reputation through networks of contacts, working long hours on projects and coping with periods without paid work, sometimes with a second job outside the film industry, while accessing and funding training is often the responsibility of the employee rather than the employer.

3.3 Hollywood 1920-1950 – a flexible specialisation (FS) analysis

The term ‘Studio System’ stems from classical-era Hollywood⁴ which spanned a period from approximately 1920 to 1950 and refers to the vertical integration of the eight large Hollywood Majors⁵. The majors controlled the production, distribution and exhibition of the film-making process (Christopherson and Storper 1989). The domestic exhibition market in America was strong enough to give the majors a return on their investment in production. As they expanded they began to dominate the European market, which by the late 1920s provided them with their profit margins. This dominance was particularly acute in Britain; in 1926 90% of films exhibited in British cinemas were produced by the Hollywood majors.⁶

The US majors offered stable employment to BTL workers, providing informal apprenticeships and a vertical career through bureaucratic structures (Christopherson and Storper 1989). The labour process in production reflected ‘a routinized factory-like process’ (Christopherson and Storper 1987), with the majors developing formulised genre films. For example MGM specialised in Musicals and Warner Brothers in Westerns (Ellis 1982). Film crews were charged with executing a strict shooting script, sometimes working on up to 20 films a year, with ‘standardised’ working practices (Christopherson and Storper 1989). The division of labour was underpinned by the shooting script, with ATL ‘creative’ employees having control over the conception of films and BTL technical employees executing these concepts in production. The continuity script with pre-production planning of each scene in detail became, ‘the design blueprint for the workers in the central producer system of production’ (Staiger 1985 138). In classical-era Hollywood the bureaucratic system started with capital owners who employed a central producer, or a production executive who controlled production with a team of studio managers and producers and then a range of production departments, such as camera, sound, scenario and art comprising a ‘highly stratified’ series of BTL film crews (Dawson and Holmes 2012). The Art Departments employed a large number of BTL workers in traditional trades with workshops in plastering and carpentry, which were known as ‘backlot’⁷ - essentially the workshops that turned the detailed drawings from the drawing office into film sets (Staiger 1985: 128). In the principal photography stage of production the camera and sound departments employed film crews in specialised trades such as camera operator, boom operator and focus puller, and the traditional trades of gaffer and electrician in the camera lighting department.

⁴ Classical-era Hollywood is often referred to in relation to the Hollywood formula picture, with studio locations and sets, in contrast to the ‘New Hollywood’ of the 60s and 70s with location shooting and independent production, but it also refers to the vertically integrated studio system. In this sense we refer to the organisational structure of the eight vertically integrated majors

⁵ Fox, RKO, MGM, Warner Brothers, Paramount, Universal, United Artists, Columbia Pictures

⁶ This was the reason for the 1927 Quota Act - legislation to increase British film production, which began the period of vertical integration in the British film industry (see Blair 2001 and Street 1997).

⁷ Backlot is a film industry term which refers to all the space where the production sets (‘lots’) are produced and stored, it is often used as a way of comparing the studios to large mass production factories (for instance see Staiger 1985)

The growth of craft based trade unions⁸ in the 1930s resulted in collective agreements on pay, hours and tasks. These agreements increased ‘the segregation of tasks’ with strict demarcation across trades, resulting in the development of a homogenised group of craft workers with a ‘craft identity’ (Christopherson and Storper 1989). In this context BTL workers could expect stable employment, with a ‘traditional career’ in ‘traditional hierarchies’ (Jones 1997: 58). It is through this historical narrative that the dramatic shift in work organisation takes place.

In the Flexible Specialisation analysis of the Hollywood Studio System BTL is the domain of male workers with a craft identity, adopting standardised working practices to produce formularised feature films. This limited analysis of BTL occupations in the film sector during the studio system paves the way for the transformation analysis which argues that FS:

‘...transformed what was once a hierarchically organized work force with a limited number of career paths into a more heterogeneous work force with increasing disparities in expectations and career possibilities among workers.’ Christopherson and Storper (1989: 336)

The production process of a feature film can require up to 170 different grades and occupations and the great shift in these occupations has taken place in post-production with the advent of video, and then digital, technology (Reid 2008). In the principal photography stage and in set production many trades have remained unchanged, which Reid argues provides excellent data for understanding continuities in occupations in the film sector. This conflicts with an analysis of production as having a limited number of career paths and a homogenous craft identity.

4.0 Methodology

Any study of the past is limited by the resources available in the present. During the 1980s a group of film makers keen to record the working experiences of, mainly retired, colleagues in the industry initiated the BECTU History Project which includes an archive of over 650 interviews. This group took an inclusive approach to the gathering of data on work in the industry and many of the interviews undertaken have been with those occupying craft and technical roles⁹. Drawing on interviews with BTL workers from this archive this paper will explore the employment relationship from the perspective of this group.

The BECTU Oral History Archive in the BFI library exists because of the dedicated work of a group of volunteers over a period of several decades, without the resources to record and disseminate the archive in a systematic manner. Searching the database involves trial and error, looking for BTL occupations in a database that has very little description on demographics or career routes. This paper is based on ten randomly chosen transcribed interviews of film workers in BTL positions who started work in the industry before 1950. These transcripts are publically available on the BECTU history

⁸ The International Association of Theatrical and Stage Employees (IATSE) was formed from 40 craft guilds, mainly representing below-the-line trades

⁹ It has been argued the number of BTL workers collected in the BECTU history archive, overall, could have been higher (for instance see Dawson and Holmes 2012a), however the period of collection from 1987-1993, which incorporates a number of interviewees who worked during the studio system, seems to have focused on BTL trades more than later collections.

project website¹⁰. For this reason they are all named. It includes a studio plasterer (traditional craft trade) and a draughtsperson in the art department, two head sound technicians and a boom operator in the sound department, a camera operator, a sound camera operator and a focus puller in the camera department (all specialised trades, with varied positions in the hierarchical chain) and two 'continuity girls' (initially a secretarial duty which developed into 'women's work' in the scenario department, ultimately becoming script supervisor). These are broadly representative of the variety of occupations among BTL production workers.

All ten subjects began work in the UK industry between 1927-1942, during the period of the vertically integrated studio system and before cinema was challenged by television from the 1950s onwards. Their careers continued as the studio system declined, some diversifying into television production, while others stayed in feature film production, as the studios became four-wallers, moving into location shooting and working in the studios on freelance projects for production companies. All ten are ethnically white caucasian, with one from an Irish and another from an Eastern European background. Seven are male and three female. Some began their working lives in the film industry, while others transferred. Five come from what could be described as a 'middle class' background and five from 'working class' backgrounds. Three were employed mainly on permanent contracts (all head technicians), while the remaining seven worked mainly on temporary contracts, but had sustained employment in the same studio over several years, usually in the vertically integrated majors or one of the large production companies. There is movement between trades: one moved from electrician to sound, one moved from projectionist to sound production and one worked as a continuity girl and editor. Before the advent of television many worked in a range of different productions for the studios, including; big budget feature films, quota quickies¹¹, B-movies, children's movies, instructional films, newsreels and documentaries, all were exhibited in British cinemas.

We began by looking at the backgrounds of the selected subjects, using social origins and educational capital as the two measurements of their class. We then mapped their careers, analysing their experiences of getting in and getting on, looking at the way they were recruited and the ways they progressed in the industry. We looked for descriptions of the labour process, training and the nature of work.

The aim of the following section is to provide an account of the studio system in the context of the British film industry, through accounts of the careers of the ten BTL workers between 1927-1950. It comprises an early output from a wider study of the industry, and does not aspire to offer a definitive picture of the past.

5.0 Working in the British Studio System 1927-1950

The British Studio System began after the passing of the 1927 Quota Act, this was protective legislation, designed to resist the dominance of Hollywood films in the British market¹². The measure gave British companies some guarantee of a return on their

¹⁰ See references for full details of website

¹¹ Quota Quickies were low budget films, produced as a result of the 1927 Quota Act, they were often financed by the American distribution companies to fulfil their 'quota' of British made films in their deals to British cinemas, so they could continue renting their American produced films as main features, many were of notoriously bad quality and were often exhibited early in the morning to empty cinemas (Napper in Murphy 1997).

investment and led to the vertical integration of two British majors; the Associated British Picture Corporation (ABPC), and the Gaumont British Picture Corporation (GBPC), bought by the Rank Organisation in 1941¹³. Like the Hollywood majors these combines integrated a number of production studios, distribution companies and large cinema circuits, with interests in every stage of film from early production to consumption. Vertical integration lasted until around 1959, when the Rank Organisation, the last vertically integrated major disintegrated and no longer employed any permanent staff in the production stage of film-making. This was the culmination of a process that had started in the early 1950s as television began to challenge the cinema market and with it the production companies that owned studios and made feature films over a continuous period (Reid 2008).

Employment in British film studios rose dramatically from 4,418 to 6,638 following the Quota Act (Jones 1987: 60). 2,002 of these workers were female, the majority working in offices and trades considered 'women's work', such as costume makers and continuity girls¹⁴ Most of this employment was concentrated around London and the south east, where many studios were already situated and many new ones were built in the 1930s¹⁵, with many of the distribution companies located in Wardour Street, Soho.

It is important not to overstate the growth in production or to suggest that vertical integration resulted in a London-wide studio system comparable in size and scope to Hollywood. The important difference was that the UK industry did not have a domestic market of a size which could provide a return on their investment, the domestic market was still, in the main, controlled by the seven Hollywood majors with distribution deals controlled by the powerful Kinematograph Renters Society (see Low, 1985: xiv). During the peak of British production in the mid-1930s, 60% of films exhibited in British cinemas were still produced in Hollywood (Low 1985).

This US dominance resulted in a highly volatile domestic market and created a 'feast and famine industry' (Reid 2008), a series of boom periods with high employment (most notably 1933-1936) and bust periods with high unemployment (1938 and 1948). Throughout the period studios and production companies went bankrupt or downsized for a period of time as they waited for a return on their investment via box-office receipts (Low 1985).

It is more useful to see the British Studio System less as an entirely vertically integrated structure comparable to the Hollywood Studio System and more as a fragmented centralised system, meaning with studios owned by a central production company, but with a three-tier structure, offering different levels of employment stability to BTL workers. In the first tier were the studios owned by GBPC, ABPC and Rank. In the second tier large production companies¹⁶ and the third tier small production companies

¹² The law stipulated a quota rising to 25% of films exhibited in British cinemas had to be produced by British studios, with a quota of 75% of British native workers on each production (Street 1997: 7).

¹³ ABPC employed 6,000 workers in production, distribution and exhibition; it owned the ABC cinema circuit. GBPC employed 14,000 and owned the Gaumont cinema circuit. The Rank Organisation bought GBPC in 1941 and became the dominate film combine in Britain with over 600 Odeon and Gaumont cinemas (Jones 1987:61)

¹⁵ Pinewood Studios, Denham Studios and Shepperton Studios were all built in the 1930s. For a full list of studios built in this period see Wood, L. *British Films 1927-1939* (BFI website)

¹⁶ For instance Associated Talking Pictures (Ealing Studios), British and Dominions (Etree, Imperial Studios) and London Films (Denham Studios)

financed by the American majors¹⁷. There are very few statistics on the nature of employment in production at this time, however there was certainly widespread temporary employment during the British Studio System (Jones 1987 and Reid 2008). The early research for this paper suggests production companies offered permanent contracts to a minority of core BTL workers, often head technicians, while the majority of BTL crews worked on temporary week-long rolling contracts. In the vertically integrated firms and large production companies, these temporary contracts could continue for several years including training and offering some job security.

There were three trade unions representing BTL production crew workers: Associated Cine-Technicians (ACT), National Association of Theatrical and Kine Employees (NATKE) and the Electrical Trade Union (ETU) (Kelly 1966:170). From 1927-1939 the three unions grew in power. But it was not until 1947 that they began to control the labour supply with a pre-entry closed shop and collective agreements over pay and tighter demarcations of tasks. By the 1950s the Studio System was beginning to decline with many workers moving into TV production for the BBC and later ITV, where they could secure permanent contracts. However it is estimated there were still around 6,000 ACTT members working as freelance contractors in feature film production in 1964 (Reid 2008). In the period from 1927-1947 working conditions, length of contracts, hours, pay and task segregation were all, as a camera operator working at Cricklewood Studios in 1931 says, 'rather arbitrary' (Tubby Englander, camera operator BECTU Archive). In the following sections we will look most closely at this 1927-1947 period, before the studios began to cut production and before the three trade unions took control of the labour supply.

5.1 Contracts and careers in the specialised trades

The FS analysis of the Hollywood Studio System suggests BTL production workers could expect a relatively stable career with vertical progression through a Hollywood major, beginning with an informal apprenticeship, where they would be trained by experienced technicians in a department. The British Studio System could not offer this level of employment stability, while the three main film unions did not start to control labour supply until after 1947, meaning that BTL workers faced an unstable labour market between 1927 and 1950. The flexible specialisation BTL work focuses on what have been referred to as 'craft trades' (Christopherson and Storper 1989) and concentrates on the specialised trades in principal photography (the sound and camera departments). As demonstrated this does not reflect the variety of trades in film production. The specialised trades allow us to compare the labour market to the one depicted in the FS analysis of Hollywood.

These specialised trades are unique to the film industry. In an uncertain labour market this is significant as these workers could not transfer to other industries, and would have to either develop a new trade or use a variety of strategies to negotiate a career in an uncertain market. The following four careers are indicative of this.

5.1.1 Gordon McCallum (sound engineer)

McCallum got into the industry by writing to various studios. With the aid of his father's golfing contacts, he secured an interview with the production manager at British and

¹⁷ For instance Fox Instructional (Wembley Studios)

Dominions (Imperial Studio, Elstree) in 1935. He started an informal apprenticeship on £1 a week, which he described as 'barely enough for travel expenses'. In 1939 he moved to the Rank Organisation, progressing vertically in the sound department to the position of chief dubbing mixer in post-production, earning a salary which he compares to that of a professional by the 1950s. The interview reveals he comes from a middle-class background (his father was a clothes designer) and is attracted to the creative aspects of his role as a sound technician:

"I would never describe myself as a great technician, I mean there were people far more able than me to talk about what went on in the back rooms. But my original interest in going into the films was somehow allied to the artistic side of it and I think that dubbing just gave me that opportunity, the opportunity I needed, and I felt that I was right in that job."

He had an expectation of vertical progression, a rising salary, job stability and some creativity in his job. These expectations were met through his employment at the relatively stable Rank Organisation and his move into post-production, which offered some permanent employment from the 1950s onwards¹⁸. He is the only interviewee in this sample to have been employed almost continually on a permanent contract in the studios.

5.1.2 Manny Yospa (focus puller)

Rolling week long contracts seemed to be common among other production workers across trades. Yospa entered the film industry through the ACT union via a contact in the Young Communist League in 1938. His first job in the studio system was at ABPC at Welwyn Studio in 1941 on a temporary contract that lasted four years. From 1946-1948 he had a permanent contract with Rank, at Gainsborough Studios but was sacked after Rank closed their London studios and moved production to Pinewood in 1948, following the second industry crash. Yospa's early career on uncertain contracts in the two vertically integrated combines is indicative of the industry. Although the studios did not offer him long-term contracts, they could offer work over several years in the same studio and in this sense he is able to develop his trade and reputation. From 1948 onwards he worked as a freelance contractor moving into television serials, news and TV commercials. He got work through personal contacts and the reputation he had built in the studios, but he was unable to get regular employment in the large feature film productions, as he explains:

I had a few regular [contacts], who employed me ... but I never got onto the big stuff, the big names. I think there must be ... a freemason's lodge and they all sort of gave each other jobs, because it was always the same people doing them! And I never got in on that."

5.1.3 Fred Tomlin (electrician and boom operator)

Tomlin's early career from 1932-1939 provides some insight into network groups in the 1930s. He started as an electrician in 1932 moving across a number of studios owned by Hollywood majors and independent British production companies, working for a few

¹⁸ As stable production work in the studios began to decline, companies like Rank kept a team of post-production workers on permanent contracts as they were able to work on many different productions that had been captured elsewhere.

days a week, when he could get it, until he got work at GBPC (Highbury Studio) in 1933. In 1934 he moved into the sound department as a boom operator at their larger studio (Shepherds Bush), where he stayed until 1938 working on various Alfred Hitchcock films (*The 39 Steps*, *The Lady Vanishes*), until he was sacked for taking part in the 1938 ETU strike. He then worked on another temporary rolling contract at Elstree Studio for ABPC. To secure his work as a freelance contractor Tomlin was dependent on a network of head technicians in the ETU who worked at various production companies. It was not through a trade union office, but via an informal network of ETU members providing work and security in a fragmented studio system. The following comment, refers to his transfer of trades and studios from electrical assistant at Highbury to boom operator at Shepherds Bush. It highlights the importance of head technicians in his career development and his class allegiance, referring to the class differences among technicians in the specialised trades at this time:

"Bill Salter [head of sound at Shepherds Bush] was asking for a "rough and ready boom operator."... Didn't want any of these educated young boys who were coming into the business, he wanted somebody rough-like who could say, "Quiet!" and things like that, you see! So I got the job, they said, "Don't go back to Islington, you're here."

5.1.4 Tilly Day (continuity girl)

Work was often most precarious for continuity girls as they were associated with specific directors and secured employment through them. Day was on freelance contracts throughout her career from 1917-1975. She had been working occasionally in the film industry as a secretary, a film extra and a continuity girl, until she secured more regular work with the notorious George King ('King of quota quickies'), a prolific producer/director of cheap 40 minute films. This meant working long hours for short periods and then facing periods without work in the industry. When work was available in studios she would take it, whatever the hours:

"I went to Twickenham Studios and it was all night, and then I got the job on the day picture...I must have been in such a bemused state! Because I used to come off of the night picture, go and wash my hands and face and go onto the day shift, to the day picture, and then I'd work all day."

The quota quickies were produced in various studios that specialised in this type of production in the 1930s. Despite their reputation for poor quality they offered Day training and experience in continuity, as it became an established trade in the 1930s. This training and experience helped her build a reputation as a continuity girl, so that by the 1950s she was able to secure regular freelance employment via various prominent directors like Thorold Dickinson, working on a total of over 300 feature films in her long career.

5.2 Summary

These four careers reflect the fragmented nature of employment for production workers in specialised trades during the British Studio System. They adapted to the studio system in different ways and took very different routes during the 1950s as the studios began to break-up. McCallum attached himself to the Rank Organisation, moving vertically in the company. Yospa gained experience as a focus puller and developed

personal contacts through temporary, but continual, employment at ABPC and GBPC, moving into TV as a freelance contractor from 1948. Tomlin used a network of head technicians in the ETU to secure work as a freelance contractor in film production, where he remained after 1950. Finally, Day used her working relationships with various directors to continue project work in feature films until 1975. Despite all working in specialised trades, they had diverse experiences. What they have in common is the way they were able to gain an informal apprenticeship and develop their trades through continual employment in particular studios and in the way they develop working relationships with other crew members through the collaborative nature of the labour process in principal photography. This also allowed them to develop contacts and develop their skills in order to secure future employment.

5.3 A Fordist film labour process?

This final section focuses on the experiences of two BTL workers in the art department and accompanying workshops. Their descriptions of the art department in film production offer insightful observations on labour processes during this period, as these departments have been largely ignored in film studies. Tom Peacock was a studio plasterer who worked on temporary rolling contracts for the large studios: Denham in the 1930s and Pinewood in the 1940s. Peggy Gick was a draughtswoman at various studios such as Ealing and Elstree in the 1930s and 1940s, she also worked as an art director for the Crown Film Unit during the war and in TV and advertisements in the 1950s. The organisational structure in the art department was split between a drawing office and workshops where the drawings were turned into sets. In the workshops many technicians would work on props and sets for several films at once, often unaware which film they were for. Peacock comments:

"...you know you're making stuff in the shop and all you had was a number, say 507, that was the set you were on. But you didn't know what 507 was because you're working in the shop see, and all the stuff's being done out there."

The alienated nature of this work and the division between design and production or conception and execution reflects traditional perceptions of a mass production engineering firm. However interviewee descriptions of the labour process suggest the production of prototypes rather than mass production. Added to this was the culture of a project driven pace and long hours to finish a set in time for principle photography and then in time for the next film, so that sets were constantly being rebuilt to fit differentiated products. As Peacock comments:

"...you might be [on a particular job] four hours you see, this is the colourful way of studio work you see, because you didn't have sitting down there, producing the same things, you had all sorts of things you see"

The pressures on both the studio plasterer and the draughtswoman were the result of tight deadlines. In the following quote Gick describes the labour process at Elstree (ABPC) in the late 1930s:

"I was trying to get a big set out and I had the carpenters and the plasterers and everybody coming up saying, "what have we got? We must have some work to give the night gang!" And I said, [chuckling] "Look, there you are, there's a couple of arches!" to the carpenter, "and get that lot built!" And I could say to

the plasterer, "Look, we want these columns [by that time]"...and I was literally working like that, until we got the stuff all sorted out for the night gang to come on. And we usually...oh God knows...we stayed 'till ten o'clock very often at night... This was murder, because you'd got the one day on that, they're going to be the next day on the next set and you haven't been able to strike it¹⁹ 'cause they were on it yesterday"

Despite these tight deadlines and rather chaotic working conditions both Peacock and Gick reflect on the satisfaction they gained from working in the industry.

6.0 Conclusion

We have argued that one of the main problems with the analysis of the US film industry provided by Christopherson and Storper is that in their determination to provide a transformation narrative they were too quick to dismiss the existence of continuities with the past. Despite the validity of some critical commentary (Askoy and Robins 1992, Dawson and Holmes 2012) they have, nevertheless, provided an analysis of the historical development of labour processes in the US film sector during the life of the studio system. By focusing on below the line work, they have provided us with a rare account of the labour process from the perspective of the majority of employees, those who work in below the line occupations. The aim of our paper has been to provide a comparable account of similar occupations during the same period in the UK film sector.

In the context of the UK film sector the depiction of work as having undergone a 'transformation' does not, we argue, accurately depict its development. The data we have provided suggests that workers were adopting many of the working cultures and patterns of accessing work that characterise the industry today. Our research suggests the film industry labour market has always been precarious, with freelance employment widespread and the use of a network of personal contacts necessary to access employment. The project organisation of the production process in film has always given rise to a labour process shaped by deadlines, creating a continuous culture of long working days and working weeks. Prototype production, rather than the mass production which flexible specialisation theory argued characterised the studio system, created a significant degree of task autonomy for many below the line occupations. The number of trades required to produce a feature film produced an industry that relied upon a large body of workers considered 'below the line' or technical. The interviews in our study lead us to conclude that these trades attracted workers with a range of expectations of the labour process, suggesting the depiction of BTL workers as having a collective 'craft' identity is not an accurate portrayal of the experience of these occupational groups.

The centralised studios able to maintain continuous production over the period provided a degree of job security for BTL workers, certainly more than they might expect today. The studios also provided informal apprenticeships and training, which

¹⁹ "strike it" – to take the set down after shooting has finished to allow a new set for another scene to be constructed.

developed many skills and working practices that were maintained by BTL workers as the industry became dominated by single project productions and freelance employment in the 1960s and some of which persist today.

By linking the study of working life in the first half of the 20th century with more modern research on the UK film sector (eg Blair 2001) we have been able to begin to trace the continuities in work - as well as the change - that has characterised the UK film sector. In doing so we have begun to move away from a reliance on the transformation narrative that infuses the analysis of the US industry provided by flexible specialisation theorists and taken a step towards an alternative depiction of the UK industry, one underpinned by the lived experience of those who represent the great majority of film production workers in below the line occupations.

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