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Poetics

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Gatekeeping and networking arrangements: Dutch distributors in the film distribution business



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 22 February 2015

Received in revised form 15 July 2016

Accepted 24 August 2016

Available online 28 August 2016

Keywords:

Gatekeeping

Transnational networks

Film distribution

Independent film

ABSTRACT

Gatekeeping studies in the cultural industries increasingly draw attention to transnational networks, revealing that decision-making is decentralised through gatekeepers operating from different levels in the marketplace. This brings into focus a new line of enquiry revolving around the nature of such relationships. This paper situates an analysis of transnational gatekeeping and networking arrangements within the longstanding tradition of neo-institutional and Bourdieusian theory. Through a typology of the search and selection strategies developed by distributors in the Dutch film market, it explores their decision-making practices, demonstrating how institutional factors, taste judgements and networking arrangements work together in specific transnational contexts. This reveals that networking arrangements serve the purpose of information sharing, but, more specifically, also act as a social influence through which decision-making is evaluated and confirmed. It therefore becomes clear that reliance on transnational networks adds significant weight to decision-making processes.

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1. Introduction

Cultural flow, the access producers have to markets and the range of cultural goods available to consumers is heavily circumscribed by the gatekeeping arrangements that have developed in the cultural industries. Recent empirical investigations have thrown up new theoretical concerns about the study of such gatekeeping arrangements (Franssen & Kuipers, 2013; Friedman, 2014; Kuipers 2012). Such accounts draw attention to relationships between gatekeepers mediating at different levels in the marketplace, demonstrating that different types of gatekeepers fulfil quite specific roles as part of wider transnational networks. In the literary industry, for instance, gatekeepers such as scouts, agents and acquisition editors decentralise decision-making amongst each other, and their activities are by no means confined to particular national contexts (Franssen & Kuipers, 2013; Thompson, 2010).

While this shift in focus to decentralised decision-making points to processes such as cooperation, personalised relationships and social reliance, the arrangements between gatekeepers operating at different levels have not yet been studied in sufficient depth. This brings into focus a new line of enquiry in which work routines and selection strategies are considered in the context of transnational gatekeeping networks. How exactly do gatekeepers make use of networking

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arrangements? What sort of arrangements do they maintain with each other? How does that affect decision-making? And what influence do gatekeeping networks have on widely held assumptions about institutional logics and taste preferences?

This paper draws on a case-specific analysis of Dutch distributors in the film industry. Those distributors acquire distribution rights for films to be released in the Dutch market. The focus is firmly on films released in cinemas, which is usually the first release window, before films are introduced in other exploitation markets, such as the physical video market (e.g. DVD/Blu-ray), the online video market and the television market. The collective decision-making of distribution professionals is critical to which films are shown in Dutch cinemas. Given that the majority of the films screened in the Netherlands and other European film markets are international rather than national productions (Focus, 2014), this calls for a deeper understanding of the film acquisition process, thereby opening up a new perspective on gatekeeping and networking arrangements in the film industry beyond national borders.

The paper starts with a discussion that situates gatekeeping activity within a transnational context, drawing on aspects of neo-institutional and Bourdieusian theory. This provides a perspective from which to understand actual distribution operations in the Netherlands, and how they compare with other European markets. The empirical analysis combines quantitative with qualitative methods to develop a typology of Dutch distributors and their search and selection strategies: what they let through the gate, and what they bar. This analysis draws attention to institutional factors and taste preferences, but extends to networking arrangements between Dutch distributors and other type of gatekeepers such as sales agents and scouts. It will become clear that networking arrangements are critical to the decision-making processes adopted by the distributors; while those arrangements serve the purpose of information sharing (Godart & Mears, 2009; Foster, Borgatti, & Jones, 2011), they are also yet another way in which decision-making is evaluated and confirmed. Further, this analysis generates a deeper understanding of the concept “gatekeeping networks” (Franssen & Kuipers, 2013), and I argue that such networks bring along privileges and social pressures which in some contexts take the form of social forces through which decision-making is structured.

2. Gatekeeping and networking arrangements

Gatekeeping studies have consistently addressed matters such as overabundance, competition, and ambiguity about the nature and quality of cultural products as the prevailing obstacles to decision-making. Such accounts have drawn particularly on the longstanding tradition of neo-institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, 1991) and Bourdieusian theory (Bourdieu, 1993, 1984). Both traditions acknowledge the influence of field structures, and the inherent pressures and forces they bring along, as the starting point of analysis. What they reveal is that the prevailing logics within such organisational fields structure professional practice and actions.

Integrating such theoretical frameworks within gatekeeping studies has brought into focus institutional logics and taste preferences as the principal subjects worthy of study, often in response to the uncertain nature of the cultural industries. Beyond their commonality in approach, however, neo-institutional analysis is primarily concerned with issues surrounding institutional logics and Bourdieusian analysis with issues surrounding taste judgements. This paper follows in the tradition of those gatekeeping studies that combine aspects of both perspectives to deepen thinking about decision-making (Franssen & Kuipers 2013; Friedman, 2014; Kuipers 2012).

The neo-institutional perspective has developed as a sub-discipline within organisation studies, and is frequently employed to demonstrate that gatekeepers rely on institutional strategies and resources to cope with uncertainties. Organisational fields, DiMaggio and Powell (1983:148, 1991) note, “constitute a recognised area of institutional life”, in which organisations socially construct shared logics and understandings, as reflected in rules, beliefs, and conventions. Such institutionalised logics bring stability and durability to rapidly changing business environments (Bielby & Harrington, 2008). Thus, gatekeeping studies have pointed to rhetorical strategies designed to legitimise decision-making (Bielby & Bielby, 1994), social relationships (Kawashima, 1999) and the reputation or status of organisations, a business strategy that is strongly associated with their engagement in previous productions.

While such institutional logics bring along influences from *without*, Bourdieusian theory (1984, 1993) is more attentive to the *habitus* of decision-makers, which generates structural dispositions from *within*. Such dispositions involve aesthetic preferences deeply ingrained in professional practice, making explicit the relationship between personal and professional habitus (Bourdieu, 1984:171). Although scholarship has confirmed the pervasive role of taste preferences in relation to decision-making, Bourdieu’s taste analogy has been criticised by some who argue that the habitus of decision-makers does not necessarily correspond with the aesthetics of the products with which they engage, and that decision-making is perhaps more calculative and driven by audience preference by nature (Friedman, 2014; Kuipers 2012; Smith Maguire, 2008).

A new strand of research has increasingly taken up the notion of institutional logics and taste preferences with discussions about gatekeepers working at the intersection of the national and the transnational level, demonstrating that decision-making is a process that unfolds in a transnational context (Bielby & Harrington, 2008; Franssen & Kuipers, 2013; Friedman, 2014; Godart & Mears, 2009; Havens, 2006; Kuipers 2012). Such accounts point to networking as another decisive process which should be taken into account while considering decision-making. Networking is also acknowledged within neo-institutional and Bourdieusian theory, but is here increasingly taken up as a process which serves its own function and which can be set alongside institutional logics and taste preferences. Networking, in this sense, involves social reliance and

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