

# 'Sorry mate, you're finishing tonight': a historical perspective on employment flexibility in the UK film industry

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## **ABSTRACT**

This article considers the nature of employment in the UK Film Industry in the period 1927-1947 against a background of US domination of the global market for film. Drawing on archived interview material from 60 participants in the archive of the History Project of BECTU (the British trade union for Media and Entertainment workers) the article focusses on entry routes, working hours, training and pay grades to assess the degree of stability present in the labour market across a number of selected below-the-line film production occupations. This provides an historical context to debates surrounding the organisation of work in the sector, which is characterised by both continuity and change. The article argues that the UK film industry has never been a stable, 'job-for-life' sector, nor have its labour processes ever followed mass production lines. It supports assertions that assumptions of linear development from secure to casualised employment are inadequate for understanding work in this sector.

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## **Introduction**

This article considers the history of labour market flexibility in the UK film industry since the emergence of a studio system in 1927. This can be divided into three main phases: first, a transitional period of growth, interspersed with labour/capital conflict and with a fragmented internal labour market from 1927 to 1947; second, a pact between labour and capital and sector-level institutional agreements from 1948 to 1990; and third, deregulation and weakening of labour organisation from 1990 onwards<sup>1</sup>. Little research has been published on the history of employment in the UK film industry, due in part to a shortage of empirical data on employment practices (Blair, Grey & Randle 2001:170). Literature on the UK studio system has tended to

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<sup>1</sup> The 1990 Peacock report encouraged greater production independence in TV, following the widening of competition for Channel 4 contracts and the series of Employment Acts between 1982 and 1990.

focus on state intervention and the impact of US distribution companies in the global and domestic markets (Low, 1985; Street, 1997; Blair & Rainnie, 2000). Reflecting a trend in wider studies of work (see, for example, Hauptmeier & Vidal, 2014) there has been a lack of research bringing together a synthesis between political economy, the employment relationship and the actual experiences of film production workers. This article examines the first of the three phases above, from 1927 to 1947, against more contemporary accounts, combining a comparative political economy of the UK and US studio systems (Blair & Rainnie 2000; Wakso, 2003) with oral history testimonies of film workers employed in the UK during the 1930s.

By the 1920s film was a globalised market, dominated by US products. In response to this situation, governments worldwide introduced state regulations to defend their national industries from penetration by the USA (Guback 1969). In 1927 the Quota Act was passed in the UK. Designed to protect the national film industry, the Act also led to some important developments in the organisation of film work. In 1947 the three main film unions, the ETU, ACT(T) and NAT(K)E<sup>2</sup> formalised their joint control of the internal labour market through a series of agreements with employers<sup>3</sup>.

This article examines the period before this capital-labour pact, which led to a period of relative stability and security in film employment. A comparison between this period and more contemporary accounts of the employment relationship (Blair, Grey & Randle, 2001) enables us to draw the conclusion that employment trends in the industry may have been more circular than linear, and that continuities are as prevalent as change.

The next section considers the sparse accounts of labour in the film sector, highlighting an even greater shortage of research on below-the-line and female employment in the UK film industry. A third section provides a brief account of employment flexibility in the sector today, the historical development of the UK film studios and the internal labour market. The fourth section describes the methodology underpinning the research presented here, while the fifth section presents empirical data on the nature of employment in UK film production from 1927-1947, based on archived interviews. A final section draws some conclusions.

## The division of labour in film production

The costs of film production are generally divided into two categories: above-the-line (ATL) and below-the-line (BTL). This accounting device emerged in the Hollywood studio system in the 1940s and has been broadly replicated across international film

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2 Electrical Trades Union (ETU). Association of Cine-Technicians (ACT). Formed in 1933 and became Association of Cinematograph, Television and allied Technicians (ACTT) in 1956 recognising television workers. National Association of Theatrical and Kine Employees (NATKE). Added Kine in 1936 to incorporate film production workers. The three unions merged to form Broadcasting Entertainment Cinematograph and Theatre Union (BECTU) in 1991.

3 The unions took considerable control over pay rates and labour supply with three agreements in particular: when they formalised the closed shop with the major studios in 1947; when the ACT(T) agreed minimum crewing levels with the British Film Producers Association; and when the three main unions (ACT(T) NAT(K)E and ETU) signed the demarcation agreements which formalised collective agreements over minimum pay and grades. However labour conditions improved from 1937 due to a number of studio agreements, the fair pay clause in the 1938 Quota Act and the commencement of an informal closed shop from 1941.

production ever since (Dawson & Holmes, 2012). This distinction has become, 'the most important hierarchical division between "creative" and "technical" labor' (Stahl, 2009:58). The main creative 'talent' – principal actors, directors, screen-writers and producers – are ATL and are generally considered to be the creators of the content and meaning of films (Powdermaker, 1950), while technical employees, such as camera operators, focus pullers, carpenters and boom operators, are BTL and considered to have less creative input to film content (Banks, 2010). Much of the literature focuses on ATL labour, although an increasing number of contemporary studies have taken a more inclusive approach in both the USA and the UK (Blair, 2000; Randle & Culkin, 2009; Caldwell, 2008; Mayer, 2011). The published history of BTL employment is sparse, but two contending accounts of the US sector are the most comprehensive. The first is influenced by the notion that flexible specialisation and 'vertical disintegration' have been a catalyst for transformation in the sector (Christopherson & Storper, 1987, 1989; Jones, 1996), while the second takes a political economy perspective and places more emphasis on continuity and change (Nielson, 1983; Wakso 2003). These debates are discussed in more detail later. Reid's (2008) work on the UK industry, beginning in 1950, provides an analysis of industrial relations and the labour market among ACT technicians. In the US studio system the execution/conception distinction was characterised by a strict shooting script which both determined content and controlled BTL labour with instructions from the scenario departments in pre-production and well-planned set designs from the art department (Staiger, 1985; Christopherson & Storper, 1987; 1989). In the UK, studio departments were generally under-funded and disorganised, especially in the 1930s, with scripts often completed or rewritten during production (Low, 1985; Chanan, 1976). Set building in the 1930s, from design to execution could be haphazard, last minute and created with a minimal budget.

The 'line' was reflected in the US studio system in the unions, with the Directors Guild of America (DGA) representing ATL members and the International Association of Theatrical and Stage Employees (IATSE) representing BTL members (Wakso, 2003). The three main unions representing behind-camera workers in the UK were divided by departments and trades, with NATKE and the ETU mainly representing members from general trades: carpenters, hairdressers, plasters and electricians. ACT, which represented specialised trades (boom operators, focus pullers, directors etc) included both BTL and ATL workers.

In spite of the mixture of ATL and BTL members in ACT, the available evidence suggests that the 'line', was broadly similar in both the USA and the UK and is a useful indicator of hierarchy. However, this convenient dichotomy obscures the heterogeneous nature of BTL film labour. Hierarchy is central to organisation in the industry, with heads of department (HODs), and other managers (see Table 2) mediating control and consent in the employment relationship and recruitment in the labour market. A five-grade system is adopted here which also incorporates four occupational types in BTL employment.

The film labour process depends upon 'teamed production' (Ryan, 1991). Nevertheless, BTL occupations remain largely overlooked. ATL work has formed the focus of much greater interest, being branded as 'artistic labour', which is 'high status,

and is valorised as the primary source of creativity, “genius” and aesthetic value...’ (Banks, 2010: 305). There are a number of exceptions to this, which, in examinations of the UK industry, have followed an industrial relations and/or labour process theory approach (Chanan, 1976; Jones, 1987; Ryan, 1991; Blair, 2001; Reid, 2008).

**Table 1: Occupational grade in film production 1951**

Occupational grade	Trades
Grade 1 - ‘Creative Professionals’	Director, producer, screen writer, art director (production designer) and head lighting cameraman (cinematographer) on feature films
Grade 2 - Managers and Technical Professions	Chief hairdresser, make-up artist and costume designer, production manager, first assistant director, draughtsman, model maker, studio construction manager, gaffer (head of lighting), editors, sound mixer and camera operator (also second unit lighting cameraman)
Grade 3 - Technicians and Craft workers	Focus puller, boom operator, continuity girl (script supervisor), carpenter, rigger, plasterer
Grade 4 – Administration and assistants	Hair, make-up and costume design assistant, production secretary, third assistant director
Grade 5 – Trainees	Clapper boy, tea boy, office boy, number boy (essentially production runners)

Source: Census (1951): ORDER XXI – PERSONS PROFESSIONALLY ENGAGED IN ENTERTAINMENTS AND SPORT, Classifications of Occupations (England and Wales) HMSO.

## Employment flexibility in film production: A US/UK historical comparison

### Employment in contemporary UK film production

The UK film production sector has been described as a cottage industry, in which films are often produced by small companies or using individual producers who raise capital to fund a single film (Blair, Grey & Randle, 2001). Empirically-grounded contemporary literature delineates the following picture. Employment is almost universally freelance (Creative Skillset, 2014). Entry into the sector is often dependent on personal contacts followed by a period of internship which frequently involves working for free (Randle, Leung & Kurian, 2008, Percival & Hesmondhalgh, 2014). Developing a career requires building a reputation, working long hours on projects and coping with periods without paid work, sometimes with a second job outside the industry (Blair, Grey & Randle, 2001). Below-the-line workers often access employment through ‘semi-permanent work groups’, which are assembled by heads of department (HODs), to overcome employment uncertainty (Blair, 2001). In a deregulated labour market, informal networks and contacts are the main ways to access work (Lee, 2011;

Grugulis & Stoyanova, 2012). Employment contracts are generally 'all-in deals' (Blair, Grey & Randle, 2001:182) for the duration of a single film, often with no overtime pay or compensation for unsociable hours. Accessing and funding training is often the responsibility of the employee rather than the employer (Grugulis & Stoyanova, 2009). The division of labour is noticeably gendered, with more women in hairdressing, make-up and wardrobe departments and in the production office and a strong domination of men in lighting, studio construction, sound and camera. There is also a gender pay gap, with women on proportionally lower pay than men and often in positions lower down departmental hierarchies (Sargent-Disc, 2011).

### **A comparative political economy of the US and UK studio systems**

The term 'studio system' stems from classical-era Hollywood<sup>4</sup> spanning a period from approximately 1920 to 1950 and refers to the vertical integration of the eight large Hollywood majors<sup>5</sup>. The majors controlled the production, distribution and exhibition of film (Christopherson & Storper, 1989). The domestic exhibition market in the USA was large enough to enable the majors to recover the cost of their investment in production. Expansion brought about the domination of the European market, which by the late 1920s provided them with their profit margins. This dominance was particularly overwhelming in the UK: in 1926, 90% of films exhibited in British cinemas were produced by the Hollywood majors (Blair & Rainnie, 2000). Influenced by theories of 'flexible specialisation' (Piore & Sabel, 1984) some have argued that in the US film sector the studio system resulted in the adoption of 'Fordist' production practices (Christopherson & Storper, 1986; 1989; Jones, 1987) in which below-the-line work was the domain of male workers with a craft identity (Christopherson & Storper, 1989), who could expect stable employment, with a 'traditional career' in 'traditional hierarchies' (Jones, 1996:58). Starting from this premise, the argument then followed that a shift towards flexible employment from the 1950s was prompted by the vertical disintegration of the Hollywood majors following the 1948 Paramount Supreme Court decision (which ended the majors' monopoly over the exhibition market) and the growth of television. This, it was contended, also led to an increase in independent production and a more flexible labour market (Christopherson & Storper, 1986, 1989). Both the extent of this 'Fordist past' and the subsequent move to flexible employment, have been challenged (Aksoy & Robins, 1992; Blair & Rainnie, 2000; Wakso, 2003; Dawson, 2012). The nature of film production, where every film is different, means that comparisons with mass production labour processes can be misleading (Dawson, 2012), while the assertion that BTL studio workers were all in stable employment at one studio is also debateable (Neilson, 1983; Dawson, 2012). In the USA, IATSE did represent all BTL crafts, but these were divided into autonomous branches that were protective of their individual trades, some of which also developed their own professional organisations (Wakso, 2003), reflecting the heterogeneous nature of film production labour and putting into question the extent to which it could

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.

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

be characterised as flexible specialisation. However the suggestion that a vertically integrated studio system resulted in greater levels of employment security has wider acceptance (Scott, 2002).

It has also been suggested that emphasising the shift towards independent production, due to vertical disintegration, neglects the role distribution companies play in the circulation of capital in film. Hence, although the 1948 Supreme Court decision may have reduced the number of cinemas owned by the majors, they retained their powerful distribution arms which still dominated the domestic and global film market and, importantly, still provided the financial backing for film production. The monopoly of the world film market by the US majors has therefore continued since the 1920s (Aksoy & Robins, 1992; Wakso, 2003).

The concept of flexible specialisation was part of a wider trend towards 'paradigm break theories' in the mid-1980s (Smith & Thompson, 2010:14) that proclaimed a magic-bullet answer to the impact of globalisation across industries in developed societies. There is a need to understand the global film market as part of a larger narrative of 'horizontal integration' (Blair & Rainnie, 2000:91) with US film majors diversifying into, and merging with, other media and electrical engineering companies, and engaging in runaway production across Europe from the 1920s onwards (Wakso, 2003). It would be more accurate to see them as 'distribution companies with a small amount of production attached' (Blair & Rainnie, 2000:193). As such these distribution companies (especially MGM, Fox, and Columbia) invested in UK production (and wider European production) throughout the history of this industry (Guback, 1969).

Research in the UK (Blair & Rainnie, 2000; Blair, Grey & Randle, 2001; Blair, Culkin & Randle, 2003; Reid, 2008) has highlighted contemporary employment differences between the UK and the USA but has lacked empirical data relating to actual working lives during the UK studio system, which makes it difficult to compare past and present work experiences. There is, however a range of literature on the structure of the British studio system (Low, 1985; Wood, 1986; Murphy, 1996; Street, 1997; Blair & Rainnie, 2000), and some industrial relations literature focusing on the 1930s (Chanan, 1976; Jones, 1987), which provides data on employment in the UK from 1927 to 1947. The 1927 Quota Act stipulated that 25% of films exhibited in UK cinemas must be produced by UK studios, with a quota of 75% of UK nationals working on each production (Street, 1997). To gain a more rounded view of film history there is a need to 'merge dispassionate analysis of structures with the real life stories of those most affected by the workings of the industry' (Nielson, 1983:48). What follows is an account of the impact the 1927 Act on BTL workers in the UK during the 1930s. The aim is to build on the political economy of film and provide a synthesis with workers' accounts of employment in this period.

The Act gave UK companies some guarantee of a return on their 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 1941<sup>6</sup>. Like the Hollywood majors, these conglomerates

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6 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 dominant film combine in Britain with over 600 Odeon and Gaumont cinemas (Jones 1987:61)

integrated a number of production studios, distribution companies and large cinema circuits, with interests in every stage of film from pre-production to exhibition.

Employment in British film studios rose from 4,418 to 6,638 following the Act, with approximately one third of those employed being women (Jones, 1987), the majority of whom worked in offices and female-dominated trades in production. Most employment was concentrated in 25 studios around London and the south east of England, with many more built during the 1930s<sup>7</sup> and many of the distribution companies located in Wardour Street, Soho, in Central London (Wood, 1986).

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 UK industry did not have a domestic market of a size which could provide a return on its investment; this was still mainly controlled by the eight Hollywood majors with distribution deals controlled by the powerful Kinematograph Renters Society. During the peak of UK production in the mid-1930s, 60% of films exhibited in UK cinemas were produced in Hollywood (Low, 1985). Despite state intervention in the UK, US dominance resulted in a highly volatile domestic market and created a 'feast and famine industry' (Reid, 2008), with a series of boom and bust periods from 1927 to 1947.

In the UK a two tier structure emerged. The first tier comprised the vertically-integrated studios owned by GBPC, ABPC and Rank and other in-house production companies<sup>8</sup>, including studios owned by the Hollywood majors. In these larger studios formal departmental bureaucracies emerged, with job tenure for a number of employees, enabling unions to organise labour more easily (Jones, 1987). In the second tier were small independent companies, which rented studio space and often hired workers on a freelance basis. These companies often only stayed in business for a short period and produced low-budget 'quota quickies' for the US distributors, so they could fulfil their quota of UK productions and avoid having their bigger-budget Hollywood productions banned from its cinemas (Blair & Rainnie, 2000). Unions found it much more difficult to organise employees working for these small, sub-contracted companies (Chanan, 1976; Jones, 1987). This industrial structure suggests that a dual labour market, (Doeringer & Piore, 1971) existed in this period. However a simple distinction between 'core' workers able to gain secure employment on big budget feature films and 'peripheral' workers on insecure contracts working on quota quickies is complicated by a number of factors which are explored through the data.

There is no clear agreement on when the British studio system officially ended. ABPC 'disintegrated' in 1969 and Rank in 1979 (Threadgall, 1994). However centralised in-house production across the sector had gradually declined from the early 1950s onwards, leading some to suggest that it ended in the 1950s (Ellis, 1982; Reid, 2008). By this time many studio departments were made up of freelance workers hired for the duration of one film or TV series. Most of the studios were known as 'four-wallers', employing a small number of staff (mainly in studio construction and production

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7 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 at: <http://www.bfi.org.uk/>)

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



lighting) on permanent contracts but having no in-house production (Reid, 2008). Since the 1970s there has been very little permanent employment in UK film production, with all of the studios having become 'four-wallers'.

If vertical disintegration is questionable as the catalyst for dramatic shifts in work organisation in the Hollywood context, it simply cannot be applied in the UK, where the history of film production is one of structural weakness (Blair, Grey & Randle, 2001) even during this period when in-house production dominated. The move to almost universal freelance contracts has been described as an 'extreme case of existing trends towards "flexible" labour markets' (2001:173) rather than an early example of an industrial transformation from Fordist to post-Fordist production principles. In the US context, by contrast, this has prompted much debate (Christopherson & Storper, 1986; 1989; Aksoy & Robins, 1992; Jones, 1996; Blair & Rainnie, 2000; Dawson, 2012). Employment in the UK sector is best understood against a background both of the gradual and uneven decline of the studio structure and of the changing nature of labour organisation, to which we now turn.

## **Labour organisation in the UK: 1927-1990**

The development of in-house production and employment following the Quota Act, led to the growth of the three main film unions during the 1930s. However at this time they were unable to gain control of the labour supply or negotiate national collective agreements with employers (Jones, 1987). Labour organisation in the ETU and NATKE strengthened throughout the 1930s, but among technicians in the ACT it did not begin to strengthen until after 1939. In 1941 the UK Ministry of Labour awarded film technicians in sound and camera 'reserve occupation' status, acknowledging their potential contribution to the war effort. To achieve this status, technicians had to first join the ACT. This increased union membership dramatically and led ultimately to the formalisation of the closed shop<sup>9</sup> after 1945 (Reid, 2008). From 1947-1990 the three main film unions controlled labour supply with a pre-entry closed shop, collective agreements over pay and tighter demarcation of tasks (Reid, 2008).

Employers were now obliged to recruit available freelance workers with union membership, proven via a 'union ticket', and shown to the shop steward on entering the studios. Getting a ticket was difficult; for example, approval of the application of an employer's preferred non-union candidate by the trade union panel could take a year or more (Kelly, 1966). Many interviewees who began work in the 1930s mention recommending their children and other relatives for union membership in the post-war period. Ticket holders were not guaranteed employment, but they benefited from union control of labour supply and, from the 1950s, there were increasing numbers of employment opportunities in commercial television production, to which union members had privileged access (Reid, 2008). The Employment Acts (1982-1990) ended the closed shop and national collective agreements came to an end in 1988, weakening labour organisation (Mckinlay, 2009) and resulting in an increased level of

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<sup>9</sup> The pre-entry closed shop was a system used by many unions across industries in the UK up until 1989, until it was made illegal by the 1990 Employment Act. Under this system, potential employees without union membership were barred from working until they had obtained membership.



employment casualisation in both film and TV production (Sparks, 1994; McKinlay, 2009).

## Methodology

During the 1980s a group of film-makers keen to record the working experiences of (mainly retired) colleagues in the industry initiated the BECTU<sup>10</sup> History Project (BHP)<sup>11</sup>, which resulted in an archive of over 650 interviews. Drawing on this archive, this article focuses on the production stage of film making and occupational categories in below-the-line film production work: craft workers, designers, the production office and technicians. Sixty interviews from the archive were analysed, of which all but five were with people directly involved in production departments (sound, camera, art departments, studio construction and production lighting). The remaining five interviews were with people who provide general information on employment (a production accountant, a studio manager and full-time trade union officials).

The selection method involved taking a sample of trades and grades from each production department. The interviews were conducted by more than 20 interviewers and covered themes relating to employment, film-making and film aesthetics. They are semi-structured oral history interviews, adopting a life-story approach, providing background on parental occupation, education and prior work history. All the interviewees were trade union members (as were the interviewers) and around one third were shop-stewards. Of the 55 production workers, all started in BTL positions with 19 ending their careers in high positions as 'creative professionals', a term used to describe high grade film production workers (see Mayer, 2011) in ATL and high BTL positions, 22 finishing in management and 'technical professions', while 14 ended their working lives as skilled technicians or craft workers. Twenty one were educated in elementary schools and 34 in grammar and private schools. Fifteen were women, mainly working in hairdressing, wardrobe, secretarial work and continuity, although three moved into production office or above-the-line positions. The craft and design workers migrated from general trades originally developed outside the film industry, but adapted to the specialised requirements of film production. Production office workers and technicians were in specialised trades particular to the film industry. This is an important distinction in a volatile labour market, since craft workers and designers had transferable skills which could be more easily adapted to outside industries, while specialised workers found this more difficult.

ATL employees form the majority of the 650 interviews in the archive, with accounts from BTL workers in occupations such as boom operator, continuity girl or focus puller much rarer than those from producers, for example. In particular, former NATKE and ETU members are poorly represented, with only six studio construction

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10 BECTU (The Broadcasting, Entertainment, Cinematograph and Theatre Union) was formed in 1991 as the result of the merger of a number of different media trade unions, including the Association of Broadcasting Staff (representing BBC employees), NATTKE (National Association of Theatrical, Television and Kine Employees) the ACTT (Association of Cinematograph Television and allied Technicians) and the FAA (Film Artistes Association).

11 [www.bectu.org.uk/advice-resources/history-project](http://www.bectu.org.uk/advice-resources/history-project)

workers and five former ETU members (who were employed in production lighting) in the sample.

A more general limitation of using an oral history archive is that the interviewees did not necessarily share the aims of this research or focus on employment issues. There are, for instance, interjections and redirecting questions in the interviews which sometimes move the interviewee away from relevant employment issues. Several techniques were used to sift through the interviews to discover the more relevant material. These included mapping careers using a 'data sorting' method commonly used in qualitative secondary analysis (Heaton, 2004), in which relevant data from the BHP interviews was coded to analyse workers' experiences of 'getting in and getting on'. These examined the way the workers were recruited and the ways they progressed, descriptions of the labour process, training and the nature of work. In the interviews there are recurring themes relating to the labour market, hidden in what the film production researcher Caldwell (2008) refers to as 'trade stories'. Some of these recurring accounts, for example one recurring story, here labelled, 'my Hitch story', explicitly refers to the need to build a reputation in an insecure labour market, by having worked with a 'big player' (Wakso, 2003) in the industry. The following section presents the findings from the interviews. Actual names are used because the data are not anonymised in the archive.

## Working below the line: 1927-1947

### The rise of HODs and BTL hierarchies

Studios were generally run by a studio manager or a central producer with a small team of unit producers, script/scenario editors, film editors and directors on long-term contracts. In the next grades down were the heads of the various departments (HODs). Table 2 provides a comparison of some of the top grades in 'entertainments and sports professions' in the occupational classifications from the censuses of 1931 and 1951. The table reveals how HOD roles emerged between 1931 and 1951, associated with the growth of in-house studio bureaucracies following the 1927 Quota Act. The emergence of these job titles is indicative of the rise of management roles in the film industry in the 1930s. Many of these top grades, which were well established in the UK by 1951, still exist today (Creative Skillset, 2014) and now recruit BTL workers further down the line into semi-permanent work groups, thereby playing a central role in the management of the labour process (Blair, 2000). Five grades in film production employment, which had emerged by 1951, have been identified here.<sup>12</sup> These operate across the four occupational categories (crafts, technicians, production office and designers). Each of the positions in Table 1 was held by some of the 55 interviewees at various points in their careers and all progressed to the top three grades. The positions from Grade 2 down are all considered 'below-the-line', while Grade 1 positions are generally considered 'above-the-line'. Literature on the US studio system implies that

<sup>12</sup> These grades are based on several budget sheets, reflecting weekly pay rates from films produced in the 1940s and 1950s at the Fairbanks production company and in the 1960s from ACTT Films Ltd budget sheets, which reflected minimum wage agreements (BFI collection). They also draw on the 60 interviews analysed and on the 1931 and 1951 censuses of occupational classifications.

below-the-line positions were the domain of male workers with shared craft identities (Christopherson & Storper, 1989), ignoring the variety of trades in film production. In the UK context, making distinctions between the five grades, the four occupational categories and the important role HODs played in the employment relationship provides a richer picture of BTL employment. This employment incorporated a number of female-dominated occupations and departments, such as continuity, wardrobe and hair and make-up.

**Table 2: Emerging 'professions' in film production, 1931-1951**

1931 Census: 'Film Producers, Film Studio Managers'	1951 Census: 'Producers and Stage managers in Film studios'
	Art Advisor (Film Production)
Cinema Art Expert	Art Director (Films)
	Casting Director (Films)
	Chief cameraman (Films)
	Constructional Manager (Film sets)
Director of Production	Director of Production
	Director of Sound Recording
	Dubbing Editor
	Film Director
Film Editor	Editor
	Studio Manager
	First assistant Director
	Production Manager

Source: Census (1931 and 1951): ORDER XXI – PERSONS PROFESSIONALLY ENGAGED IN ENTERTAINMENTS AND SPORT, Classifications of Occupations (England and Wales) HMSO.

### Employment flexibility in a two-tier studio system

While labour market dualism partly explains the different types of employment and lengths of job tenure in the two-tier studio system, with 'core' workers seemingly protected by permanent contracts in the larger studios and 'peripheral' workers on temporary contracts in the smaller studios, the data here suggest a more complex picture. Large studios awarded both permanent and temporary contracts and the volatile nature of the market meant that even workers on permanent contracts were susceptible to unemployment during sector-wide downturns in production. The degree of employment casualisation also varied by occupation. Nevertheless, on the whole, employment over the period appears to have been more secure than today, despite the two-tier studio system.

The number of permanent staff in a studio was dependent on the size of the in-house production company that ran it. A large studio would hire several film units across departments. Each unit consisted of a crew made up of sound, camera and production lighting technicians. In general, the 25 studios in London and the South East kept a

small number of permanent technicians and production office workers in these units, and hired additional temporary workers when required. Craft and design workers were not employed in units, but were hired as required on temporary contracts during busy production periods. A production manager at Elstree explains:

*...it was quite extraordinary the way that departments were run with the absolute minimum personnel [...] with so much going on, so few people were really at the top....you realise that the actual heads of departments and key personnel at Elstree, where five pictures might be on the go, was probably about twelve people, you know.<sup>13</sup>*

Most of the studios operating in this period had a very small permanent staff, keeping a second group in the art department, production lighting, sound, camera and production office, on week-long rolling contracts. These could continue for several years but were sometimes terminated during downturns in production with staff being rehired later. Eddie Dryhurst worked as a script editor at Wembley, a medium sized studio owned by the US 'major', Fox in the 1930s:

*I worked on a weekly basis, I was paid a weekly salary and a week's notice on either side sort of thing. And we used to go on month after month, year after year, but we were not under contract.<sup>14</sup>*

Sometimes staff on permanent contracts were 'hired out' or 'loaned' to other studios when there was a downturn in production at their studio, allowing employers to retain their skills. Some workers had jobs outside film, while others had two jobs in the industry. An ACT report in 1935 confirmed that many members were unable to maintain employment throughout the year (Reid, 2008). When production declined or in-house studios closed, 'core' workers on temporary contracts were released either to search for casual employment with independent production companies, making 'quota quickies', or to work in other industries, thus joining the peripheral sections of the film labour market.

Traditional craft workers were on particularly insecure contracts, some with just two hours notice, and often had to wait outside studio gates to get daily work. This improved slightly during the 1930s with NATKE and the ETU signing a series of individual studio agreements over contracts, but until the national agreements in 1947 these remained insecure. Gus Walker started as a carpenter at Denham when it was being built in 1935 and rose up the hierarchy there, then moved to Pinewood to work for the Rank Organisation, becoming a studio construction manager by the 1950s:

*In the early days [...] people worked on Elstree and different places on daily rate, you could be called for a day. They used to wait outside the gate. That didn't happen at Denham; you were hired by the week, but the thing is you could get two hours notice. This operated until the big agreement was made, but prior to that you were on two hours notice.<sup>15</sup>*

Walker's career was more stable than most craft workers and he was able to establish himself as a permanent worker after World War Two. By the 1950s he was confident

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13 EM Smedley-Aston (b1912-2006) BHP Interview 407 (Transcription): conducted by Roy Fowler and Mary Harvey (1997)

14 Eddie Dryhurst (b1908-1989) BHP Interview 36 (transcription): Conducted by Roy Fowler (1988)

15 Gus Walker (b1913) BHP Interview 278 (Audio Recording): Conducted by Joyce Robinson (2000)

enough of obtaining work to become a freelancer and in the 1970s started his own rigging company. But for many other craft workers careers were more precarious. Les Hillings, a stagehand who started at GBPC Shepherds Bush in 1932, was laid off in the mid-1930s and, unable to find enough film work to support his family, became a bus driver in 1937. After the war, he returned to production until 1952, when he found secure full-time employment as a laboratory technician in post-production. He explains the nature of employment in the 1930s:

*Well it's not freelance in the true sense of the word, its no – freelance, it sounds nice – [...] it invariably went, if the picture was finished you were finished as well, just went without saying you know. [Someone] come round on a Friday afternoon and they'd say 'sorry mate, you're finishing tonight'. One accepted that. It was just a run of the mill thing. This is what happened. [If...] a picture was about to start at Elstree or Ealing or Twickenham. [We would...] get there early in the morning, stand outside hoping somebody would come out and say: 'any props, any stage hands, any chippies'<sup>16,17</sup>*

Tilly Day was on freelance contracts throughout her career from 1917 to 1975. She had been working occasionally in the industry as a secretary and a film extra, moving back to secretarial roles in other industries when there was no work in film until she secured more regular work on low budget 'quota quickies' in the 1930s. This allowed Day to move into continuity and establish her career. When work was available in studios she would take it, sometimes working all night and through the next day and also facing periods without work. Many women were obliged to build their careers against this uncertainty in the 1930s. It is important however to see film production work in relation to the lack of wider opportunities for women in this period. Day comments:

*Well, in my lifetime if you were a girl – nobody ever said to you, 'What are you going to do when you grow up?' Because there wasn't anything that you could do, barring get married.<sup>18</sup>*

Employment contracts were thus largely casual and short-term, although some workers had long job tenure in the same department. These departments developed formal bureaucracies, in contrast with the contemporary industry structure (Eikhof & Warhurst, 2013). Contrary to general accounts of insecure employment in the industries, these formal bureaucracies did in fact create some 'traditional careers' (Jones 1997). Some of the workers with secure employment were employed by the Rank Organisation or Ealing Studios under the charge of Michael Balcon between 1938 and 1959, but the majority of workers in the archive who had long-term employment in the same studio were those who moved into TV production in the post-war period.

## Entry routes and network intelligence

Analysis demonstrates varied entry routes during this period, with different patterns emerging in each of the four occupational categories. Of the 31 production office

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16 'Chippy' is a slang term for a carpenter.

17 Les Hilling (b1914) BHP interview 274 (audio recording): Conducted by Alan Lawson and Syd Wilson (1993)

18 Tilly Day. Extra, secretary and 'Continuity Girl' (b1903-1994) BHP Interview 30 (transcribed): Conducted by Sid Cole and Alan Lawson (1988).

workers and technicians in the sound and camera departments, 22 were male, a small number of whom were electrical engineering workers who moved from maintenance and lighting into sound and camera departments. Some entered through the Regents Park Technical College, which offered vocational film courses in the 1930s. The rest started as paid interns, getting in through an introduction to the studio, either from a family contact or an 'old boy' contact from private school who knew someone in a senior position in the organisation (a studio manager or a highly regarded HOD on a permanent contract). These entrants became trainees in an 'informal apprenticeship' system (Reid, 2008) which continued after 1947. Sound, camera and production office training, with low pay and no guarantee of future employment or even vocational certification, formed a barrier for many more economically-marginal aspirants. These departments had a large proportion of middle-class entrants, educated in private schools, a majority of whom were male, a proportion which increased further up the production hierarchy.

Of the eleven male workers in the craft trades (in studio construction and lighting departments) one came via the theatre, while the remaining ten entered as the new studios were built and others converted to sound stages. They gained their skills through vocational courses and work in industries such as construction, shipbuilding and electrical engineering, developing a high level of skill before they entered the film industry. They had a film industry contact further down the employment hierarchy, often gaining employment after hearing about temporary employment from a studio craft worker or lighting electrician (in Grade 4) with whom they had worked in another industry. Without a contact in a high grade in the industry to act as a mentor, they were dependent on more senior members in their department to recommend them for promotion or further employment, often based on their technical proficiency and speed of performance. By the mid-1930s, agreements between employers and the ETU and NAT(K)E meant that union membership was essential for entry. However entry was not enough in itself: sustaining employment in the industry was still dependent on informal relationships with senior core workers and HODs.

Of the sample, 15 were women, of whom six were designers in art departments (hair, wardrobe and production design) who entered through formal training via the theatre, the fashion industry or the Architectural Association. This provided them with status before they entered the film industry and enabled them to progress in those departments where relatively well-paid careers for women were possible, though the number of jobs available was still small.

The remaining nine female interviewees began their careers as production secretaries. All had received training in shorthand and typing at schools such as the Pitman College and accessed employment through a variety of routes. They would assist male producers with shooting scripts, getting an insight into the film-making process from its conception. Some moved on into other areas of production such as continuity, seen from the 1930s to the 1960s as 'women's work'. Four of the nine production secretaries (Grade 4) progressed to Grades 1 and 2 in production. As they explain in their interviews, they were a minority in these high grades. The production secretaries would also keep each other informed of any jobs in continuity or on the

production floor when new film projects were in early stages of development. This follows a similar pattern to the early networks in the studios at this time, where workers in the more precarious trades developed contacts and shared labour market intelligence.

Between 1927 and 1947 the network of family dynasties that emerged in later decades had not yet been established, so the nepotism that is often attributed to the industry was not a central factor in determining entry. However many workers spoke of 'getting an introduction' into the industry through informal family contacts, private school contacts, (via relatives who were employers in the studios) or from work colleagues in prior employment (who knew a HOD or a 'core' worker in a studio). Interviewees mention getting their children and other relatives into the film industry in the post-war period. This is significant because union membership was the only way to gain access and could only be obtained after two recommendations from existing members. However, despite the fact that entry routes before the post-war closed shop era were more varied, favoured entry through informal networks was still prominent, especially for those who went on to reach the top two grades in the industry. Informal contacts were therefore an important entry route for workers in this period and remain so today.

## Training

Craft workers and designers in the 'traditional' trades (the art departments, studio construction and production lighting) received their training in other industries, and had to adapt to the particular requirements in the film industry on the job. In the specialised film trades, the production office, camera and sound departments, it was accepted that some form of training was necessary. In the late 1920s and 1930s the HODs in many of the highest pay grades were often technicians from Germany, Italy, Hungary and, more often, the USA. As these studio departments were emerging, the early HODs trained many of the first generation of UK technicians using an on-the-job approach, where many were expected to 'sink or swim' and there was little room for structured programmes – a system of training which continues today in semi-permanent work groups (Reid, 2008).

In the 1930s, the ACT attempted to get employers' federations to agree to formal apprenticeships for technicians in sound and camera; however the uncertainty of the industry formed an obstacle and training remained informal. The studios employed a number of interns known as 'number boys', 'clapper boys' or 'office boys' on wages that were below the national average. These interns would be engaged in some technical work and general studio duties. Of the 12 interviewees who began as low-paid trainees eleven had been to private schools and only one, the cinematographer Jack Cardiff, went to an elementary school. During their internships they would work anything from 60 to 100 hours a week, often late into the night. The majority got in through a family contact, who would often act as a protective mentor in their early careers. Significantly, they all eventually moved into Grade 1 and 2 positions and eight moved into above-the-line creative 'talent' positions. Trainees were generally used as cheap labour rather than being part of a structured training scheme. Hugh Stewart started as a trainee at GBPC Shepherds Bush in 1932, through his mother's contact with Ian Dalrymple, an editor who went on to run Warwick Films (one of Rank's 'Independents') in the 1940s. Stewart



underwent one of the few official training programmes as the studio departments were emerging, but was not impressed:

*...we were just pushed into the place and made assistants and sidekicks and that kind of thing [...] we were given a princely salary of five bob<sup>19</sup> a week. And then after three months we got ten bob a week and then for the last six months we were told we would get ... for those who were still existing, and by this time there were about ten of us... we got a pound a week.<sup>20</sup>*

Dalrymple played the role of mentor in Stewart's early career and acted as a powerful protector, ensuring that he was given an early pay increase and recommending that he should be given an editing credit on the Hitchcock film *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1933). This distinguished credit and the recommendation from Dalrymple were the springboard for Stewart's future freelance career as an editor and producer.

Despite their initially low wages, long hours, poor working conditions and poor training programmes, those that remained and showed aptitude could often expect a secure future. As one trainee and future film producer put it, 'We knew we were being exploited but we figured that in the long run it was probably all right'.<sup>21</sup>

This informal but extensive training provided an income and an opportunity to gain skills and experience that were of benefit to future careers which is rare today.

### **Working hours and the growth of labour organisation**

The working week was generally long, ranging from 60 to 100 hours. In sound and camera departments the average working day was 12-15 hours and, exceptionally, the working week was seven days, with overtime pay rare. Tubby Englander started as a clapper boy at the small Cricklewood studios in 1930 and was a camera assistant at the larger GBPC Shepherds Bush by the mid-1930s:

*Finishing times were purely arbitrary. You could go on until 10 o'clock at night. You could finish at 7 o'clock at night, and sometimes you could work all night and half the next day. And of course the same goes for weekends; you could work seven days a week if necessary. More often than not you never worked five, you always worked six. Saturday was part and parcel of the week.<sup>22</sup>*

Self-employed workers like Englander were not paid overtime and were often obliged to work long hours. Craft workers were on a flat 48-52 hour working week, and then paid overtime as NATKE and the ETU made studio agreements throughout the 1930s. A sound technician at the small Nettlefolds studios in the early 1930s explains:

*What they did do of course, they worked the studio staff [...] So the overtime was used a hell of a lot, but the technicians, we got no overtime. The 'sparks'<sup>23</sup> did, the*

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19 'Five bob' is a slang term for five shillings – the equivalent of 25 pence (or 25% of a pound) in decimal currency. 'Ten bob' was ten shillings, or 50 pence. In present-day equivalents, 5 'bob' (shillings) = £68 and one pound (£1) = £272, using the 'income status' measurement on the Measuring Worth website: see bibliography.

20 Hugh Stewart: assistant editor, editor, producer (b1910) BHP Interview 108 (transcribed): Conducted by John Legard and Alan Lawson (1988).

21 EM Smedley Aston Ibid.

22 Tubby Englander (b1916-2004) BHP Interview 22 (transcribed): Conducted by Arthur Graham and Dave Robson (1987)

23 'Spark' is a slang term for an electrician

*workmen, but the technicians got nothing. We could work every night until one o'clock in the morning. If you were lucky you got a bottle of ginger beer and a sandwich.*<sup>24</sup>

The working week was therefore longer than the national average, with unsociable hours expected, bearing comparison with film production today. In the 1930s, workers in film units were often paid a weekly salary and no overtime. This type of unpaid labour was one of the main grievances among non-unionised workers and is a reason they organised, as an art director and early ACT member, who joined in 1933 explains:

**Rodney Giesler:** *Can you describe the sort of things that prompted the formation of the union? I mean, why were you involved in the formation of it?*

**L.P Williams (Art Director):** *...well of course one was young and enthusiastic, and that sort of thing, so one didn't mind much. But one did get rather fed up with the hours that were worked. And I think that's what we thought needed putting right. [...] especially when work, as usual in the British film industry, wasn't all that plentiful, and so if you got a job, you weren't likely to kick up a row about it [...] Me and Freddie Young [DOP] used to go up to London for [union] meetings in the evening.*<sup>25</sup>

Because the ACT was not recognised by employers in the early 1930s, members would have secret committee meetings in cafes and pubs<sup>26</sup> and recruit colleagues while working alongside them. Tilly Day was recruited to the ACT by the head of her film unit at Stoll Studios, Cricklewood:

*Desmond Dickinson was number four, his [union] card was number four and he said, 'You must join this, Tilly, because it's gonna be a great thing, and you'll need it' [...], he persuaded me and I joined*<sup>27</sup>

Between 1934 and 1936, ACT membership grew from eight to 1,212 (Jones, 1987).

## Conclusion

Recognition of the continuities as well as the discontinuities in their historical development is missing from current appreciations of work in the creative industries. Our understanding of the employment relationship, in particular, has suffered from a tendency to pose the past only in contrast to the present, while it also bears comparison with it.

The film industry was already a global industry, dominated by US companies, by the 1920s. Attempts by the UK government to protect its national industry resulted in growth in both employment and trade union power which provided a protective shield over workers in what was, as it still is, a highly competitive labour market.

The UK film production sector did not see a dramatic shift from Fordist to post-Fordist employment practices. The decline of UK studio production was a gradual and uneven process and changes to the employment relationship are better understood

24 Vernon Sewell: Assistant sound technician, writer and director (b1903-2001). BHP Interview 329 (transcript) conducted by Roy Fowler (1994)

25 L.P Williams, Art Director from 1928-1960s, and early ACT activist, BHP Interview 295 (transcribed). Conducted by Rodney Giesler (1993)

26 George Elvin, General Secretary of ACT(T) 1934 to 1969, BHP transcribed recording 115 (circa 1960s)

27 Tilly Day

as a result of the weakening of labour organisation rather than simply as changes in industrial structure. The labour/capital pact lasting from 1947 to 1990, which immediately followed the period described in this article, improved employment conditions and increased union control over the supply of labour, which, apart from a short period during World War Two, has always outstripped demand. Les Hillings, who commented 'it's not freelance... freelance sounds nice', makes a pertinent point: that the term 'freelance' can be a euphemism, a way of dignifying what would otherwise be recognised simply as casual or precarious labour.

Political economy provides a lens through which to view the way domestic state intervention and global capitalism can impact on workers. Combining this with archived interviews, provides a more holistic approach to understanding how this 'bigger picture' (Mosco, 2009) was experienced by workers in the lower echelons of film production, both in terms of employment conditions and in the way they responded to them. The oral histories in the BHP archive reveal that issues relating to unpaid labour, uncertain employment and long working days were common features of the experience of work in film production. In the 1930s, labour organisation was growing, with previously unorganised occupations following the path of craft workers and forming the trade union, ACT, which led to changes in the employment relationship benefitting labour. In an industry where 'structured uncertainty' (Randle & Culkin, 2009) remains a constant theme of the employment relationship, labour organisation allowed workers to gain more certainty in the post-war era. In describing employment relations in UK film in both the 1930s and the present, the term 'casualised' may be more appropriate than 'flexible'. In this sense the assertion that the advances made by labour in the post-war era were a 'great exception to a general rule' (Huws, 2011:2) appears to be confirmed by the film industry.

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