

TAFIND — Talent Agents in the American Film INDustry: How cinematic careers and projects are shaped behind the scenes

This project goes behind the scenes of Hollywood and sheds light on the consequential activity of talent agents. Hollywood agents and agencies, even though their activity is highly consequential for the making of entertainment projects and artistic careers, have been almost completely ignored by social scientists so far. This work has investigated the agency world, deemed to be impenetrable and known for its culture of secrecy, through sociological interviews and *in situ* observations.

Thousands of agents work in Hollywood, either in the hundreds of boutique agencies that gather only a few employees or in one of the giant organizations – such as the famous William Morris Endeavor (WME), Creative Artists Agency (CAA), or United Talent Agency (UTA) – which have recently grown very significantly as a result of corporatization and concentration processes. Agents represent many of the Hollywood professions, from actors, directors, and writers (“above the line” creators) to members of film and television crews (“below the line” personnel, from cinematographers to makeup artists, and so on), as well as producers, “reality world” personalities (in TV and digital media), and more. They form a segmented and specialized profession. Specialization mechanisms either mean that small companies tend to focus on one specific dimension of agenting or a “fringe business,” or it manifests itself in the advanced division of labor and compartmentation characterizing large “full service” agencies which are present in the core areas of representing the most visible talent all the while developing ancillary businesses. Regardless, each agent typically handles a long list of clients, from several dozens to over 100 or 150. They practically do a lot more than negotiating deals; their activity includes creative dimensions. They sometimes act as project orchestrators. The organizational settings within which they operate – the agencies – frame their perceptions and actions just as much as does their inclusion into interrelation circles tying them to other types of Hollywood professionals. Different categories of talent representatives, the artists they represent, and their production and distribution counterparts delineate specific interdependence networks that remain informal but structure Hollywood as consequentially as organizations do. This investigation of agenting unveils the invisible structure of relationships organizing action in Hollywood, as it is revealed by the daily experience of the participants.

Methods:

I conducted 122 open-focused interviews with agents, former agents and trainees working in various areas of specialty and types of agencies, as well as with a few of their work counterparts so as to get their perspective on agenting (including studio executives, independent producers, managers, lawyers, publicists, actors, directors, and writers). The interviews have been complemented with five *in situ* observations at agencies and alongside agents. Three observations took place in the organizational setting of different types of companies: a management company in Beverly Hills led by a former agent of one of the very large agencies, a “boutique” agency established on the border of Beverly Hills, by the side of a female agent representing actors and actresses, and a below-the-line agency made up of three agents (representing crew members that work underneath the director in film and TV production) located in Downtown Los Angeles. In addition, two agents let me shadow them repeatedly while they were performing their daily agenting activities: one was a senior agent from one of the major agencies, the other one a talent agent who works in a small company. This fieldwork integrally took place in Los Angeles between 2010 and 2015.

Main findings:

Besides turning light on a relatively unknown profession which contributes in a decisive way to what gets made in Hollywood (describing the social morphology of this professional group, the paths that lead to becoming an agent, the images and elements of professional definition attached to it, the different dimensions of the practice of agenting and the creative domains that they affect), this work presents a series of findings that, while being specific to the occupational system in which contemporary talent agents operate, have a more general analytic impact. They fall within the scope of an occupational sociology of worth which approaches Hollywood as a professional configuration within which the “quality” of people and projects is evaluated at the same time as

their “value” is defined. Agents are amongst the participants in this collective (e)valuation process. We examine both the positions that they individually and collectively occupy and the interactional dynamics that tie them to different types of counterparts. On one hand, the logics of agenting depend on participants’ placement within the organizational system of the agencies. Agents are situated in organizations – from which they draw unequal resources and hierarchized identities – and agencies themselves are located in two distinct systems of cultural production, the world of small agencies and their vis-à-vis on the production side (“Little Hollywood”) being very different from the sphere of the major players to which the few big agencies belong (“Big Hollywood”). On the other hand, agenting is performed in trans-organizational circles: beyond the boundaries of the agency, what matters here for the agent is to create and maintain strong ties with relevant counterparts which are potential “buyers of talent” (studio or network executives, producers, casting professionals, distributors – depending on the level on which an agent operates), allies in the transaction of talent and projects (managers, lawyers, financiers, etc.), and of course actual and potential clients. These different categories of Hollywood professionals compose specific evaluation communities through the activity of which projects and careers get shaped. This activity, as we explain below, creates simultaneously and inseparably economic and artistic value in Hollywood. We show that processes of symbolic consecration do not only happen at a later stage when a product is offered to audiences and when authorized critics, journalists, and commentators of different kinds come into the mix – which is what the sociology of artistic legitimization, especially the Bourdieuan school, has mostly focused on.

Through this approach, we present elements for the understanding of action in social worlds which are, like Hollywood, characterized by the importance of personal ties as a form of power relation, although they are at the same time highly institutionalized and organizationally structured spaces. First, in such types of professional configurations, professional trajectories cannot be reduced to a series of objectifiable positions that one successively occupies. It is crucial, on the contrary, to take into account the role of the interdependent perceptions and shared memory of the participants in interrelation circles: the history of the game as the stakeholders remember it – not just the official positions they held in the past, but the known debts and favors, successes and failures, ties and breakups – matters for the definition of what agents and their Hollywood counterparts can do, that is, for the power they are granted by others in this “perception game.” This is why this case study allows us to explore the interplay of positional power and interactional power. The agent’s ability to influence and provoke behaviors in others (“sign” a star, attract financiers, get an unprecedented price for a client, or simply have one’s phone calls returned at the needed level) has to do with the way in which the resources attached to his/her position are affected by the “capital of relationships” that this person has accumulated. This project has explored the meaning of “relationships” in Hollywood and the mechanisms by which long-term interactions in evaluation communities interfere with institutionalized hierarchies of positions and associated resources. To do so, we have analyzed the relationship work that agents perform, primarily with production professionals whose trust determines an agent’s existence and success, and with artist-clients with whom creating and maintaining ties take the form of emotional work. Both sincere and strategic, relationship work is at the heart of agenting activities.

In sum, there are lessons to learn from the study of agenting, beyond the cases of talent agents and Hollywood themselves. It provides us with points of comparison and analytical resources with which to understand other relationship-based professional worlds: other cultural industries, of course, but also, in spite of obvious differences, other types of social spheres such as those of finance and politics, which are institutionalized environments while being dependent on personal interrelation systems. The conclusions of this research can be of use to policy makers and professional organizations willing to base changes and reforms of cultural industries on deeper knowledge of their workings. They will also be of interest to scholars in the fields of cultural, economic, and occupational sociology, film and media studies, communication. The results of this project have been presented at several international symposiums/workshops as well as in the form of books, articles, and book chapters. Publications include: Violaine Roussel and Denise Bielby, *Brokerage and Production in the American and French Entertainment Industries. Invisible Hands in Cultural Markets*, Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015.