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# Access: Reflections on studying up in Hollywood

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## Abstract

This is an article about the difficulties of doing ethnography in relatively enclosed and secretive communities, based on my experience of trying to launch an ethnographic study of Hollywood. I consider (separately) the problems of doing participant observation in 'inside' locations, and the problems of gaining access to industry insiders for interviews. In response to the problem of doing participant observation, I propose the practice of what I call 'interface ethnography', attending events in which the closed institution presents itself to 'the public'. In response to the problem of gaining access to insiders for interviews, I discuss the important role of the interviewee's 'interest', whether practical or intellectual, in the project.

## Keywords

Hollywood, studying up, participant observation, interviews, 'interface ethnography', informant interest

What makes accurate books about the machinery of the movie business so rare is the difficulty of obtaining access. For all their grandiosity, for all their ability to infuriate, movie people are rarely stupid. What they cannot control they do not trust, and a reporter with access they view as others might a terrorist. (John Gregory Dunne, *The Studio*, 1998 [1968]: vi)

Hollywood still matters greatly.<sup>1</sup> It is true that movie viewing has been declining for more than half a century, and that television now reaches far more people than movies. Yet judging from the endless flow of popular magazines, books, and journalism, Hollywood films and the world of Hollywood filmmaking retain a kind of compelling glamour that never seems to fade. Similarly, one could argue that Hollywood films retain a great deal of cultural power, a capacity to shape both the larger culture and viewers' subjectivities in ways that Horkheimer and Adorno

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decried more than 60 years ago in their influential attack on 'the culture industry' (1999 [1947]). Starting in the 1970s, Stuart Hall and his colleagues of the Birmingham School of cultural studies (e.g. Hall et al., 1980) launched an important challenge to the Horkheimer and Adorno perspective, arguing that viewers are able to resist and transform the messages that mass media seek to impose upon them. But I share Elizabeth Traube's view that the power of culture industries and their products must not be underestimated: '... consumers are active participants in the creation of meaning who put what they consume to creative use. But the analytic splitting of production from consumption overstates the interpretive control exercised by consumers and understates the power of the culture industries ...' (Traube, 1996: xii). Hollywood, arguably still the queen of the culture industries, has the power to produce certain kinds of products and not others, to tell certain kinds of stories and not others, all the while seeking to move people emotionally and viscerally, and succeeding more often than not. For these and other reasons, then, Hollywood and its products remain important objects of study for the anthropologist interested in the forces shaping American, and even global, discourses, identities, and subjectivities.

Yet Hollywood has only been studied once by an anthropologist, and that was 60-plus years ago. Hortense Powdermaker, student of Malinowski, founder of the Department of Anthropology of Queens College in the city of New York, conducted fieldwork in Hollywood for about a year between 1946 and 1947. She wrote a monograph, *Hollywood the Dream Factory* (1950), which probably remains her best known book. In part the lack of further studies can be attributed to the relative avoidance of American ethnographic research by anthropologists. Starting in the 1970s, however, more and more anthropological work began to be done in the US (see Ortner, 1991, for an overview), yet no one returned to the scene of Powdermaker's efforts.

There are no doubt many explanations for this, and it is not the purpose of this article to explore all the possible reasons. Rather I wish to focus on one specific factor that may have made Hollywood a particularly daunting project to undertake: the problem of 'access'. As I will discuss below, anthropologists have always had access problems; it is part of the very nature of fieldwork. But in the case of Hollywood, the problem of 'access' seems to be particularly acute, and has bedeviled most outsiders (including Powdermaker) who have tried to get 'inside' for the kind of research anthropologists want to do. Ethnographers have had more luck with television (Dornfeld, 1998; Gitlin, 1983; Grindstaff, 2002), but most of the quasi-ethnographic work on the movie industry has been done by journalists (Biskind, 1998, 2004; Dunne, 1968; Ross, 2002; Salamon, 1991) and Hollywood insiders themselves (Bart and Guber, 2002; Goldman, 1983; Obst, 1997). A recent ethnographic success story – John Caldwell's study of 'cultures of production' in Hollywood (Caldwell, 2008) – also indirectly underscores the problem of access. Although Caldwell's complex and sophisticated study includes both above-the-line (producers, executives) and below-the-line (technicians, crew) industry workers, the book leans heavily toward below-the-line workers, suggesting once again that a

scholar is more likely to get 'inside' if that inside is, as with so much classic anthropological work, among the less powerful.

There are really two distinct issues of access for the anthropologist. One has to do with the possibility of participant observation; the other with obtaining interviews. While in classic fieldwork the two are part of a single package, in a situation like Hollywood they have emerged as quite distinct, and in what follows I will visit them separately. With respect to participant observation, I will discuss what might be called 'interface ethnography', doing participant observation in the border areas where the closed community or organization or institution interfaces with the public. And with respect to interviews, I will explore the proposition that much of what is called studying up is really 'studying sideways', that is, studying people – like scientists, journalists, and Hollywood filmmakers – who in many ways are really not much different from anthropologists and our fellow academics more generally.

## Hollywood and secrecy

'Hollywood' in spatial terms is an entity that is spread discontinuously across and beyond the city of Los Angeles. But its spatially discontinuous nature should not be confused with the question of whether there is in fact a 'community', and in this case the answer would very definitely be yes. The grounds for saying this include at least the following: 1) there is a relatively small number of insiders and, for the most part, they all know who they are; 2) there is a well-known and well-trod urban geography punctuated visually and symbolically by the various studio lots scattered across the city; 3) there are newspapers and magazines directed toward this community that insiders read compulsively to stay abreast of current developments; 4) there are ritual occasions (most notably the Academy Awards but there are others as well, and these are proliferating all the time) when the community comes together to celebrate itself; and more. It is ironic that this site of high- or even post-modernity is also one of the few places in America where 'community' in a relatively classic sense really exists.

Although the community is delocalized, it has a very strong sense of its boundaries. It is deeply invested in discourses and practices that both define and constantly construct insiderness and outsiderness. One might go so far as to say that the inside/outside binary is an 'elementary structure' of Hollywood life.

There are some practical reasons for this. For one thing, Hollywood is a business involving quite cutthroat competition; information is managed for competitive advantage as it is in any business (see especially Gamson, 1995). There is also the fact that, because this is indeed a real community, people need to sustain their social relationships in good working order. One may hate someone, or think poorly of him/her, but this must not be allowed to circulate (unless there is some deeper reason for allowing it to do so). Further, the products of Hollywood – movies and the larger world of cultural mythology of which movies partake – are all about illusions, and the boundaries around the production process, and especially around actors, are important for maintaining those illusions.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to these and no doubt other practical reasons, there is the sheer clubbiness of the Hollywood community. One screenwriter I interviewed likened it to a country club. Producer Christine Vachon likens it to high school, and writes of a culture of exclusion:

Lots of writing about the film industry promises to take you 'inside' Hollywood. Even *in* Hollywood, most people are obsessed with being even further 'inside,' on getting a first-look, the right of first refusal, the hottest invitations. It's a culture that thrives on exclusion. (Vachon and Bunn, 2006: 7)

Or take the TV series, *Project Green Light*, in which actors Matt Damon and Ben Affleck, and producer Chris Moore, hold a contest for the best screenplay, with the winner to get \$1,000,000 from Miramax to make his or her film. The panel of judges includes several high ranking Miramax executives, including Meryl Poster, Co-President of Production, and Jon Gordon, Executive Vice President of Production. Producer Moore is very clear that the show is all about providing access to these otherwise inaccessible personages:

I think every aspiring director, every aspiring writer, would love to have people like Jon and Meryl reading their scripts. . . It is impossible for somebody who doesn't have an agent, or contacts, or didn't go to college with one of them, to get a meeting with them. That is the essence of *Project Green Light*: We are giving people access. (Disc 2, Episode 1, Chapter 4, 'Deciding on the Final Three')

The boundaries of Hollywood are maintained in innumerable ways. One might begin at the level of language and information, and consider the trade magazines. The contents of *Variety*, for example, are highly coded at multiple levels. The magazine maintains a made-up alternative vocabulary, a system of in-house abbreviations and spellings, and a fondness for cute puns and rhymes. Here are a few headlines from the 11 July 2008 issue: 'Studios Kick Ash on DVD's', about how four major studios will include anti-smoking messages on some of their youth-oriented DVDs; 'Censors Chummy with U's Mummy', about how Chinese censors want to cut Universal's 'The Mummy'; and 'Creatures find Comfort at Col', about a movie about a veterinarian to be produced at Columbia Pictures. Then there is the level of content: what precisely gets reported, with how much space, and in what location in the magazine. At both levels the outsider has difficulty reading: even if one can make sense of the language (and it is not that difficult, but it is distracting), one cannot understand the meanings being conveyed. The effect is to strongly reinforce the inside/outside divide, as insiders (they assure me) 'get it' and outsiders don't, while at the same time leaking the valuable information that keeps the industry humming.

But most of the construction of the inside/outside divide is at the level of materiality and space. Most visibly, the studio lots have high walls that run on for long distances, impressing one with not only the scale of the physical barrier but

the amount of real estate enclosed within (see also Caldwell, 2003). Stars and other major personalities also live in high-walled barricaded houses, and the whole conceit of 'star tours' is to take tourists past locations where nothing is visible at all. I have taken one of these star tours and it is fascinating to be sitting in a bus with a group of people outside an enormous wall or hedge, while the guide, in a deep and solemn voice, conjures up an image of the invisible star leading his or her life within.

The set of a movie in production is another kind of space to which it is very difficult for an outsider to gain access. At the beginning of the project I could not get access to sets at all. But after about two years of interviewing, I had gained enough allies to get me 'on set' for three different productions. Given contemporary technology, most of the action of the filming is observed (even by the director) through monitors some distance away from where the action is taking place. The monitors are set up in a tent called 'video village', which is set up and taken down as the filming moves even relatively short distances. I quickly learned that being 'on set' did not mean I was really 'inside', unless I were actually in video village.<sup>3</sup> It seems there is always an inside further inside the inside.<sup>4</sup>

Again it is not only the anthropologist who experiences the boundaries of access and the varying degrees of inside-ness. Christine Vachon, quoted above, was a very well established, and indeed in certain circles quite famous, independent producer when she went to the Cannes film festival in the year 2000 to raise financing for some projects. Vachon offers 10 funny rules for survival at the festival, of which Rule 6 is 'There is always some other great thing happening that you have not been invited to.' She expounds:

Cannes breeds this feeling, no matter how secure you think you are. You walk around sensing that, at any moment, there is a lunch, a party, a press conference, a meeting that you have been excluded from. You try to stay above it, but then someone says, 'I'm heading off to the Luxembourg Film Financing Website Lunch!' and suddenly you're back in high school. (Vachon and Bunn, 2006: 118)

With all this, then, it is no surprise that anthropologists (among others) have had trouble gaining access to 'Hollywood'. In the next section I will look briefly at Hortense Powdermaker's experiences, and then my own. Partly I present these accounts as (meta)ethnographic, as ethnographies of what trying to do ethnography in Hollywood is like. Additionally, however, it was in the course of experiencing all those difficulties, and then finally beginning to resolve them, that I was forced to think further about what kinds of issues were at stake.

## **Anthropologists in Hollywood**

Hortense Powdermaker, as noted earlier, conducted her fieldwork in Hollywood for about a year in the late 1940s.<sup>5</sup> She writes in various ways about her entry into the project, and the ways in which she conducted it. She characterizes her role as

follows: 'As in any field trip, my role was that of participant-observer' (1950: 7). But although she did gain some access to more ethnography-friendly contexts – she 'went on the sets a number of times', attended 'guild meetings', 'had leisurely evenings with friends, and went to some of their parties' (all quotes on p. 7) – a close reading of the Introduction makes it clear that the project was conducted almost entirely through interviews.<sup>6</sup>

Powdermaker also does not indicate in the Introduction to *Hollywood the Dream Factory* that she was troubled by access problems. However, in her memoir about her various field experiences, *Stranger and Friend* (1966), we get a rather different picture. In the section on the Hollywood project she states that there were 'formidable problems' and writes, 'Today I am critical of the Hollywood field work, more so than of any other field experiences' (p. 211).

She attributes the problems to a variety of factors, but two are relevant to the point at hand. The first concerns the absence of a 'definite' community, and thus the absence of the possibility of participant observation:

When I left my apartment, on foot or in a car, I could not perceive a community. Hollywood was not a structured geographical locale; studios and homes were spread for many miles in the sprawling city of Los Angeles, which I thought ugly.<sup>7</sup> In both Lesu [in Melanesia] and Indianola [in Mississippi], the communities were definite, and it had been relatively easy to observe constantly and participate in their life. Experiencing the culture in each had been continuous and escape had been difficult. This kind of constant and seemingly casual observation was not possible in Hollywood. (p. 213)

Another formidable problem was that of access to the most powerful people:

With the exception of one atypical front-office executive... , the few interviews with the powerful men at the top in major studios resulted in only superficial data and impressions.<sup>8</sup> Many would not consent to be interviewed at all and others agreed only if their public relations aide was present – not an interview in my estimation. Accordingly I never knew the top level of the Hollywood hierarchy, as I had known its equivalent in all other field work. I was well aware of the lack of direct contact with the most powerful segment of the social structure, but all efforts to include it were rebuffed. (p. 216)

My own experiences were quite similar. I first thought to gain access through several sons of members of my high school graduating class who I knew to be working in 'the industry' (as they call it here in Los Angeles). I had done a study of my high school graduating class (Ortner, 2003) and at the time (early to mid 1990s) I had thought I would make it a multi-generational study. Thus, I interviewed not only about 100 of my own high school classmates in depth, but about 50 of their grown children. Six of the latter (all male) were working in one way or another in Hollywood, and I interviewed five of them, missing one of two talent agents.

In the interim I heard that this last person, who I will call JB, had become extremely successful and was now quite highly placed in one of the major agencies. Because of this I decided to call him first, even though I hadn't interviewed him before. His mother, my classmate, had given me his cell phone number and had also let him know that I would be calling. I called once and left a message, and he did actually call me back but I wasn't home. He left a message – very minimal – 'this is JB returning your call' – and I called him back. Silence. I called again. Silence.

I began many initiatives like this in that early period which in one way or another went nowhere. I was getting a growing sense of how hard – and perhaps even impossible – this project might be.

My next thought was to try to start higher up the ladder. My cousin, Charles (Chuck) Ortner, is a high-level entertainment lawyer who knows many highly placed people in the TV and music industries. In the early stages of the project I was also thinking about doing something with television rather than, or in addition to, films; I was keeping a lot of options open as I had no idea which initiative was going to pan out. I was (and still am) interested in so-called reality TV, and specifically the show *Survivor* with its faux-primitive, desert island, motif. Chuck called one of his contacts, a senior Vice President at CBS Television, who gave Chuck a name for me to call, saying I could use his (the senior VP's) name. I did make that call, and the person called me back, no doubt because of the power of the senior VP's name. This second person said he wasn't actually the right person and gave me another name. This went on through a series of names, with each person – to my mounting excitement – returning my call. And then suddenly – once again – the whole thing died. I was able to reconstruct afterwards that the access I was being considered for was a so-called Press Tour, provided for important journalists who can create publicity for the show. I had represented myself as an anthropologist and 'free-lance journalist' but at some point it must have become clear to them that I was very small fry indeed and at that point I was simply dropped.<sup>9</sup>

These and many other dead-end experiences made me reflect on the question of trying to gain access via 'contacts'. I have come to realize that probably every human being in Los Angeles has a contact in the industry, and is happy to give me a name and number, or even to make the initial contact with that person on my behalf. At first I thought I should follow up on all of these leads, and perhaps I should have. Yet the *Survivor* experience made me think a little bit harder about that. While it is probably true that some kind of approach through contacts is inevitable, it now seems to me that if the person being contacted is merely doing somebody a favor, they are very unlikely to make something really happen. They either don't call back like JB after the first time (which I took to be the minimal bow to his mother's wishes), or they pass one down the food chain till one finally reaches someone who is so far from the original contact that the whole thing is irrelevant to them – and that final person doesn't call back.

I am inclined to think that the missing ingredient in these sorts of contacts is the insider's *interest*, in either or both senses of the term. It may be a question of pragmatic interest: the people organizing the CBS press tour are looking for



big-time journalists from major media who will give their programs important publicity. I had nothing to offer.<sup>10</sup> But there is also the question of interest in the sense of curiosity, of intellectual or 'gut' engagement with the idea: somebody needs to *feel*, for whatever reason, that this is an interesting project, and get behind it. I will come back to this point below.

At this point I turn to the two major arenas of fieldwork, participant observation and interviewing. As noted earlier, these are usually part of a single package, but the access issues were quite distinct and I need to address them separately.

### **Participant observation: Interface ethnography**

At the beginning of this project I had access, through friends, to award-winning producer James Schamus, who I approached for the possibility of doing participant observation in his production company, Focus Features.<sup>11</sup> Schamus was kind enough to give me an hour of his time on the telephone, and he was sympathetic to my request, but said participant observation at the company offices was quite impossible because of the numerous confidential conversations, meetings, and deals that take place there every day. He doubted that anyone else would let me do it either.

At the higher levels of the Hollywood scene – conversations, meetings, and workaday practices among high level decision-makers – Schamus was completely correct and participant observation deep 'inside' has been impossible. Early on in the project I found one producer – I will call her Harriet – who thought it might be interesting, or perhaps just amusing, to let me in to at least some limited contexts within her business. I did an interview with her in her office and then she invited me back to sit in on a relatively low-power meeting, a so-called 'meet and greet' with a screenwriter she and her partner were cultivating. I was, needless to say, ecstatic. After that meeting, however, she evidently had second thoughts. She never returned another phone call or e-mail again. And no one else has even come close to giving me a similar opportunity.

Other anthropologists doing projects with high status and/or powerful people (what Laura Nader has called 'studying up', to be discussed more fully below) have had similar experiences. Hugh Gusterson did an ethnography of Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, in which nuclear weapons technology is researched and developed (1996). He subsequently published a paper (1997) in which he reflects at some length on the fate of participant observation in studies such as his. He comments that 'in most cases participant observation will be highly problematic, if not impossible' (p. 115), and that 'participant observation is a research technique that does not travel well up the social structure' (p. 115). Going further, he says that 'it may be that anthropologists who want to study up will have to abandon, or at least subordinate, the research technique that has defined anthropology as a discipline... ' (p. 116). Instead he calls for ethnographers to pursue what he calls 'polymorphous engagement', which means 'interacting with informants across a number of dispersed sites, not just in local communities, and

sometimes in virtual form; and it means collecting data eclectically from a disparate array of sources in many different ways' (p. 116).

Of course anthropological work has been moving in this direction for some time now, and not just in the context of studying up. The move toward multi-sited fieldwork (Marcus, 1998), the use of archives (e.g. Dirks, 1992), or in any event a deeper engagement with history (e.g. Ortner, 1999), the greater reliance on interviews (e.g. Ortner, 2003), the use of texts of every kind as both sources of information and embodiments of deeper meanings (starting with Geertz, 1973) – all of these have been expanding the anthropological toolkit in extremely valuable ways. And it may indeed be the case that one has no choice, in some cases, but to give up on participant observation entirely, and to resort to what Margaret Mead and Rhoda Métraux famously called 'the study of culture at a distance' (1953).

Yet I did not want to give up on participant observation so easily, even in 'studying up' and/or highly dispersed and/or dangerous (e.g. Robben, 2005) contexts where it appears to be difficult or impossible. In the case of the Hollywood project, and in light of all my frustrations sketched above, I began to seek opportunities – any opportunities at all – to enter 'halfway' or 'interface' spaces in which some sort of revelations about insiders' ways of thinking and talking and (re-)presenting themselves might be heard and seen. One of these was the Star Tour noted briefly above. Let me sketch a few more here.

First, many relatively closed communities (like Hollywood) nonetheless have public events. For example, there is something called 'The Writer's Expo' that takes place every year in Los Angeles and caters to the hordes of would-be screenwriters who inhabit the city. Anyone can register and attend the many panels in which successful Hollywood professionals – writers and producers – sit and talk to audiences about the art and craft of writing, selling, promoting, etc. one's scripts. I attended one in 2005 and it was enormously informative in terms of hearing the kinds of discourse professionals use to represent what they do and how they do it, a discourse which may or may not correspond to real practices but nonetheless tells one something about the culture in question.<sup>12</sup> In addition, the panelists told personal stories and anecdotes about their own experiences which again constituted a kind of public ethnographic data; I assume they would tell me much the same kinds of stories were I to succeed in getting an interview with them. Moreover, the whole Expo was interesting as part of an industry specifically designed to help people break into the industry. Besides the panels and lectures of the official Expo, the tables in the lobby were littered with flyers for screenwriting classes, workshops, and software, as well as screenwriter support groups and therapists.

I also attended several film festivals, including Sundance 2007, and the Los Angeles Film Festival in 2006 and 2007. These were even more productive. At Sundance I had a personal connection with a film in the competition, a brilliant documentary called *No End in Sight*. I was able to hang out with the group that came to the festival with the film, including the producer/director Charles Ferguson, and share in the excitement of the competition, resulting finally in a Special Jury Award for the film in the documentary category.<sup>13</sup> I also had a

personal connection to a very interesting film called *Kabul Transit* in the 2006 Los Angeles Film Festival; one of its co-directors, anthropologist David Edwards, had been a student of mine. Even without a connection, there was plenty of grist for the interface-ethnographer's mill. In addition to film screenings, the Los Angeles Film Festival stages many panels, lunch talks, poolside chats, and public interviews with major figures in the independent film world, open to anyone with the right passes and tickets.

Further, in all of the festivals, most screenings of films are followed by Q&As with the directors of the films. In fact screenings with Q&A afterwards are not limited to film festivals and are another major locus of interface ethnography. If one belongs to any sort of film-related organization, one will be invited to screenings at which people importantly connected with the film – producers, directors, or writers – will take questions afterwards about the conditions of making the film. I joined one of these organizations (Film Independent), attended many such screenings, and took copious notes during the Q&As. I also took an extension course at UCLA called 'Sneak Previews', with screenings and Q&As every week.

I initially viewed my attendance at the Writers' Expo, screening Q&As, festivals and similar events as ethnographic supplements, something to beef up the project which – I could already see – would be heavily interview-based. But in fact critical film and television scholar John Caldwell has argued that such events, among many others, should be seen as part of a 'hierarchy of graded spaces' in which significant 'professional and industrial rituals' take place, and through which one can learn an enormous amount about the cultural assumptions and social relations of the industry, even if one never gets to the highest level of 'insiderness' (Caldwell, 2003: 186 and *passim*). Writing of what he calls 'cultivation rituals', for example, rituals in which the industry seeks to promote a view of itself as 'collaborative, personal and humane' (p. 171), Caldwell writes:

This acting-out... frequently takes place in what might be termed 'half-way spaces' that exist between the private and public spheres of the professional: guild halls, film festivals, cinemathèque retrospectives, film/TV museums, summits and panels, industry conventions, trade shows and universities... Cultivation rituals and mentoring activities in these half-way spaces, ironically, often pretend to bring the heretofore hidden secrets of the bunkered practitioner out into the light of day. (p. 171)

The 'ironically' in that last sentence suggests that the practitioners do not actually bring the secrets out into the open. At one level this is true, and we are not really privy to all the 'budget-busting excess, bad-bet developments, derailed productions, colleague back-stabbing and corporate "exit-strategies"' (p. 171), except through the heavily coded pages of *Variety*. But it is also Caldwell's point that people in these contexts always reveal more than they intend, especially at the level of the deep background assumptions that shape what they say and what they do not say, as well as the body displays and interaction rituals they perform, in these arenas.

In any event without quite theorizing it so elegantly, I had been enacting at least a part of Caldwell's agenda, showing up in many physically disconnected but structurally/culturally connected – and open to the public – sites around the city of Los Angeles, watching people do their thing and listening to them talk. When I first started conceiving of this project, I was still living in New York, and imagined I could do this project by commuting as I had done for *New Jersey Dreaming* (2003).<sup>14</sup> Now that I am living in Los Angeles, and realize how much of the social universe and cultural formations of Hollywood are literally soaked into the spaces and events of the city, I think that would have been quite impossible. Thus, although the meat of the project has continued to be the interviews, doing ethnography at various sites of interface between the inner world of Hollywood and the outer world of 'the public' has been important in generating, at the least, enough knowledgeable to hopefully conduct better interviews, and at most, some genuine ethnographic insight into 'Hollywood'.

### Interviews: Studying sideways

In an extraordinarily prescient article published in 1969 entitled 'Up the Anthropologist', Laura Nader urged anthropologists to 'study up', that is, to engage in the critical study of dominant institutions and what she later called 'controlling processes' (1997) in powerful nations like the United States.<sup>15</sup> One section of 'Up the Anthropologist' is called 'Obstacles and Objections', and addresses among other things issues of access. Nader paraphrases objections based on problems of access: 'The powerful are out of reach on a number of different planes: they don't want to be studied; it is dangerous to study the powerful; they are busy people; they are not all in one place, etc.' (1974: 302). While minimally acknowledging these points, she also goes on to challenge them:

The difficulties are true of the people that anthropologists have studied in many different places. That problems of access are any different, or at least any more problematic, in studying up in the United States is a proposition which has not been adequately tested. Anthropologists have had problems of access everywhere they have gone; solving such problems of access is part of what constitutes 'making rapport'. In view of our successes among peoples of the world who have been incredibly hostile, it is rather surprising that anthropologists could be so timid at home. (p. 302)

I am not sure it is a question of anthropological timidity, although some of that may be involved. And I do think, contrary to what Nader says, that contemporary institutions of power have generally been able to surround themselves with rather more impenetrable bastions of enclosure. Nonetheless, Nader's general point is well taken: anthropologists seeking to do ethnography in relatively closed communities simply need to get more creative.

If it is hard to get into the inner spaces of Hollywood, it is also difficult to get people to sit for interviews, especially of course people in any sort of powerful

position. Despite Nader's dismissal of this point, people like this are indeed very busy (as in academia, busyness is both real and part of the culture), and the anthropologist's needs are of very low priority for them. In the early stages of the project I was extremely frustrated about the possibility of getting to talk to anyone who was actively involved in making films in Hollywood. I conducted a number of interviews with people who were quite interesting, but who nonetheless, and for various reasons, were quite marginal to the art/business of filmmaking. And unlike the arguments in the last section, where the margins of Hollywood spaces could be ethnographically productive, the same is not true of interviews. If the person is not him- or herself 'inside', then the interview cannot really pay off.

Eventually I got a break through the good offices of my colleagues in the UCLA School of Theater, Film, and Television. John Caldwell, professor of Film and Media Studies, put me in touch with Denise Mann, who runs the Producers' Masters Program. Denise put me in touch with Cathy Rabin, a screenwriter. Cathy put me in touch with Albert Berger, an independent producer, and Albert put me in touch with more producers as well as some studio executives. And so the ball got rolling.

There are important reasons why people like Cathy Rabin and Albert Berger were more receptive to my project. Both are part of the independent film scene which is very different from the world of big-studio Hollywood moviemaking. Independent film people pride themselves on making much more challenging and sophisticated films, films that would appeal to more culturally and intellectually sophisticated audiences. For this and other reasons, there was a much better 'fit' between my interests and theirs. I will return to this point below.

In addition, I want to call attention to the specific nature of the chain of contacts that got me to that point, the (not-unrelated) fact that the initial access breakthrough came through academic channels, that is, through professors in the UCLA film school. Both the 'independent film' connection and the 'professor' connection bring me very quickly to my point in this section, which is that, while at one level movie-makers seem very inaccessible, at another level they are very much part of the world that we, as academic anthropologists, inhabit. As Elizabeth Traube has astutely written with respect to a series of interviews/lectures with people in entertainment and advertising, we are all part of the 'knowledge classes' (Traube, 1996: xv). Similarly, Faye Ginsburg, Lila Abu-Lughod, and Brian Larkin have noted that 'media professionals are... our peers' (2002: 22). As I began to interview the folks just mentioned, and the folks they referred me to, it began to dawn on me that – even more than in the New Jersey project – I was studying not only my own social class, but my own – in the old Marxist jargon – class fraction.

The interviews always began with a little questionnaire on the person's social background. I asked people what their parents did when they were growing up and how they would describe the social class in which they grew up. While there was some variation in class background, many of the producers and executives grew up in families rich in material or cultural capital or both. In addition, and even more uniformly, they were almost entirely highly educated. Virtually all had BAs, mostly

from prestigious colleges and universities. Some had PhDs or law degrees. I was back in the territory of the PMC, the professional managerial class.<sup>16</sup>

I said earlier that I thought that the important factor in someone agreeing to talk to me was ‘interest’, either practical (not much here) or intellectual. And as I broke through and began doing interviews, it seemed clear to me that that was the main reason people were doing this. On the one hand, they were responding to the name of the contact person, but that was rarely enough. In addition, people – many of whom had taken an anthropology course in college – would say, oh, an anthropological study of Hollywood, how interesting! Filmmaker Rodrigo Garcia (*Nine Lives; In Treatment*) was more specific:

I thanked him for the interview and said I realized he must do hundreds of interviews and it must get tedious. And first he said, well I am happy if this helps you (which I am beginning to hear as the standard polite answer). But then he said, actually I would rather do this for someone who is interested in taking a longer view of all this, meaning presumably the anthropologist. (Fieldnotes, July 2007)

There are of course people in every class and culture who can find the ethnographic study of their own world interesting. In an old collection of essays about ‘key informants’ (Casagrande, 1964), a wide range of anthropologists wrote about individuals who came to share their ethnographic passion in projects throughout the world. More recently, reflecting on his fieldwork in Algeria, Pierre Bourdieu wrote: ‘My inevitable disquiet was relieved to some extent by the *interest* my informants always manifested in my research whenever it became theirs too...’ (1990: 3, italics in original).

But the degree to which shared interest can become the basis for genuine cooperation is magnified when the people being studied have the same kinds of educational background as the anthropologist, the same kinds of cultural and material resources, and particularly, when they are working in the same general cultural zone as ourselves – the world of knowledge, information, representation, interpretation, and criticism. This I think plays a large role in the fact that some of the most active areas in the ‘studying up’ game today are the anthropology of (the work of) the knowledge classes: of science (e.g. Gusterson, 1996; Rabinow, 1996), visual media (Ginsburg et al., 2002; Traube, 1992), journalism (Hannerz, 2004), advertising (Mazzarella, 2003), and finance (Fisher and Downey, 2006).

Yet if in fact, as a graduate school classmate once memorably said, ‘we are all natives’, then the label ‘studying up’ is actually a misnomer. These folks are not ‘up’ relative to us, they *are* – with certain modifications that I will return to below – us. Thus the title of this section contains a modest proposal that we call this kind of ethnographic enterprise ‘studying sideways’, which recognizes the relative complicity between us and our informants, and which also acknowledges our own elite status more fully. I can complain about the difficulties of getting access to Hollywood, but ultimately I can traverse the manicured campus of UCLA and tap the resources of excellent colleagues in the film school.

If studying sideways means that we and our informants occupy more or less the same social space, this in turn has a number of important implications. On the one hand, it has obviously played a major role in helping me gain access to film scene insiders. We all more or less share a habitus, including not least a taste for film, literature, art, and the good life.

At the same time, the fact that they and I are in broadly the same business can also mean that there is potentially a competitive edge to the relationship, an edge that can make its appearance at unexpected moments.<sup>17</sup> This is fact has happened several times in the course of the project, almost always with someone whose position was structurally very similar to mine: a director of a film festival, a director of an organization of filmmakers, an editor of a film magazine. These are all people whose job it is to maintain an overview of the larger system, who pride themselves on having the kind of broad knowledge of the scene and its trends that the anthropologist is also seeking.

In all of these cases there came a moment in the interview where the person would challenge where I seemed to be going. Actually I tried not to be 'going' anywhere in interviews. But informants in general, and these informants in particular, asked fairly sharp questions about what the project was about. I tried to give general answers (especially since I wasn't entirely sure for a long time what the project was in fact about) but occasionally individuals would press the question and I would mention some line of thinking I was pursuing. This was almost always a mistake, as the person would immediately disagree with whatever premise I seemed to be working from.

In most cases this did not totally derail the conversation, but in one case it did. It came during an interview (taped April 2006) with a personage whom I will call Jake Morley, long-time director of a major regional film festival. I was talking to him about independent cinema ('indies'), and I used the phrase 'indie community'. For reasons that I can now reconstruct from the transcript (but won't have time to do here), this set him off:

JM: I find that one of the problems I sometimes have with this kind of study, this kind of an inquiry, is that so often the person who's doing that study creates an entity in order to study it. Essentially I'd argue that you probably can't tell me what independent film is and I'm not challenging you, but you probably can't.

SBO: I wouldn't even try.

JM: Yeah but you probably couldn't tell me even how to start to think about it, and yet you're telling me about the community, how it exists, it doesn't exist, so what I'm suggesting to you is that the ways in which you think about it are often times the ways of trying to [validate] its definition. . .

SBO: Well, let me say first I'm really not trying to impose anything on what I'm seeing. Hopefully as an anthropologist I'm really just trying to hear what is –

JM: Maybe you'll do that, maybe you won't, I kind of doubt [that you won't], I'm not being cynical when I say that, I just kind of doubt it because there's a critical practice in any field by definition. . .

I thought I got the interview back on track for a while after this. I was primarily asking Morley for his views on the whole indie scene, rather than specifically about his own work. I was thinking of him as an expert in general, which indeed he is, with a large overview, which indeed he has. We talked about various topics for a while and I found it all very interesting, so I never really worked back to his own job and his own ‘baby’, the [X] Film Festival. This was a big mistake:

JM: I’ve talked about a lot of things, I haven’t talked about most of the things I do, but that’s ok.

SBO: Well let me shut up, tell me something I wouldn’t even think to ask you.

JM: Actually I don’t want to do that, that’s not what I’m trying to do, I’m not writing your book, nor am I trying to tell you, but to suggest somehow that we haven’t even begun. You haven’t asked me a single question about what [the festival] is, or what it is that I do, which I presume is not the subject of your inquiry.

...

SBO: I think the reason I didn’t ask you was because I’ve been reading a lot so I felt like –

JM: There’s no book that can give you an idea of my vision of that, but there may be other visions of that.

SBO: Right, I think I presumed the importance of [the festival] in the –

JM: ... The fact of the matter is that there’s very little that you could read that would tell you... about what [this festival] does, what does it do? It’s not, how do I say it in the next five minutes? Is that what you’re asking [me to do]?

The whole text – and there is much more – could probably serve as an object lesson in an ethnographic interview gone bad, for an introductory field methods course. But that is not my main point here. Even granting that I did not do an exemplary job as an interviewer, it seemed to me that something else was at work. Morley clearly had no respect for academics who, from his point of view, already know what they will find before they ask the first question.<sup>18</sup>

But I think there is a broader point, namely, that the two of us were in the same arena doing basically similar things. This can work in a pleasurable and productive way, which has been true of most of the interviews, or we can start stepping on each other’s toes as happened here. As John Caldwell said (personal communication) when I described this interview experience, ‘You’re both “framers”’; that is, Morley and I are in the same structural position with respect to the knowledge in question, even if Morley knows infinitely more than I do. Alternatively one could say that we are hearing a version of what Andrew Ross (1989) has called ‘a dialectic of “no respect”’ – from Morley’s point of view I failed to show respect for what was important to him (though in fact I have great admiration for what he does), and he in turn made it clear that he had no respect for the way ‘academics’ go about their business.

Of course, Morley is not alone in dismissing academics who have studied Hollywood. Part of the problem is the unavoidable fact that film people want to



talk primarily about film, and see ethnographies or other accounts of the social and cultural world of film production as beside the point. Thus, in 1968 Andrew Sarris published an essay that began with a distinction between people who study ‘the forest’ – Hollywood as a culture industry – and people who study ‘the trees’, the actual films. The forest people are always homogenizing, and judging, ‘Hollywood’, instead of distinguishing between better and worse directors, better and worse individual films (Sarris, 1968). More generally, there is the idea that outsiders simply can’t get it right. A review of Powdermaker’s *Hollywood the Dream Factory* called it ‘[a] dull and tedious tome. . . Downright silly. . . Most of it could have been put together by any Hollywood correspondent in two weeks’ (quoted in Caldwell, 2006: 109). John Caldwell also quotes someone discussing Todd Gitlin’s *Prime Time*: ‘Gitlin merely came to LA. . . and was “taken to lunch.” Producers and executives take people to lunch for a living. . . Gitlin didn’t realize he’d been hustled by self-serving myths’ (p. 114). Caldwell summarizes:

Surveying the littered trail of industry studies like these over the past half-century shows a repeated pattern: access granted, stories told, behind-the-scenes knowledge made available, scholar challenged or written off. (p. 114)

Putting together the difficulty of access, the history of dismissal of academic work, and the ever-present possibility of triggering hostile responses from informants, the other down side of studying up or sideways is the danger of becoming a complicit ethnographer, overly cautious in the interview situation, and timid in what one writes, wanting to please and impress informants. I use ‘complicity’ here not in the good sense discussed by George Marcus, in which complicity with informants is a way of creating a shared and cooperative space of research (1997).<sup>19</sup> Rather, for present purposes, I am inclined to use the concept here in its more conventional meaning. The idea of complicity in ordinary usage suggests allying oneself with something morally questionable. At the simplest level this might involve pandering to a bullying interviewee, as I did several times with Morley and hated myself for afterwards. But the more serious question of complicity involves pulling one’s punches in interpreting the data and writing the ethnography, something the ethnographer must always be vigilant about.<sup>20</sup>

Yet in the end, as Laura Nader said, all ethnography – in the double sense of both fieldwork and writing – has its obstacles, and it is our job to figure out how to surmount them. This brings me to my very brief conclusions.

## Breaking through

Recall the producer Harriet who initially welcomed my project, but subsequently stopped returning my calls. At the time I was devastated, as she was the only person who had shown any interest in the enterprise and any willingness to let me inside. But there was a fly in the ointment even at the time: I could not stand the kinds of movies her company produced, many of which seemed to be about teenage

boys drinking beer, talking about ‘chicks’, and trying to get laid. I gave myself lectures about my problem with this: it is not my job as an anthropologist to like or dislike the movies people make; all movies tell us something important about the culture we live in, and any kind of movie is just as good as any other for purposes of this kind of project. If this producer was going to let me do participant observation in her business, after all the trouble I had been having, what more could I ask? Still I was not entirely happy. A good part of the project would involve not only ethnography, but a lot of film viewing. How much of that genre could I take?

Harriet’s company is an independent production company, but it puts together Hollywood-oriented movies which it sells to the big Hollywood studios. At the point at which I made contact with her, I was still trying to gain access to the big studios, in the spirit of Hortense Powdermaker. But, as is widely known by now, there are other kinds of independent production companies, which make films that are independent not just formally but substantively, films that work against the Hollywood thematics and conventions, and that try to say something serious and challenging about the world today. Shortly after Harriet dropped me, I made the happy connection described earlier with some independent film people. They were much more accessible than the studio types, they were generous with their time and their contacts, and they opened my eyes to the world of genuinely independent film which quickly became the focus of this project.<sup>21</sup>

I said earlier I thought there were good reasons why the independent film people might have been more receptive to – and sometimes genuinely interested in – my project than people on the Hollywood (or network TV) side of the culture industry. To understand this we need to go back to the point that people who work on the creative (as opposed to technical) side of the film industry are in many ways not that different from ‘us’, that is, from highly educated academics, journalists, critics, and the like. We are all part of what Elizabeth Traube called ‘the knowledge classes’, a sub-set of the professional-managerial class or the PMC.

But even here further distinctions need to be made. If we are all members of the PMC, nonetheless there are what Bourdieu has called ‘dominant’ and ‘dominated’ fractions of this dominant class. Bourdieu first explores this distinction in *Distinction* (1984), but develops it more fully in relation to the arts in *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993). There he argues quite convincingly that any field of cultural/artistic production is structured by the opposition between commerce and art, with commerce lining up with the dominant fraction, and art with the dominated fraction, of the *haute bourgeoisie*. These points perfectly organize the relationship between the world of Hollywood movies and the world of independent film, and provide at least part of the answer for my differential access to the two worlds.

At the very beginning of this project, I had asked myself what might be new in Hollywood since Powdermaker’s work. At one level Hollywood has changed enormously in the past 60 years. Yet at another level all the changes have been consistent with what Hollywood always was about: commercial movie making designed to entertain and please audiences, and to make big money. One could argue then

that the only thing that is relatively new in Hollywood today is the break-out success, since the late 1980s, of an anti-Hollywood, the independent film scene. At least that is what I will argue in works to follow.

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### Notes

1. This is a significantly extended and revised version of a paper called 'Studying Sideways: Ethnographic Access in Hollywood', which appeared in *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries*, edited by Vicki Mayer, Miranda Banks, and John Caldwell (New York and London: Routledge, 2009).
2. See especially Edward Jay Epstein (2006) on non-disclosure agreements or NDAs for people working with stars.
3. Video village actually functions in a more complex way, depending on the style of a specific director. Some directors work much of the time via the monitors in video village, and in that case it has the 'inside' (or inside of inside) quality just discussed. But one director preferred to be much more mobile, working almost entirely with a mobile monitor, and spending almost no time in the tent. In that case those of us sitting in the tent were actually being left behind and left out.
4. Another way an 'inside of inside' is created on sets is the idea of the 'closed set', usually related to sex scenes. This means not only that everyone who does not absolutely have to be in the room (where the action is taking place) is not in the room, but that the monitors are turned off in video village so that the action of the scene cannot be observed from outside.
5. I have been told (Jill Cherneff, personal communication) that Powdermaker had all her field data destroyed. She had been a student of Malinowski's at the LSE, and had been appalled at the unauthorized publication of his diaries. She thus left instructions for her sister to destroy all her materials after she died, and the sister reportedly did so. However, Sydel Silverman found letters from Powdermaker in the files at the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, which funded Powdermaker's research. Silverman uses these letters in a fascinating examination of the politics of Hollywood in the mid-20th century (Silverman, 2007).
6. She says she did 'approximately 900 interviews' (1950: 5) but this seems almost impossible in a year, given the spread-out geography of Los Angeles. It is hard to do more than two interviews a day, at the most, and of course one does not do them every day.
7. Powdermaker was a New York City native.

8. The experience of discovering that interviews with higher-ups in the industry may be relatively useless is widespread; see Caldwell (2008); Kermode (2008); Mayer (2008). The problem may be more general than doing research in relatively inaccessible institutions like Hollywood. I remember finding in my research with Tibetan Buddhist Sherpas that lower level religious specialists (lamas) often tended to be more articulate and useful as informants than higher-ranking lamas. It may be that high-ranking people in any institutional setting are more likely to be too identified with the institution to be able to step back and explain it well (or patiently) to the ethnographer. But there are no doubt many exceptions to this point.
9. I have considered the possibility of doing some free-lance journalism, ideally for magazines that publish intellectually and politically substantial essays, and I have spoken to several editors about this. Hence my self-representation as a free-lance journalist was not false; it was more on the order of an aspiring actor who works as a waitress describing herself nonetheless as an actor.
10. Gamson noted this as part of the problem of access in Hollywood. The academic researcher is 'perceived as someone wanting a piece of the action for free, with nothing to trade' (1995: 87).
11. Thanks to Karen Seeley for the contact.
12. Thanks to producer Sheila Hanahan Taylor of Perfect Pictures, who invited me to the event.
13. Thanks to Columbia University Anthropology PhD student Kate Hohman, who connected me to her partner, film editor Chad Beck, who connected me to the film at Sundance. The film won many other awards and received an Academy Award nomination.
14. I discuss in the book trying to 'ethnographize' the largely interview-based *New Jersey Dreaming* project, through being attuned to the various spaces I was able to enter (2003: 15). But I was also aware at the time that the 'commuter-ethnography' worked largely because I was essentially an 'insider' in ways that are not true for the Hollywood project.
15. An earlier and much shorter version of this paper was presented at the 2006 meetings of the Society of Cultural Anthropology. At the panel there was a lively and interesting discussion. One person said she found the phrase 'studying up' problematic, implying as it does that the folks traditionally studied by anthropologists were in some sense 'down'. I can see the point, but I would defend the phrase studying up for certain projects, in which the people studied are of significantly higher status and power than the anthropologist, and in which the aim of the project is some form of cultural critique. On the other hand, as I am arguing in this part of the article, many projects that might have been lumped in the 'studying up' category are really a form of 'studying sideways' or laterally, in terms of the relative status symmetry between the anthropologist and the people being studied.
16. The literature on the PMC goes back to an article by John and Barbara Ehrenreich (Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich, 1979). The economic trajectory and the cultural characteristics of the PMC will be central to this project and will be discussed more fully in later essays.
17. On friction/competition between anthropologists and media professionals, see Ginsburg (1995), Himpele (2002), Ortner (2006).
18. It may or may not be relevant that Morley is an ABD ['All But Dissertation']; he had said earlier in the interview that he left graduate school because he found it largely

irrelevant to the real world. It is not unusual for there to be some friction between ABDs and PhDs; my degree was probably somewhat irritating to him, as was his charge of the irrelevance of academia irritating to me. For two other discussions of some of the psychodynamics of studying up/studying sideways in media research, see Mayer (2008) and the Epilogue to Grindstaff (2002).

19. See also Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson on 'strategic alliances' in fieldwork (1997).
20. For other discussions of ethnographic complicity in this sense, see Himpele (2002) and Robben (1996).
21. I am grateful beyond words for the successful 'contact' help of the following people: my cousin, entertainment lawyer Chuck Ortner; Professors Barbara Boyle, John Caldwell, and Denise Mann of the UCLA film school; screenwriter Cathy Rabin; and producers Albert Berger, Ron Yerxa, Ted Hope, and Vanessa Wanger. All of these people were interested enough in the project to help me in the first place; all in turn put me in touch with people who were similarly interested and thus willing to give me further 'access'.

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### Films.

- Kabul Transit* (2006) Produced and directed by David B. Edwards, Gregory Whitmore, and Maliha Zulfacar.
- Nine Lives* (2005) Produced by Julie Lynn. Directed by Rodrigo Garcia.
- No End in Sight* (2007) Produced by Jennie Amias, Charles Ferguson, Audrey Marrs, and Jessie Vogelsson. Directed by Charles Ferguson.

### TV series (DVDs).

- In Treatment* (2008) (first season). Executive produced by Rodrigo Garcia et al., HBO.

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*Project Green Light* (2001) (first season). Executive produced by Ben Affleck, Matt Damon, and Chris Moore et al., HBO.

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