

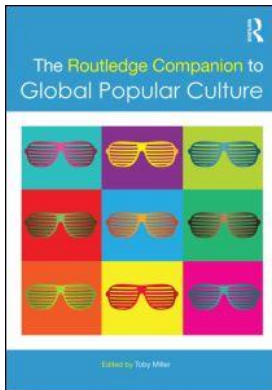
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THEORETICALLY ACCOUNTING FOR TELEVISION FORMATS IN THE NEW INTERNATIONAL DIVISION OF CULTURAL LABOUR

Anthony Quinn

All thirteen parts of *House of Cards*, series two, arrived on Netflix on Valentine's Day in February 2014. This televisual event brought back familiar feelings of pleasure first experienced during series one of this tale of amorality. Some people watched four-in-a-row. Others created their own appointment TV with Francis Underwood, played by Kevin Spacey. The Machiavellian character of Francis is not new to the small screen: Francis has an English predecessor, Francis Urquart. He, too, uttered the shrewd words, 'You might think that. I couldn't possibly comment'. *House of Cards* is a television format; the first version, based on Michael Dobbs' book, was broadcast on the BBC in the UK in 1990. The freshly re-versioned *House of Cards* is a television format that has been put at the head of a battering ram, to repurpose Rupert Murdoch's phrase about accessing new televisual markets. Outside the gate is former DVD-by-post company Netflix; on the inside is distinction-soaked HBO. It has much to lose. The goal, stated Netflix's chief content officer Ted Sarandos, 'is to become HBO faster than HBO can become us' (in Hass, 2013).

The industrial context to *House of Cards* underlines the importance of understanding the television format trade. The use of formats to make television programmes is not a new phenomenon, and goes back to the 1951 sale of *What's My Line?* by CBS to the BBC. However, the number of formats being adapted has increased significantly. Over the last decade, local versions of formats such as *Homeland*, *The Killing*, *Ugly Betty*, *Strictly Come Dancing*, *Big Brother* and *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* have placed the

format model at the centre of transnational television production. Formats have become a major commodity form in an expanded version of what Miller et al. conceptualise as the 'New International Division of Cultural Labour' (2005).

This chapter focusses on how to theoretically account for television formats as a new division of cultural labour, both as a set of commodity forms and as indicators of real social relations in media labour. Formats are cultural objects that simultaneously exist within a transnational field of televisual production, within national fields of televisual production, within a field of political and economic power and within various subfields of cultural production. Formats are therefore cultural objects which link fields. The chapter draws on empirical insights gained during an ethnographic study of the effects of television formats on the autonomy of television producers. Concepts drawn from the theories of Miller et al., Karl Marx, Pierre Bourdieu and Susan Leigh Star are used to contribute to what Georgina Born calls a 'post-Bourdieuian theory of culture' (2010).

What Is a Format?

The seminal research on the topic of formats has been done by Albert Moran (1998, 2006). He states that to ask the question 'what is a format?' is to ask the 'wrong kind of question':

Such a question implies that a format has some core or essence . . . 'format' is a loose term that covers a range of items that may be included in a format licensing arrangement. The term has meaning not so much because of what it is but because of what it permits or facilitates. A format is an economic and cultural technology of exchange that has meaning not because of a principle but because of a function or effect.

(2006: 6)

The concept of exchange is thus crucial when thinking theoretically about television formats. In order to understand these exchanges, we need to think of a format as a 'commodity'. Karl Marx initially defines such a commodity as 'an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another' (2008: 13). He notes the complex unfurling of socioeconomic relations that emerges once we follow this line of thought: ' . . . a commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties' (2008: 42).

From a Marxian perspective, it is through an analysis of commodities that we can understand social relations. The metaphysical subtleties of television formats begin to take shape when four distinct aspects of formats as a commodity are identified.

Following Dallas Smythe (1977), formats have an *audience commodity* aspect. In order that branded consumer products and services are sold, the attention of audiences has to be bought by advertisers from media companies and broadcasters. This aspect of formats is visible during ad breaks and through product placements within the content of programmes. Netflix is primarily based on a subscription model, so there are no adverts. Product placement is visible, however. In *House of Cards*, we see Frank Underwood playing late-night sessions of *Call of Duty* on his PlayStation and communicating on a Blackberry with journalist Zoe Barnes.

Formats also reduce risk for broadcasters and television producers, both in terms of the time it takes to develop a programme and the ideas that are perceived to ‘work’: thus there is a *risk reduction commodity* aspect. This aspect is important in the context of the global socioeconomic crisis, with broadcasters wishing to reduce both reputational risk and economic risk. The fact that *House of Cards* had worked for the BBC made it more likely that the Netflix version would succeed. Formats also have a *brand commodity* aspect; these potent brands are used to create branded opportunities for multiple revenue streams with potentially long tails: merchandising, live events tickets, music, magazines and premium rate telecoms. For example, the 45 or so different versions of *X Factor* are expertly used to exploit these sources of revenue. To use William Melody’s concept (1987), formats also have an *information commodity* aspect: the format bible, instructions on how to make it; the format consultancy process represented by a ‘travelling producer’ who oversees a re-version; and sample recordings of other territorial versions of the format. Finally, formats have a *legal commodity* aspect. The copyright to images, music and programme titles is exchanged in the format trade. While ownership is maintained, the legal rights to use copyrighted elements are sold and bought.

The four aspects of the commodity form of formats are thus the risk reduction commodity, the legal commodity, the audience commodity and the information commodity. This is what is being sold in the transnational market for television formats, and this is what a format is as a ‘thing’. However, this is an insufficient definition. In order to gain a socioeconomic understanding, we need to draw on the work of Karl Marx, as per Garnham (1979) and Fuchs (2009). Using Marx to discern the particularities of the circuit of capital as it relates to the television format trade is a good way of thinking about the exchanges that surround formats in the new international division of cultural labour.

Once we use the circuit of capital model, we begin to understand formats as not only a ‘thing’ but, more importantly, as a valuable indicator of social relations in the new international division of cultural labour. Television formats are a method by which to extract surplus value from media workers and to valorise capital (to increase its value), so that the money form that M invested at the start of the circuit becomes larger. A rent model is a major part of this dynamic: the purchase of the legal aspects of the commodity that enables a television production team to reproduce a particular programme, with particular music and graphics, in a particular place.

More than ten years ago, Daniel Schiller said that ‘there can be no doubt that television has grown to comprise a global cultural infrastructure . . . a massive change in direction has concurrently reoriented the institutional structures of global television . . . television system development has been largely handed over to capital’ (2001: 54). Since Schiller made this important point, further flows in the ‘hand over’ have been facilitated via the mechanism of television formats. A beneficial ownership analysis of any major format reveals familiar corporate names. To take the example of successful format *Undercover Boss*, we can see from [Figure 2.2](#) that MediaSet, Sony, and non-traditional media owners Permira, which holds investment funds of €20 billion, are the beneficial owners of *Undercover Boss*, via All3Media.

Public service broadcasters (PSBs) are also involved with formats. BBC Worldwide, the commercial arm of the iconic UK PSB, is a major format player. *Strictly Come Dancing* has multiple other lives through the format *Dancing with the Stars*. The Irish public service broadcaster RTÉ runs a ‘formats lab’; successful formats get aired as a programme, and commercially-oriented distributors then sell them abroad. Institutional

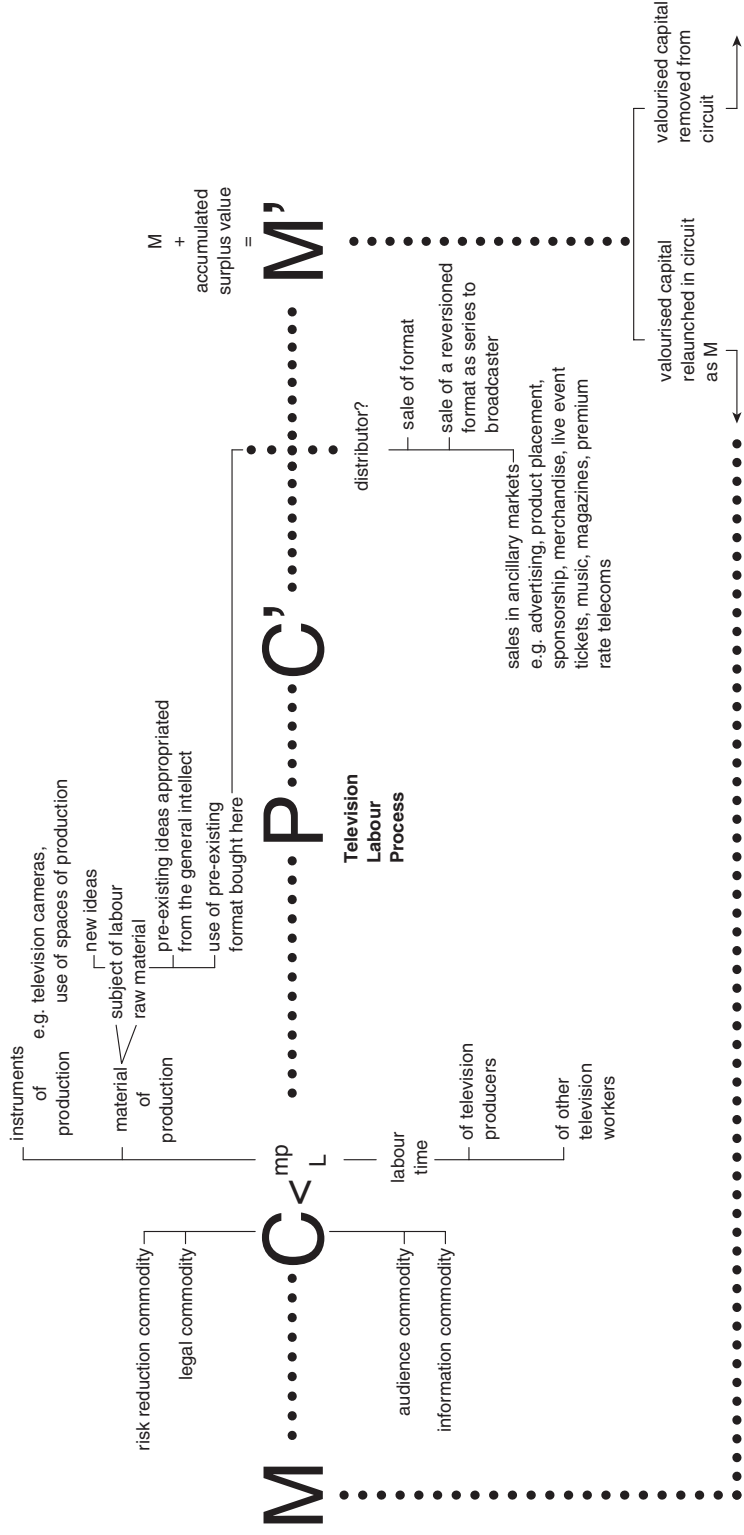


Figure 2.1 The circuit of capital in the case of the format trade. After Fuchs, 2009

FORMATS: *Undercover Boss* (26 versions), *Are You Smarter Than?* (53 versions), *The Cube* (11 versions), *Skins* (2 versions), *How To Look Good Naked* (10 versions), *Cash Cab* (39 versions), *The Real Hustle* (8 versions)

All3Media

All3Media International (distribution)
Bentley Productions (*Midsomer Murders*, *Ultimate Force*)
Company Pictures (*Shameless*, *Skins*, *Generation Kill*)
Illumina Digital (digital content for education and public service)
Lime Pictures (*Brookside*, *Hollyoaks*, *The Outsiders*)
Maverick Television (*Ten Years Younger*, *How To Look Good Naked*)
North One Television (sports and factual entertainment)
South Pacific Pictures (*Shortland Street*)
Tower Productions (venture with BBC Worldwide)

ARG (agency for actors and presenters)
Cactus TV (*Richard & Judy*, *TV Book Club*)
 IDTV (crossmedia production; Dutch drama)
Kameleon (branding)
Lion Television (London, Glasgow, New York, LA)
Mme Moviemment (German TV production)
Objective (*Derren Brown*, *The Cube*, *The Real Hustle*)
Studio Lambert (*Undercover Boss*, *Benefit Busters*)
Zoo Productions (*Are You Smarter Than?*)

Permira

Food (Birds Eye; Telepizza, HiperDino and SuperSo food shops)
Consumer (Ancestry.com; Hugo Boss, Dr Martens)
Industry (Freescale semiconductors, Borsod-Chem)
Media and Telecoms (*All3Media*, *ProSieben-Sat.1 TV station*, *TDC*)

Clothing (New Look)
Gambling (Galaxy Entertainment)
Financial Services (The AA, Saga, secure payments)

Figure 2.2 A beneficial ownership analysis of the 26 version format *Undercover Boss*

Sources: www.all3media.com, www.permira.com

PSBs have been a part of the format trade since its beginnings. The institutional role that PSBs play is one reason why the circuit of capital only gives us a partial theoretical account of formats. In order to facilitate a more detailed account, it is necessary to turn to Pierre Bourdieu.

Marx, Bourdieu and Fields

In his theoretical dialogue between Marx and Bourdieu, Michael Burawoy states that Bourdieu's social theory is 'so clearly a response' to Marx (2011: 4). Yet, in his meeting between the thinkers, Burawoy points out that the structural dynamic of fields presented by Marx and Bourdieu is 'profoundly different' (2011: 5). He notes that, for Marx, there is 'just one major field'; the capitalist mode of production, 'with its inherent laws of competition leading to crises of overproduction and the falling rate of profit on the one side and the intensification of class struggle on the other' (2011: 5). He continues: 'If Marx has a historical succession of economic fields, Bourdieu has a functional coexistence of fields. Bourdieu's multiplication of coexisting fields poses a host of new problems with respect to the relations among fields' (2011: 5). Analysing the semi-autonomous nature of fields is

one of these problems; Bourdieu's prime example is the early French literary field (1996). Autonomy, self-law, is relative, as both Weber and Bourdieu have pointed out.

Bourdieu pluralises the idea of capital, and brings it beyond the economic form. For Bourdieu, the structure of a field is constructed via empirical study and is composed of the distribution of capitals and the value of capitals at a given time: 'the structure of the social world is defined at every moment by the structure of the distribution of the capital and profits characteristic of the different particular fields' (1985: 734). Autonomy, in a Bourdieuan sense, is about the range and volume of distinctive forms of capitals held by cultural producers within a given field. For Bourdieu, the autonomy of a field is 'revealed to the extent that the principle of external hierarchization there is subordinated to the principle of internal hierarchization' (Bourdieu, 1996: 216). In other words, to what extent do forces from outside of the field of television production define what is regarded as 'of value' within the field?

Also, autonomy is a vital concept with respect to economic and political determinations from outside of fields: the 'double dependency' explored by Champagne: 'journalists are structurally condemned to produce – variably, depending on the period and outlet – under political and/or economic constraints' (2005: 49). In exploring the important question, 'autonomy from what?' Schudson states that the 'membrane of the journalistic field, permeable in relation to the market or the state, is relatively resistant to influence from other groups'; but that a 'democrat should not want journalism to be as self-enclosed and separated from outside pressures as mathematics or poetry' (2005: 220). While the emergence of fully autonomous media fields may not be desirable, the converse, the dissolution of the autonomy of media fields, may threaten the 'quality and significance of the [cultural] artefacts produced' (Brown and Szeman, 2000: 7). This fact is crucial in the context of cultural production. Bourdieu states of the wider journalistic field that it is a

very weakly autonomous field, but this autonomy, weak though it is, means that one cannot understand what happens there on the basis of knowledge of the surrounding world . . . [it] cannot be understood unless one conceptualises this microcosm as such and endeavors to understand the effects that the people engaged in this microcosm exert on one another.

(2005: 33)

Thus, using empirical data, I have constructed the field of television production in the Republic of Ireland, as shown in [Figure 2.3](#).

Bourdieu's concept of habitus refers to the perceptions and actions of producers within a given field. These can be collective. I constructed four television producer habitus: The PSB Producers, The Storytellers, The Formats Devisors and The Format Reproducers. The struggles in a field over time for recognition and resources can alter the very structure of the field itself. As Bourdieu puts it, 'the temporal movement produced by the appearance of a group capable of leaving its mark . . . is rendered by a shifting of the structure of the field of the present' (1996: 158). Format capital is a new form of specific capital partly held by some of these television producers who are buying, and selling, formats in transnational, and mass produced, context. David Hesmondhalgh has identified one major problem with Bourdieu, and this is as regards mass production:

It is simply astonishing how little Bourdieu has to say about large-scale, 'heteronomous' commercial cultural production, given not only its enormous

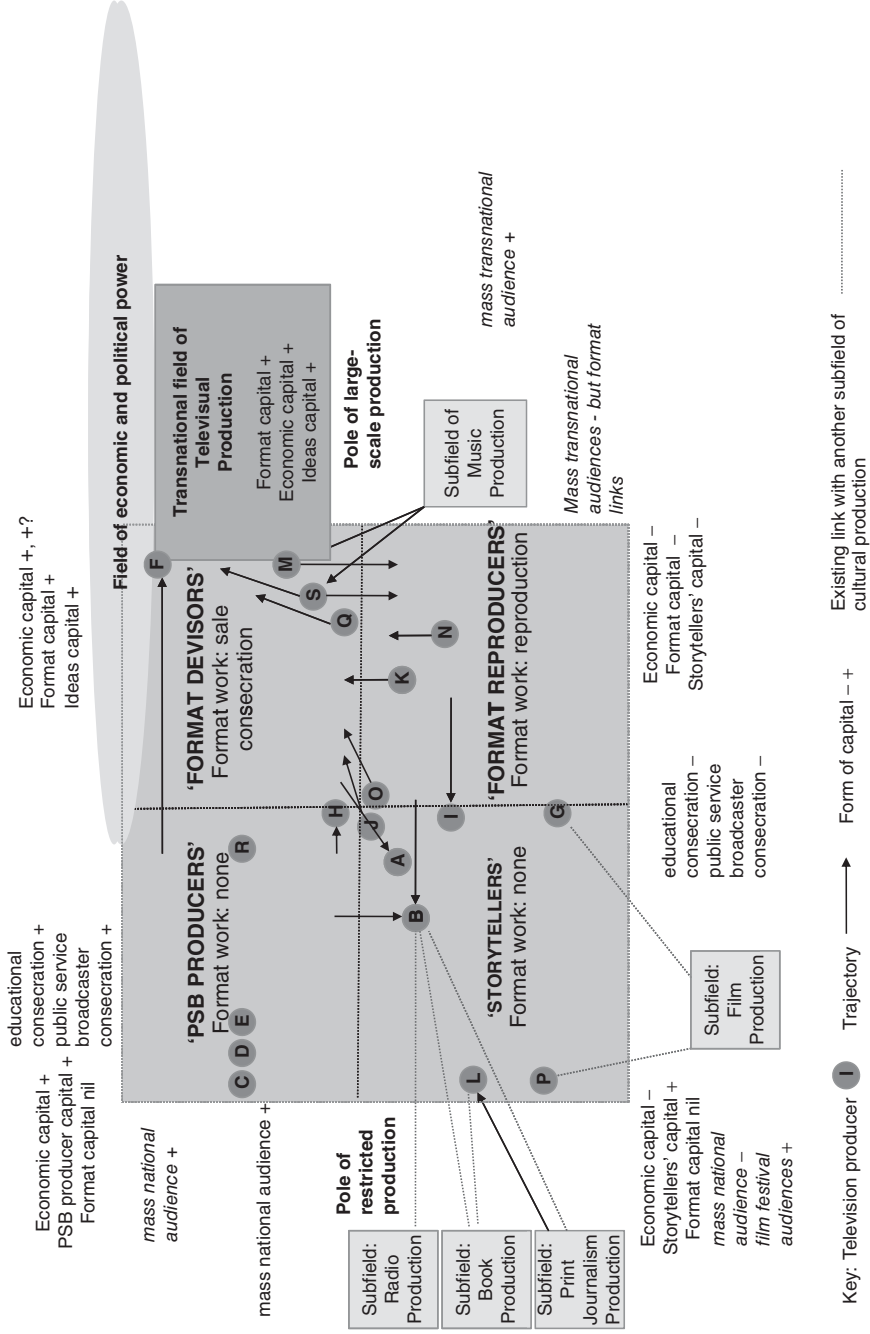


Figure 2.3 The field of television production in the Republic of Ireland

social and cultural importance in the contemporary world, but also its significance in determining conditions in the sub-field in which he is clearly much more interested, restricted production.

(2006: 217)

Theoretical and empirical attention to the mass production, and reproduction, of culture is thus essential. Formats are an indicator of the mass production of culture on a transnational scale. They are also a form of capital. What I found is that the advent of format capital signals a structural transformation of the field of television production in the Republic of Ireland and, given the transnational flows of formats, also in other places.

The rise of formats is a structural transformation in the field of television production in the Republic of Ireland. This is so in two ways. A new form of capital – format capital – has been introduced. This introduction has occurred at the edge of the field, at an overlap. There are also more connections in the top right of the field I constructed, to the field of economics and politics, and to the global television marketplace that Havens explores (2006), labelled here as the transnational field of television production. These connections need to be theoretically elaborated. Swartz states that the ‘connections between fields, like the opposition within fields, stem from structural factors, not the intentions of actors’ (1997). A structural factor, in a Bourdieuan sense, is the distribution and value of forms of capital. But Swartz refers to ‘an unresolved and uneasy tension between the priority Bourdieu gives to the internal analysis of fields and his emphasis on boundaries as contested terrain’ (1997: 122). There is a conceptual gap as regards events at the boundaries of fields. Perhaps Bourdieu’s message here is that these matters have to be worked out empirically.

Susan Leigh Star, Boundary Objects and Boundary Infrastructure

Format capital, within the complex triad of habitus-field-capitals, is an insufficient description of formats. In the final part of this chapter, my focus is this matter of the dynamics of field boundaries, and how these boundaries are key loci in advancing the subfield of media production and the broader field of mass communication.

In his concluding chapter of the recent book on Bourdieu and historical analysis, Gorski mentions two possibilities as regards the permeability of field boundaries (2013: 332). He posits that there can be *changes in degree* (the ‘ease or fluidity with which actors or resources flow from one field to another’) and *changes in direction* (‘changes in the net flows from one field or subfield to another’) (2013: 332). In order to describe television formats as structures that link fields, it is necessary to reach outside orthodox Bourdieuan analytics. The changes in degree of capitals, and changes in direction of capitals, occur through these structures. Susan Leigh Star, both alone and in work with others, draws our attention to what she called ‘boundary objects’ and ‘boundary infrastructure’. In an article with Griesemer about museum objects which mean different things to different people, they state that

Boundary objects are objects which are both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites. They are weakly structured in

common use, and become strongly structured in individual-site use. They may be abstract or concrete. They have different meanings in different social worlds but their structure is common enough to more than one world to make them recognizable, a means of translation. The creation and management of boundary objects is key in developing and maintaining coherence across intersecting social worlds.

(1989: 393)

The *ideas* which are used for television programme making can be thought of as boundary objects. Under this category of boundary objects, we can include the more general use of the term format – news format, cookery format, chat show format, observational documentary, talent show – and also the more granular programme elements: ideas for programme making in form (diary cam) or content (sex education).

The information commodity aspect of a format has three sub-elements: a format bible, a travelling producer who provides consultancy services, and older versions of the programme. These are more controlled than ideas. Despite its widescale applicability, the concept of boundary objects does have limits: the concept is, state Bowker and Star, ‘most useful in analyzing cooperative and relatively equal situations; issues of imperialist imposition of standards, force, and deception have a somewhat different structure’ (Bowker and Star 1999). The process of devising a format involves moving from the use of a boundary object – ideas – into a television programme and a format – boundary infrastructure.

Star and Ruhleder state that infrastructure is a ‘fundamentally relational concept’: it ‘becomes in relation to organized practices’ (1996: 113). This fits well with Bourdieu’s idea of co-existing social fields which affect each other – the political and economic forces. In order to relationally describe formats in the context of effects on the autonomy of television producers, I use the concept of ‘boundary infrastructure’. Here, standards are key, and formats are standards. To use an engineering metaphor, formats are a pipe that is made to pierce through the edge of a televisual field so that capitals can flow. They are also the immaterial (symbolic) and material (physical objects) substance that flows through the pipe. What flows? Ideas. This is where textual analysis is important. Brennan’s exploration of the ideas that are flowing shows some key themes repeat, such as surveillance and individuality: ‘In their representation of acquisitive, individual competition, formats, for the most part, are structurally predisposed to represent a single, monetary hierarchy as the dominant definition of human accomplishment’ (2010: 20).

What else flows via formats? Non-economic forms of capital, understood as symbolic capital, such as the prestige of being the deviser of the format. Of course, the four commodity forms discussed are a major part of the story. The format trade is a major source of economic accumulation, partly through surplus value but mostly through rent. As critical geographer David Harvey has pointed out, the general tendency with rent models is towards monopolization. He states that ‘Monopoly rent arises because social actors can realize an enhanced income stream over an extended time by virtue of their exclusive control over some directly or indirectly tradable item which is in some crucial respects unique and non-replicable’ (2001/2012: 395).

But law tends to lean against formats being protected. Rubin describes formats as being ‘caught in abyss of the ideas-expression dichotomy’ (1996: 663), with ideas not being covered by law, and expressions of ideas being covered by national and international copyright laws. Rubin states at the ‘heart of the problem is a lack of legal certainty

in disputes regarding idea submissions' (1996: 667). In contrast to legal precedent, the main industry body in the trade, the Format Recognition and Protection Association (FRAPA) maintains that the ideas in formats come under the vague umbrella of 'intellectual property rights':

Many judges consider formats to be generic programme 'ideas', as opposed to creative works, maintaining that ideas cannot be protected by copyright law. It is hardly surprising that, in the absence of clear legal guidelines, courts have been reluctant to uphold claims of copyright infringement as applied to television formats. While the format trade assumes that intellectual property (IP) rights exist in formats, this assumption is disputed in law. Against this backdrop, format theft continues to be a threat, rendering IP protection of central importance to the formats industry.

(Format Recognition and Protection Association, 2014)

At a theoretical level, as a television programme moves from being a programme comprised of boundary objects – ideas – into format land, it becomes solidified as boundary infrastructure, a format. But law is not enough to protect this boundary infrastructure, from the perspective of the beneficial owner. Within a capitalist paradigm, an owner needs to own the means of production. Otherwise, control cannot be exerted and profits are put in doubt. Producer S, a format devisor, told me about the importance of international relationships with regards to control over the means of production:

It's a two way thing and that's where the protection of your ideas will be strongest because you move up the food chain in terms of who you're selling to and we don't rip each other off and if we do, if any production company gets known as 'they ripped off [format name]', they become blacked in the industry. It's happened [to] a couple of companies that were known to rip off the show. Other distributors suddenly don't take a meeting with them anymore.

Producer F, also a format devisor, also talked about this aspect of the format trade:

Formats are very difficult to protect. I mean, I would say when they're on paper they're very vulnerable and it's essentially first to air is a sort of, get it on is the sort of golden rule, or, as we've had to do this year, just make a pilot ourselves. Stuff can be nicked, our ideas can be poached from shows and it has happened and it's very difficult to police and you need, again you need, an awful lot of money to defend your formats because you're going to end up in the High Court and you could lose but what we do is we've a very good media lawyer, [name] in [location] and he polices all our contracts.

Under international and national legal precedent, ideas are not protected. In Marxian terms, the means of production are not protected. Yet, in order for capital to be valorised, for money to be made, they need to be somehow ringfenced. Therefore, owners of capital are doing it through moral pressure.

Producers that do not have recourse to lawyers have limited options. Producer A was a relatively late arrival to television, and has no consecration in terms of educational capital

or PSB producer capital. Nevertheless, Producer A co-devised a format that was successful, in that it became a format after the crucial first-country production, but then sold it:

We sold it to the biggest player in the market which protected us from them, because you're only as good as your willingness to go to court and two freelancers who barely made it through the first series are not going to take the world's biggest production company to court at a cost of a hundred thousand a day for about a year-and-a-half, you know what I mean. No one is that stupid, you know. [International format company] basically bought it and shelved it, so it went into their catalogue of formats.

Boundary infrastructure is important in cultural fields, because it is where we can find control of the means of production; in this case, ideas. In Figure 2.4, we go back to the Marxian circuit of capital.

The shutting off of ideas – accumulation by dispossession in Marxian terms – is occurring with the advent of formats. The surveillance-soaked ideas behind *Big Brother* might not be so socially positive. What if the main idea is sex education, a vital public health area? This is the case with another Endemol programme, *The Sex Education Show*. Could ideas for sex education programming be closed off by Endemol? Additionally, we do not know how ideas will be used in the future, but it is crucial that they remain usable, beyond the reach of profit-driven legal and moral forces.

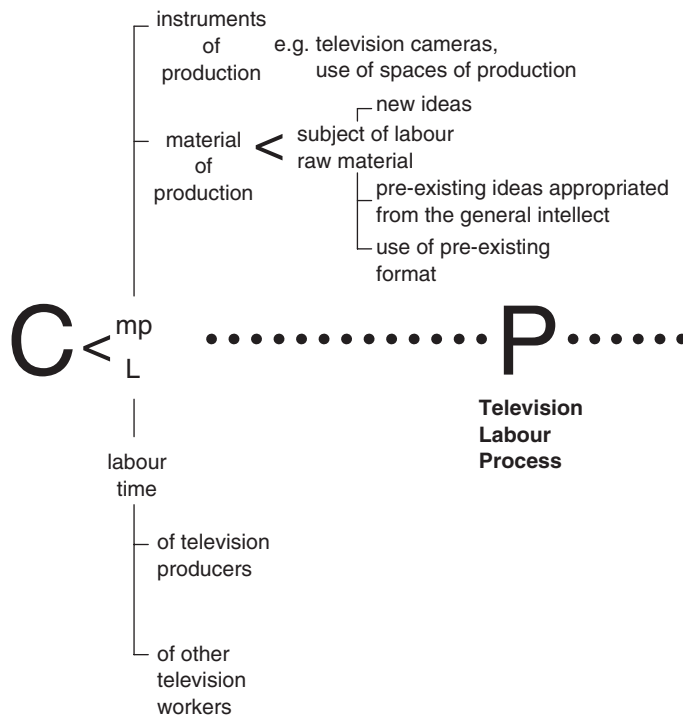


Figure 2.4 The means of production (mp) in the circuit of capital of the format trade

Conclusion

In her discussion of a post-Bourdieuian theory of culture, Born states that

If there is an overriding dimension of creative practice that has been lamentably neglected – by Bourdieu, production of culture and cultural studies alike – and that demands to be studied, it is the insistent, existential reality of the historical orientation of producers by reference to the aesthetic and ethical trajectories or coordinates of the genres in which they work, an orientation that *enables or affords agency*.

(2010: 192)

The format devisors that I interviewed are playing an international game, no longer as tied to the hit-and-miss national independent production cycle. These are also the producers who are getting the options on important formats from elsewhere. What the Format Devisors do is create boundary infrastructure which will enable them to access the international field of television production. The usual way that this happens is through a creating a television programme, getting it on-air, and then selling the format – the bible, the consultancy and an example of what was broadcast. They then own the means of production, and have moved from being a format reproducer to being a format devisor.

Leigh Star's concept of boundary infrastructure is thus an important idea when cultural fields are being studied. Boundary infrastructure needs to be seen as a method for accessing other fields, via the international field of television production, a major part of which is the format trade. Thus, by using a structure that mediates between fields, producers increase their effective agency, both at a cultural level and at an economic level. However, if a television producer is on the receiving end of a format, their effective agency is reduced via the particular demands of the format being used.

Both Marx and Bourdieu help set up a relational way of thinking. Marx's circuit of capital helps us clarify the economic aspects of the format trade. Bourdieu lets us narrow from the economic and political context (field of power) to a particular context within which television is produced (the field of television production); to the perceptions and actions of producers within that field (habitus); and to the resources that television producers and institutions draw on (forms of capital). A critique of Bourdieu socially-orientated schemata in my work gives rise to an additional field structure of formats as infrastructure, following Susan Leigh Star. In conclusion, when constructing cultural fields, it is necessary to give due attention to the circuit of capital, to boundary objects and to boundary infrastructure. These concepts allow us to pay attention to forms of agency and to the linked process of control, both vital concepts in the new international division of cultural labour. The viewing pleasures of *House of Cards* are one small part of this division.

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