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**Studying women in Swedish film production: Methodological considerations.**

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**Abstract**

This article presents methodological reflections on feminist production studies, with examples from an ongoing multidisciplinary project about women in Swedish film. Topics addressed include using interviews to understand production, the challenges connected to analysing women’s experiences, and the ethical dilemmas related to interpreting them.

Keywords: gender, feminist production studies, Swedish film industry, women’s work, experience, interviews, methods

**Introduction**

The institutional arrangements surrounding film have attracted increased attention in recent decades, paving the way for a broader understanding of the conditions of filmmaking. Production studies have played an important role in shifting the focus in cinema studies from text to practice and context. However, without feminist interventions, production studies run the risk of overlooking important aspects. Miranda Banks characterizes production studies as a ‘feminist methodology’ because of its interdisciplinary approach and because production studies have a history of focusing on inequalities (2018: 157). Additionally, we argue that research on production requires feminist perspectives and that the conditions of production cannot be fully understood unless we pay attention to the gendered character of film work. Accordingly, we suggest that feminist production studies can be used as a tool to unpack power relations and to understand how gender plays out in production contexts.
In this article, we discuss how we use production studies within the context of a multidisciplinary research project focusing on women’s experiences of working in the Swedish film industry. For our project, the point of departure is the proposition that the legal, political, social and cultural context of film production constitutes gendered rules and norms that inform film work. This includes constructing certain work as male or female and producing a specific gendered division of labour, as well as shaping hierarchical conceptualizations of how work is valued and how it should be performed.

We also present some methodological reflections on production studies, especially feminist production studies, and on some of the challenges encountered in our project. Based on 30 interviews conducted in 2018 and 2019 with women editors, continuity supervisors, cinematographers and costume designers, we used interviews as a source for understanding the production process, the challenges connected to analysing women’s experiences beyond male normativity, and the ethical dilemmas related to interpreting women’s experiences.

**Production studies: The field**

For Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks and John T. Caldwell, production studies investigate ‘the complexity of routines and rituals […], the economic and political forces that shape roles, technologies, and the distribution of resources according to cultural and demographic differences’ (2009: 4). Mayer describes the field as illuminating how ‘power operates locally through media production to reproduce social hierarchies and inequalities at the level of daily interaction’, allowing researchers to demonstrate connections between ‘micro contexts and macro forces’ (2009: 15). For Michael Curtin and Kevin Sanson, who engage critically with the field, production studies deal with ‘both the stylistic implications of screen media labor routines and the ways workers understand, represent, and theorize their labor’ (2016: 9). As an interdisciplinary research team in a project partly based on interviews with film workers and with a focus on inequalities, we are inspired by the way production studies as a field
spans across the social sciences and humanities to investigate work processes, how work is conditioned by different forces, how power is reproduced through film work, how workers understand their own work, and how all of this impacts the outcome – the films made. There are affinities between our own approach and Caldwell’s description of attempting to understand the institutional aspects, physical dimensions and cultural functions of creative work (2016: 35). Another perspective that is important for our work is Banks’ explicitly feminist approach.

Banks describes feminist production studies as ‘deeply anti-auteurist’ (2018: 158) and argues that the differentiation between ‘creative’ and ‘craft’ professions, designated in the US context by the terms ‘above the line’ and ‘below the line’, is crucial to production studies and to feminist interventions in the field (2009: 89). This is underlined by Mayer’s work on television production, which stresses the contribution by workers not usually associated with creative power (2011).

Although many below-the-line professions are male-dominated, there are categories dominated by women, such as costume design, and as Banks has shown, craft or technical work carried out by women tends to have a lower status than comparable male-dominated professions (2009: 90). Hence, feminist production studies can be characterized as especially seeking to capture the collective character of filmmaking and to resist reproducing top-down hierarchies, as it seeks – in the words of Banks – to ‘highlight production at the margins, and [to] make visible hidden labor’ (2018: 157). Such endeavours are also important in our research on Swedish film production.

Swedish film production and gender

Although a small filmmaking nation, Sweden has recently attracted international attention due to its efforts to increase the gender balance in the film industry. Notably, Sweden stands out among film-producing nations for having had formal gender equality requirements tied to
public production support since 2006 (see Jansson 2016). As a result, the number of women directors, screenwriters and producers in Swedish film production is high compared to other countries (see, e.g., EWA 2015). The initiative ‘5050 by 2020’, which was presented by Alice Bah Kuhnke, the Swedish minister of culture, and Anna Serner, the CEO of the Swedish Film Institute (SFI) at the 2016 Cannes Film Festival, has become an important milestone for people working to improve women’s positions in the film industry in many countries. However, such political initiatives most often address only so-called ‘key creative’ roles (directors, screenwriters, producers and sometimes actors).

The longstanding gender equality work provides a unique opportunity for studying how policies addressing the gender balance have affected women’s conditions in the film industry. In addition, policies have generated important statistical material. While the statistics gathered on gender in Swedish film production (see, e.g., SFI 2018) provide a useful starting point to investigate the status of women in the industry, the data, nevertheless, cover only directors, screenwriters, producers and – as a recent addition – lead actors. Since both policy and research have focused on above-the-line labour, very little can be said with precision about the number of women and men working in other positions in the film industry.

**Methodological challenges in studying women in Swedish film culture**

Our project design includes a variety of different sources to capture the conditions of filmmaking, such as legal acts, court cases and policy documents. To understand the way in which gendered norms and expectations become part of the everyday context of film workers, we have also chosen to interview women active in Swedish film culture. Since our project is partly about outlining history and analysing processes of change and continuity, the interviews provided an invaluable perspective, as they enabled us to gain access to women’s narratives about productions made over at least the last seven decades. In addition, the
interviews have allowed for more general conclusions since they have provided us with stories from numerous productions, thus enabling comparisons and the possibility of discerning ‘common’ stories from those that seem to be specific to a certain production or a certain type of production. It is important to note, however, that while the interviews elicited rich and detailed accounts of experiences of working in the industry as a woman, these accounts were individual and personal, whereas the making of a film is a collective effort. Another relevant consideration is that all interviews happened post factum – and that we as researchers did not have direct access (through, for example, participatory observations) to the production processes.

One of our aims has been to map the problems that women themselves identify and to understand how they explain and make sense of what they have experienced. Drawing on feminist theory that discusses women’s experiences as a source for understanding the mechanisms of subjection (see, e.g., Smith 1987), we wanted our research to give women and their experiences the privilege of setting the agenda (Eduards 2002). Thus, the interviews provided us with key directions for further exploration. In this vein, we were, for instance, made aware of how the norms with regard to depicting women on screen can be used as a means of questioning the authority of women directors (Jansson and Wallenberg forthcoming 2020). In addition, our investigation revealed that women do a considerable amount of invisible work, even when they hold key positions. Accordingly, we would like to broaden the thinking about invisible work/work in the margins, which previously has been discussed as something performed primarily in below-the-line professions (see Banks 2018), to additionally include work that is hidden or invisible because of gendered norms and ideals. For instance, the huge amount of effort that women put into strategizing and establishing their authority on set and into countering the numerous discriminatory – and sometimes harassing – behaviours directed towards them is, indeed, characterized by work in the margins. Several
interviewees convey how attributes of femininity, such as pleasantness and emotionality, must be hidden on set: ‘I try to be grumpy, not to smile’, says one director. She tells us that presenting herself as unavailable is an effective way of making people follow her lead. Other stories are about how to allow men to think they are in charge when, in fact, they are not: ‘I may find ways to make them think that it was their idea’. This strategy seemingly contradicts the idea of authority while demonstrating the need to be pragmatic to make the crew do as the director wants. It is also enlightening to further investigate how this work remains invisible as the result of subtle processes: if it is successful, it is merely considered ‘natural’; if it is unsuccessful, it plays into ideas of women being unfit for leadership.

A crucial aim of ours was to analyse women’s experiences to better understand how gender plays out in production. Methodologically, this aim is trickier because it assumes that women’s experiences reflect actual events. As noted by Joan W. Scott (1991), experiences are always part of a discursive context, meaning that it is impossible to separate events from how they are narrated. Along this line of reasoning, women become re-constructors of events as they reiterate their experiences. This insight posed a challenge to our ambition to analyse women’s experiences of production beyond male normativity: if women’s experiences are part of the current discourse, then their narrations are also entrenched in dominant male normativity.

In our interviews, we found that quite a few of our respondents resented the idea of gender structures shaping the film industry, and they made sure to underline that male film workers also had a hard time. A couple of women went as far as pointing out to us that they were not feminists. In all of these instances, our interviewees would begin by stating their opinion on this matter (having been informed about the aim of our research before the interview). However, as the interviews proceeded, they told us stories displaying not only how they had experienced gender inequalities but also how they themselves had acted to
counter such inequalities. For instance, one woman – who started out as a script girl in the early 1950s, subsequently moving on to being a production coordinator and then becoming a producer – told us the following:

He [the male director] was very careful to make sure that the male actors got paid appropriately, but he didn’t care about the female actors’ compensation. This meant that I could set the amount for them, so I made sure they got the same salary as the men.

How, then, can we understand the interplay between the obvious importance that some of our interviewees attached to underlining their perception of the industry as basically gender-equal and, at the same time, to telling us how they acted to change inequality? First, considering women as re-constructors of events does not mean that they can tell the story any way they want, nor that they ‘make up’ stories to fit the current discourse; it means that they recount their experiences within the limits of the current discourse. Accordingly, we can assume that there is a core of truth to the narrative; however, we must also assume that the way the story is narrated conveys something about the current discourse. Therefore we can conclude that it is possible for someone who ‘was there’ to perceive the film industry – that is, her working context – as equal and unequal at the same time. This also says something about how gender relations play out, and it warrants a closer look at how equality and inequality were narrated in the interviews.

It is striking that the statements about gender equality were always framed to implicitly compare men and women in relation to the difficult circumstances of filmmaking. Our interviewees pointed out, for example, that ‘men are also vulnerable on set’ and ‘men also have problems with funding’. Sometimes such statements came after the interviewee had told us about a problem she had experienced as a woman, thus taking the edge off the gender dimension.
One interpretation of this type of statement is that describing oneself as a victim of inequality is taboo in the current discourse. Hence, stories about feelings of vulnerability or injury are reconstructed as part of conditions that are general and equal, that is, as indigenous to the industry, while stories acknowledging inequality (such as the male director’s concern for ensuring only male actors’ compensation) are framed as being about change and action, that is, about the speaker doing the right thing. This pattern indicates that individual agency is highly valued in the current discourse, and since gender structures limit women’s agency, they are difficult to narrate.

However, one methodological insight to be drawn from these testimonies is that it is possible to learn about the hindrances and conditions women encounter by analysing their stories about strategies and actions, and to determine what such strategies aim to counter or make possible. In addition, the way in which women spoke about men and the conditions in the industry displays the limits of what is considered appropriate for women to say and do according to the informal rules of the industry.

The Swedish film industry is relatively small, and as several of our interviewees underlined, ‘everyone knows everyone’. All of the interviews featured stories about personal connections, and certain individuals are attributed great power in the industry. Being on the wrong foot with someone influential is considered detrimental to one’s career. This underscores the significance of ethical considerations in terms of how we interpret and present our results.

Despite the feminist appeal to let interviewees be co-producers of scientific knowledge (Smith 1987) and despite our efforts to make the interview situation as egalitarian as possible, as researchers we still hold the power to interpret, analyse and write up our results. The interviewees gained access to our written material before it was published so that they could communicate their view of our use of their narratives, but we would have the final say
regarding interpretation. To further complicate the issue, it is not always possible to keep the interviewees anonymous. Discussing their work sometimes necessitated referring to the films they made and their role in making them, thus revealing their identity.

So, what ethical considerations have been actualized? First, many interviewees pointed out the stigma attached to someone ‘whining’: as women, they are not allowed to complain about conditions in the industry. This is also reflected in articles in the media (see, e.g., Andersson 2010; Sigander 2010). This informal but pronounced ‘ban’, which we interpret as a prohibition on formulating problems without being able to solve them, is challenging since it stops women from speaking up about problems that are endemic and structural and consequently not easy to resolve. Facing this dominant idea, we decided to identify common traits in the interviews and to conceptualize women’s experiences of problems in a way that made it possible to analyse and theorize them more generally. One might say that we took the liberty of complaining on behalf of the women in the industry. However, since the film industry values agency, entrepreneurship and initiative, we consider it less problematic to name women when analysing and discussing their work and actions and the outcome of their work – their films.

**Conclusion**

Contributing to the field of feminist production studies within the context of Swedish film, this article has problematized some of the advantages of and challenges in conducting interviews to gather information about conditions during film production. We have shown the necessity of treating interviews as a recounting of events that is also informed by the current discourse. Thus, it is important to determine in what ways gendered features may be narrated and through which stories we can find information about this. Furthermore, our findings indicate that marginalized and invisible work exists in above-the-line positions and that the marginalization of work is related not only to an individual’s position in the production
system but also to positions within gender structures. This insight calls for further studies of production and the use of intersectional approaches that take into consideration positions based on other power relations, such as race/ethnicity and age – structures that may also produce marginalized and invisible work.

References


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Notes

1. This article is part of the research project ‘Representing Women: Gendering Swedish Film Culture and Production’, funded by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond, contract no. P170079:1.

2. The media work covered in production studies is not limited to film. Regarding creative professions such as disc jockeys, computer game designers, web designers, advertising creators and TV and film post-production professionals, see Rosalind Gill (2013).

3. Other scholars who have studied Swedish film production or used interviews in their research include Hedling (2010) and Ryberg (2015).

4. All interviewees are quoted anonymously in this article. All quotes are translated from Swedish by the authors.