

Examining Trans-media/-national Networks

Cycle Studies and Understanding the Trans-Media Environment

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Cycles of production in the film and television industries have existed alongside genres as a cost-effective method of producing content which held minimal risk for the studios and production companies involved. Cycles, defined by their function in relation to industrial practice and economic viability, are differentiated from genres by their intense focus on the repetition of a single successful formula over a limited span of time. Typically, cycles have been studied in relation to a single medium, with generic categorization fueling much of the discussion of media texts' formal similarities across media boundaries. But in the past decade the consolidation of the media industries throughout the world has been the dominant trend in globalization, affecting the production, distribution, and exhibition of media texts. Unlike genres, clusters, and trends, the study of production cycles affords us a unique opportunity for the study of how formal and aesthetic qualities manifest and engage with popular culture in a variety of different media simultaneously. What I briefly propose here is that cycle studies is a useful mode of analysis for understanding the ways formula transfers across the traditional boundaries of media on the industrial and textual level in the current media environment.

In the age of conglomerate ownership, media companies are increasingly integrated with one another under vast multinational corporate umbrellas. Indeed, media companies are becoming more vertically and horizontally integrated than ever before. Massive conglomerates like Comcast own vast holdings in film studios, broadcast and cable TV networks, and digital services which produce films, TV shows, online content, and video games. Comcast also owns the means of distribution and exhibition for its television and digital content as it is currently the largest cable and broadband provider in the United States. The goal behind this consolidation of

ownership within a larger corporate structure is to increase profitability and offset risk by using popular and familiar formulas and then capitalizing on further iterations with only slight variations. As noted above, this is not new. What is new, however, is the industries' adoption of popular forms across media boundaries and the affordances of cycle studies in allowing us to understand how these similar texts function in tandem with one another and how this can be utilized to write media history.

An example: a 2010 *L.A. Times* story declares to readers, "Your cable is haunted," and then highlights the recent boom in the production of paranormal-themed programming on television, connecting their success to a broader media environment which encompasses film, television, and even DIY media production.¹ Linking the success of paranormal reality shows such as *Ghost Hunters* (Syfy, 2004-current) and *Ghost Adventures* (Travel Channel, 2008-current), scripted programs such as *Medium* (CBS, 2005-2011) and *Ghost Whisperer* (CBS, 2005-2010) to the previous year's success of *Paranormal Activity* (Oren Peli, 2009) and the rise in ghost hunting as a cultural and fan activity, the article points out the existence of a broad trans-media cycle of production that could only exist in the 21st Century with the rise of large transnational media conglomerates. While production cycles have always existed and been discussed in relation to specific trends within specific mediums, it is the new media environment which facilitates their usefulness in examining media texts outside of the traditional parameters of industrial practice in film, television, and media studies.

Thus, while these texts might still be perceived within the bounds of medium specificity, the reality is that they are products of increasing convergence at the levels of both production and distribution. A decision made by a network executive to produce yet another iteration of a ghost

¹ Susan King, "Your cable is haunted," *L.A. Times*, January 5, 2010. Web. <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/jan/05/entertainment/la-et-ghosts5-2010jan05>. Accessed March 10, 2016.

hunting program might be based as much on the success of a similar show on another network as on the success of a film franchise that points to a potentially untapped audience segment (or vice versa). Likewise, viewers are also seeking out texts which exist within their own media silos, allowing for producers to capitalize on the popularity of media texts outside of the medium within which they work. The cycle of paranormal themed shows and films (among many other examples currently crowding our screens) highlighted above demonstrates our need as scholars to reconfigure how we study media texts and their engagements with culture. Generic formulas have a long history of being used by companies to attract audiences based on their popularity over time. The major difference in the conglomerate environment is that those formulas result in trans-media cycles of production.