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Berlin's Cosmopolitan Production Culture

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Abstract

Through the first decades of the 21st century, the Berlin-Brandenburg region has become an important production location, first for international films and then, most recently, also for transnational television drama series. Since 2015, more than 20 transnational TV drama series were produced in the region. Berlin has been attracting talent from all over the world, becoming a hotspot for international production where both above and below-the line talents from different countries work together in a creative and productive way. In this article, I argue that Berlin has thus successfully established a cosmopolitan production culture. In what follows, I outline the cosmopolitan conditions that underpin Berlin's production culture and the creative collaboration of talent with different cultural backgrounds.

Keywords: Berlin, production culture, creative collaboration, cosmopolitanism, transnational TV drama series, international films.

Introduction

Berlin has a long history as a production hub for film and television, which dates to the end of the 19th century. The history of the city as a centre of audiovisual production was massively influenced by historical events, beginning with World War I and through the Weimar Republic and the Nazi Regime, World War II and the Cold War period, spanning between the building of the Berlin Wall until the proclamation of Berlin as capital of the unified Germany in 1990 (Borgelt 1979; Hake 2008). During the Cold War, films and television series were produced in the context of two different production cultures, one based in the GDR, or rather East-Berlin, and one in West-Germany, or rather West-Berlin. After unification, in 1990 Studio Babelsberg and the city of Berlin launched Medienboard Berlin-Brandenburg as a public funding body for audiovisual production, which gradually promoted the city as the famous production site that it is today. Since the 2010s, Berlin has attracted not only many international film productions, including many Hollywood films (Eichner and Mikos 2017), but also many transnational television drama productions, starting with the 5th season of *Homeland* (USA 2011-2019, Showtime) in 2015, which was later followed by *Berlin Station* (USA, 2016-2019, Epix) and *Counterpart* (USA, 2017-2019, Starz). More than 20 transnational TV drama series have been produced in the region from 2015 onward. One reason for this success is that global streaming giants such as Netflix and Amazon Prime Video started to produce original content in Germany.

These productions brought a wide array of talent to Babelsberg and Berlin. Gradually an international production culture was established in the region that now has talents from different countries work together. My main argument here is that the vitality of the Berlin-Brandenburg region as a production culture is based on its consistent promotion of a cosmopolitan mentality, that is, on cosmopolitanism as a cultural practice. This cosmopolitan production culture is to be understood as the outcome of an increasingly global media industry in which not only films and television series are traded globally, but in which talent mobility and a global openness to cultural products from all regions of the world are continually on the rise. Kuipers (2012), for example, has shown that television buyers in the global market share a common knowledge and general aesthetic orientations, which can be said to amount to something

like a cosmopolitan cultural capital. Despite this common cosmopolitan capital, however, Kuipers (2012, 599) could also observe "considerable differences in the professional ethos of television buyers." It can be assumed that the same is true for other professional groups in the global media industry, such as producers, writers, directors or technical crews, whose different professional self-conceptions coexist with their accumulated cosmopolitan capital, especially when they work for international films and transnational TV series, as in the Berlin production landscape.

Before I explain how the cosmopolitan production culture emerged in Berlin and Babelsberg, and the role played by cosmopolitanism in creative collaboration, two remarks are important: firstly, a clarification of the terms 'international', 'global' and 'transnational', and secondly, some comments on the differences, but above all the similarities, between the film and television industries.

Transnationalism is not necessarily synonymous with globalization. As Kearney asserts, "Transnationalism overlaps globalization but typically has a more limited purview. Whereas global processes are largely decentred from specific national territories and take place in a global space, transnational processes are anchored in and transcend one or more nation-states" (Kearney 2008, 273). As I have noted elsewhere, "transnational television is anchored in the nation state and national media legislation, and it is linked to the multidirectionality of flows and interactions" (Mikos 2020, 75). Therefore, by transnational drama series and transnational television, I refer to productions that are produced locally but aimed at an audience that is constituted beyond national borders. By international production, I refer to a production in which a global company, such as a U.S. studios, produces a film in another country, for example in Berlin and Babelsberg. From the point of view of production culture, the film and television industries, even if they have different distribution channels and different aesthetic forms, have more in common than differences. In the production culture of the 21st century, characterized by big blockbuster productions and high-end drama series, the boundaries between film and television are blurring. Authors, directors and cinematographers work for film as well as for television and streaming services. For set designers, drivers, location scouts and others below the line talent, working for both media has always been perfectly normal.

Before I turn to discuss a few examples of cosmopolitan creative collaboration against the background of the concepts of cosmopolitanism and creative collaboration, first in the international film industry, and then in transnational TV drama production, the next paragraph offers a brief overview of the history of Berlin as a production site. This will give some contextual information about the political influences that have made Berlin a city in which the history of the 20th century condensates (Huyssen 2003, 51).

Film and Television Production in Berlin – Brief Overview

The first film shooting in Berlin took place in November 1892, when film pioneer Max Skladanovsky started filming short scenes with his brother Emil. The first public screening took place three years later, marking the birth of German cinema (Hake 2008). The first decade of the 20th century saw a growing number of film productions. The Roaring Twenties and the 1930s coincided with the peak of film production in Berlin, and particularly in the UFA studios at Babelsberg. Signature films such as *Metropolis* (GER, 1927, Fritz Lang) and *Der blaue Engel* (The Blue Angel; GER, 1930, Josef von Sternberg) were both shot there. Until World War II, Berlin was the centre of the German film industry: "Before 1945, 90 percent of German feature film production took place in Berlin" (Borgelt 1979, 222). During the Cold War many local films and television series were produced in Babelsberg (GDR) and Berlin (GER).

After reunification, the Babelsberg studios were acquired by the French Compagnie Générale des Eaux (later Vivendi), which tried to rebuild a prominent location for international productions. However, only one of the films produced in the studios, *The Pianist* (F/GER/POL/UK 2002, Roman Polanski), gained international attention. In the 2000s, the funding policy of Medienboard Berlin-Brandenburg and other Berlin-based funding bodies – like the German Motion Picture Fund (GMPF), created to specifically support international co-productions – led to a growing attractiveness of Berlin and Studio Babelsberg as production site for international productions. For example *The Bourne Supremacy* (USA/GER 2004, Paul Greengrass), *Bridge of Spies* (USA/GER 2015, Steven Spielberg), *Captain America: Civil War* (USA 2016, Anthony Russo & Joe Russo), *Grand Budapest Hotel* (GER/USA 2014, Wes Anderson), *Hunger Games: Mockingjay Part One and Two* (USA 2014 and 2015,

Francis Lawrence), *Inglourious Basterds* (USA/GER 2009, Quentin Tarantino), and *The Reader* (USA/GER 2008, Stephen Daldry) were all shot in Berlin and Babelsberg.

With international productions, international talent also came to Berlin, often to stay. Mixed teams formed by local and foreign creatives became increasingly common and the open cultural climate often led the international talents to stay in the city. For example, the series *Berlin Station* (USA, 2016-2019, Epix) had an international cast with 287 actors and 841 international crew members. Among them was Carlos Fidel, a Spaniard who had formerly worked in London but had moved to Berlin with the international production *The Reader*, and stayed. The creative collaboration worked so well that Frank Marshall, the American producer of *The Bourne Supremacy*, could state: "Berlin is an excellent shooting location. Most of our crew are Germans, the city has great locations, and the rest is taken care of in the Babelsberg studios. You've got all you need there" (quoted in Wedel 2012, 40). The availability of qualified personnel, production facilities, technical infrastructure, and a diverse range of other creative industries, as well as the 'internationality' of the city, are all important factors when it comes to deciding whether to shoot in Berlin or in other German cities (Castendyk and Goldhammer 2018, 130-1).

During this period Berlin and Babelsberg have also emerged as an important production site for television series. With the appearance of new players such as Amazon Prime Video and Netflix, the production of television drama series in Germany has undergone a new, substantial change. The region was well prepared for it, for it had already gained considerable experience with international Hollywood film productions. At the same time, German authors, producers, and directors were introduced to new modes of production, such as those related to the figure of the showrunner and the writers' room technique.

Cosmopolitanism as a Cultural Practice of Creative Collaboration

To successfully undertake international productions and co-productions, both above and below-the-line talent need to develop a cosmopolitan mentality, which is an essential requisite in order to advance creative collaboration in a fruitful way. Therefore, I think it

is necessary to conceptualize cosmopolitanism as a cultural practice in which not only openness is performed, but also lived inclusivity and cultural-symbolic competences play an important role (Kendall et.al. 2009, 111ff.). A cosmopolitan production culture can only exist if creative collaboration is characterised by a cultural practice of cosmopolitanism.

The notion of cosmopolitanism is widely discussed in sociology, media and cultural studies. It is a "contested term" (Beck, 2007, 286) that has inspired a variety of definitions, which all revolve around the attempt to make sense of its relation to the phenomenon of globalization. Globalization is a structural process involving the worldwide interconnection of politics, economy, and culture (see Robertson, 1992). Media underpins this process, with mediascapes working as important drivers (Appadurai 1996, 35). But globalization is always linked to localization, for the global appears in the local, and the local in the global. The notion of 'glocalization', then, describes the very kernel of the globalization process (Robertson, 1992, 173; Robertson 2012), since no real contradiction exists between the global and the local. Globalization has profoundly influenced the representation of locality, merging the global and the local into the glocal.

This process has been accompanied by an extensive transformation of lifestyles and by the emergence of cosmopolitanism as a way to deal with the growing diversity brought about by globalization. Beck and Grande (2007, 12) see cosmopolitanism as a social science concept that helps understand the circumstances of life in the context of globalization. It is "a specific way of *dealing socially with cultural difference*" (ibid., emphasis in the original). For cosmopolitanism, the recognition of difference "becomes the maxim of thought, social life and practice, both internally and towards other societies" (ibid, 13).

Operating on both a social and a cultural level, cosmopolitanism implies a fundamental willingness to engage with the other. For example, Hannerz (1990, 239) speaks of "an intellectual and aesthetic stance of openness toward different cultural experiences." This openness is regarded by many authors as an essential characteristic of cosmopolitanism (see Beck 2006 and 2011; Delanty 2009; Skrbis and Woodward 2007; Szerszynski and Urry 2002). Therefore, Tomlinson (1999, 194) calls cosmopolitanism an "ethical glocalism".

At the same time, while individuals, as empirical studies show, can live openness as a pleasurable experience that is important for their own identity (Skrbis and Woodward 2007, 744), when associated to threatening and challenging experiences, openness acquires negative connotations. Therefore, Skrbis and Woodward call openness "a fragile commitment", which suggests that it is not to be seen as one and the same as cosmopolitanism. Ong (2009, 454) has developed the notion of cosmopolitanism on a continuum ranging from closed cosmopolitanism through instrumental, banal, and ecstatic cosmopolitanism. This is neither the place nor the time to discuss this concept in detail. Yet, it is at least worth mentioning Ong's remark that "at the core of cosmopolitanism" lies "a multiplicity of tensions" (ibid., 463). He lists tensions between attachment and commitment, proximity and distance as well as "between global and local, between universals and particulars, between us and them, between media and identity" (ibid., 464).

In the case of the creative collaboration occurring in the context of the film and television industries, cosmopolitanism can be characterised as both a cultural practice and a form of cultural capital (see Igarashi and Saito 2014) which allow a negotiation of all these different tensions. Cosmopolitanism as a cultural practice is at the core of creative collaboration in the production process of both international film productions and transnational television series. With each production involving talents from different countries, further cosmopolitan capital is accumulated, so that ultimately cosmopolitanism as a cultural practice emerges as a distinctive asset of the audiovisual products made in the Berlin and Babelsberg area.

Media drives the process of globalisation and are important vehicles for the idea of cosmopolitanism. The transcultural flow of media and pop cultures "inspires new forms of global consciousness and cultural competency" (Jenkins 2006, 156). This "pop cosmopolitanism" (ibid.) or "cultural omnivorousness" (Saito 2011, 129) or "aesthetic cosmopolitanism" (Regev 2007) is arguably a recognizable element of contemporary cultural production, in the fields of film and television as well as art and popular music. It is not only "the cosmopolitan embrace of cultural difference through cult reception practice" (Smith 2017, 21), but, more crucially, an inescapable condition for collaboration in the creative industries, one that has openness in its kernel. Media products such as films, television

programmes and series, and popular music targeting a global or transnational audience need to rely on cosmopolitan openness, both in their production process and in the way they address their audience through their textual strategies. Bondebjerg (2014, 54) noted that "globalization is also about a growing need for a cosmopolitan mentality and imaginary." Of course, this not only applies to globalization itself, but also and foremost to the media products made for global audiences.

It might be true that "collaboration has always functioned as the kernel of creative work" (Graham and Gandini 2017, 1), but the nature of creative work has greatly changed over time. The global media landscape is not only about collaborative practice in the production of films, television shows and popular music, but also increasingly about international and intercultural cooperation. In this context, the openness of cosmopolitanism is essential.

The film and television industries have been international from the very beginning. Not only did films travel across the world, but special films were produced for specific international audiences. In the 1930s, for example, the UFA studios in Babelsberg produced numerous films in multiple-language versions, sometimes with different actors (Wahl 2009). After the deregulation of television in Europe during the 1980s, the digitalization of television in the 1990s and the advent of streaming services in the 2000s, the demand for audiovisual content grew enormously. The international format trade and the growth of co-productions deals provided a remedy here. A transnational television culture developed out of a social process occurring "in a transnational arena where agents, institutions and structures interact with one another" (Mikos 2020, 76). These interactions can obviously succeed better when supported by a cosmopolitan mentality and a cosmopolitan cultural capital.

Even though authors and directors are considered the creative minds behind a film or a television series, audiovisual productions are based on teamwork. Therefore, the production is simultaneously "highly individualized and fully collaborative" (Banks, Conor and Mayer 2016b, ix). In the end, only the creative collaboration between different departments makes a film come to life. The number of people involved in any film production can be seen by the cinema audience in the long end credits that scroll on the screen at the end of the show. Yet proportions can be very different, for exam-

ple in the case of arthouse films as opposed to blockbusters. According to imdb.com, an arthouse film like *The House that Jack Built* (DK/SWE/F/GER, 2018, Lars von Trier) had just 40 cast members and 179 crew members. On the opposite end, a blockbuster like *Avengers: Infinity War* (USA 2018, Anthony and Joe Russo) counted up to 143 cast members and 4468 crew members. The situation is similar with television series. This can be seen by comparing two recent European co-production, *The Team* (BEL/DK/GER/A/CH 2015-), which involved 181 cast members and 345 crew members, and *The Borgias* (GER/F/I/A/CZ 2011-2014), on which 787 crew members and 265 actors from 18 different countries worked together (Mikos 2017, 28). Larger collaborations often cause many problems, which can be extremely "troublesome and tiresome" (Bondebjerg et.al. 2017, 123). In international co-productions, it is therefore important that the partners involved rely on a long experience in this kind of projects and are provided with the conditions they need to trust each other, for communication is a crucial aspect of any creative collaboration (ibid., 103-122). Especially at sites that are regularly used for international productions, like Barandov Studios in Prague, or Studio Babelsberg in the Berlin region, it is of paramount importance that communication works well, fostered by the cosmopolitan mentality and capital of those involved.

The "collaborative turn in the creative economy" (Graham and Gandini 2017, 7) has led to a greater focus on production in media studies as well. By now, production studies have established themselves as a special form of research on media industries (Banks, Conor, and Mayer 2016a; Caldwell 2008; Mayer, Bank, and Caldwell 2009; Redvall 2013). Among other issues, the topic of television authorship has been particularly researched, foregrounded by the interest raised by the American model of the writers' room and the role that the new figure of the showrunner has acquired in that production culture (Henderson 2011; Mann 2009; Phalen 2018; Phalen and Osellame 2012; Phalen, Ksiazek and Gaber 2016). This model was adapted in the production of television series in Europe, although it was not adopted one-to-one, but rather adjusted to local conditions (see, for the UK, Cornea 2009; for Denmark, Redvall 2013). This demonstrates a fundamental openness, characteristic of a cosmopolitan cultural practice. I would now like to briefly discuss how these adaptations also took place in Berlin and

Babelsberg to show how a different production culture is integrated into a local context.

A historically grown local production culture tries to maintain its standards and habits. New developments are usually adapted only slowly. Traditionally, broadcasters and directors have had the say in German productions. Made for TV movies and drama series were written by individual authors and author-directors. This form of production is being changed mainly by young talent and young production companies adopting international production practices, since they are more open and able to negotiate the tensions of a cosmopolitan cultural practice. But, as mentioned above, new concepts are not being adapted one-to-one. Each production has dealt with them somewhat differently. While some have enthusiastically adopted the American model and others have been open to experiment with it, others have rejected it and stuck with their old roles. In the shift to an American way of drama production, the role of the showrunner became more prominent. While the *Babylon Berlin* (GER 2017-) series continued to follow old production methods, other series, like *Dark* (GER 2017-2020), *4 Blocks* (GER, 2017-2020), *Deutschland 83* (GER, 2015, RTL), *Deutschland 86* (GER 2018) and *Bad Banks* (GER, 2018-, ZDF), moved closer to the American model.

In an unpublished interview given to the author, Quirin Berg (2017), producer of both the *Dark* and *4 Blocks* series, made respectively for Netflix and the pay TV channel TNT Series, commented on this shift in the vision of drama series production. He described how, in the case of *Dark*, the American model was adapted in such a way that the director and the head author acted together like a showrunner. The production of *Deutschland 83* (GER 2015, RTL) and *Deutschland 86* (GER 2018, Amazon Prime Video), which were both filmed mainly in Berlin, followed the showrunner concept more closely. In this case, the role of the showrunner was played together by Anna Winger (the leading author in the writers' room) and Jörg Winger (producer), who are an American-German couple. As Jörg Winger (2017) stated in his interview: "We basically ran the creative decision-making processes, so we made all the creative decisions. We chose the director, we cast the actors, and so on."

As these examples demonstrate, in Berlin and Babelsberg, just like in the Scandinavian countries, the showrunner concept is not being adapted one to one, but rather the American mode of produc-

tion is being combined with traditional methods. In Germany, the role of executive producer is still a crucial one, as Lisa Blumenberg (2017), producer of *Bad Banks* (GER 2018-, ZDF) explains: "The system is not transferable. This is another system. At least for me as a producer, that's how I work, that's the secret, it's always a balance between intimacy and distance, like working very closely together and participating in the process of content development, but not completely. Should I be in the Writers' Room the entire time, I would be part of the process and would no longer have any 'outside' view on it. So, I always strike a balance between intimacy and distance. We still have a more classic division of tasks between author, director and producer, but at the same time they work very closely together as a team."

Conclusion – Cosmopolitan production culture in Berlin

After unification, and particularly since the 2000s, Berlin has become a major production site for both international films and transnational television drama series. Different production cultures came into play, and, with them, different understandings of the cultural processes implied in audiovisual production. Without a cosmopolitan mentality of cultural openness, these films and series could not have been realized. What mattered most through this development was not just the creative collaboration of casts and crews, but, rather, the cooperation in intercultural teams. Today, international Hollywood productions do not come to Babelsberg and Berlin only attracted by public funding opportunities, but, above all, because of the cosmopolitan openness that characterizes the mentality of the creatives they can find in the area. They know that talent in Berlin has a cosmopolitan cultural capital. The huge drama series productions of global streaming services such as Amazon Prime Video and Netflix have discovered this for themselves, as have American premium cable stations such as Epix, Showtime and Starz. Especially cable network productions employ mixed teams that are formed by crew members from different countries. At the same time, original German productions produced for streaming services are increasingly adapting American production methods to German conditions. All these different forms of production are contributing to the development of a lively cosmopolitan production culture in which creative collaboration works as a cosmopoli-

tan cultural practice based on the cosmopolitan capital of both above and below-the-line talent.

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