Chapter 15

Lights, Camera, but Where's the Action?

Actor-Network Theory and the Production of Robert Connolly's *Three Dollars*

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In Hollywood, filmmaking is dominated by a number of large production studios that have placed increasing emphasis upon contract and freelance labor since the end of the studio era.[1] Feature film production in many other countries and cities relies even more extensively on impermanent self-employed freelance workers that are less integrated into the long-range business plans of the major studios/distributors. American economist Jeremy Rifkin remarks, "every film production brings together a team of specialised production companies and independent contractors, each with its own expertise, along with the talent.[2] Together, these disparate parties constitute a short-lived network enterprise whose lifespan will be *limited to the duration of the project*."[3] The project-based nature of employment in this industry is hence comprehensive, with very few large film producing firms, formulating what has been coined a "cottage economy."[4]

Noting this mode of production, this chapter will show, through a project-based case study of *Three Dollars* (an Australian feature film directed by Robert Connolly) how Actor-Network Theory (ANT) can be employed to describe this project-based mode of film production that is sensitive to the freelance workers enrolled within it. The development of ANT in the social sciences literatures has offered scholars an alternative to Marxist approaches of media industry analysis. That is, ANT describes and prioritizes *action* of production work activities and relationships over *structure* of the industry's institutions and economies. This chapter therefore explores the potential of ANT as a research language for the film industry by highlighting how some of the nuances of ANT emerge through the case study of *Three Dollars*; and, by noting the research on this according to several key authors, how ANT differs from other theoretical approaches to media production.

Essentially, employing ANT frees the researcher/author from the conceptual straightjacket imposed by top-down, grand, determining metanarratives (such as capitalism, economy, culture, globalization and so on), and helps detail the processes which construct and maintain the dynamic behaviors of the production networks in question. ANT is therefore often articulated as a "flat" or "horizontal" concept, in

opposition to "top-down" approaches that have been utilized traditionally in fields such as cultural geography. Hence, the case study presented in this chapter will highlight the actions and practices of those people (and in some cases, the things) involved in the production of the film. In this way, we will be able to uncover what it is that is done in these projects, how they are maintained over a given time period, and which of them are (un)productive. In other words, to quote one of the "godfathers" of ANT, the French anthropologist and social theorist Bruno Latour, ANT "lead(s) you backstage and introduce(s) you to the skills and knacks of practitioners, it also provides a rare glimpse of what it is for a thing to emerge out of existence by adding to any existing entity its time dimension."[5] As a result, the case study will provide the qualitative data in rich, descriptive detail, and throughout these discussions, ANT will be used as a language to highlight how a focus on *action* over *structure* allows us to explore project-based film production in an alternative, more "horizontalized" way than has previously been offered by other approaches to media industry analysis.

ANT Terminology

In order to proceed, it is necessary to first highlight four key terms used in ANT and ANT-inspired research, and they must be clearly defined as they relate to media production studies: actant, enrolment, black-boxing, and practice. While this is in no way an exhaustive list of the key ANT vernacular, these terms provide the fundamental concepts that are deployed in the *Three Dollars* case study that follows, and provide the basics of understanding of the "actor" and "network" (and the hyphen) in Actor-Network theory.

Actant(s)

Humans in ANT are commonly referred to as actors (and so from henceforth in this chapter, I shall use the term "actor" in the ANT meaning of the word, not to denote a dramatic actor on film or television). Actant is the collective term for either a human *or* nonhuman entity that can be involved in the network. For example, the power inherent in a camera or piece of the set can be just as forceful or power-inherent as the verbal or gestural directions from a director (which would themselves not be possible without inhuman actants, namely the camera, video-assist monitor, megaphone or even the director's chair). If we follow Latour, every action in the production of media that is carried out by a human actor (the director, DP, gaffer, editor) therefore "ends up in the action of a nonhuman" (camera movement, lighting schemes, digitized footage). For this reason, Bruno Latour argues that the responsibility for any given action in production lies with both human and nonhuman actants.[6] The ability that an actant has to "operationalize"

this kind of network on the set is known as agency, which, said in another way, is the "force" used to create the network as the actants in it act.

Enrolment

This process of "enrolment" is fundamental to ANT as the term refers to how the web of actants, or network, in a given production is lengthened or extended. Enrolment in the network involves actants who use their agency in two particular ways—as "*intermediaries*" and "*mediators.*" The difference between the two functions is slight, but important in terms of understanding the mechanics of the network. An intermediary transports meaning without deformation (e.g., a DVD), so identifying its inputs on the network equates to identifying its outputs. Mediators, on the other hand, cannot be identified this singularly, as they might count for one, for nothing, for several, or for infinite outputs. Indeed, for mediators in a network, "their input is never a good predictor of their output; their specificity has to be taken into account every time."[7] Therefore, mediators are, more often than not, the people in the network, but they could be an intricate piece of machinery which requires constant "tinkering," such as the camera or postproduction software. The terms "intermediary" and "mediator" are therefore terms signifying the relative effect of actants over the project. They can enrol other actants into their network, and this is how "power" is therefore achieved.[8]

Black-boxing

In research, ANT considers all aspects of the network that can affect the direction, characteristics, and behavior of the network. When a part of the network becomes self-contained and ineffectual then it can be considered "black-boxed." The classic example offered in many ANT texts is that of the human body—in that the inner goings-on of the human body are only considered when it breaks down. To "black-box" is to effectively convert the inner workings of a human into an intermediary, in that its overall agency has no effect on the network. "Black-boxing" facilitates the studying and description of networks as it allows the researcher or author to gloss over certain aspects of the network without having to detail the many nuances inside the black box. However, if that "black box" is to break down, then it will change the development of the network (and become akin to a mediator described above) and hence will require description.

Practice

ANT takes scholarship past the constraints of ontologically established spatial boundaries and views the world as a construction made up of connections

established by the "doing" of actants. Practice, therefore, is essentially that "doing" that makes up the construction. Space is hence constructed through the practices of actor-networks. Within this scheme, the "spatial variation" is what Michael Serres and Latour[9] talk of when they offer the analogy of the handkerchief; when spread out, you can see certain fixed distances, but when crumpled up these two distances are suddenly close, even superimposed. This "crumpling" forms a mesh of networks (much like the production of a feature film), and the production would incorporate many actants from differing locations, whose actions constitute the timing and spacing of the network, all folded in with the others to produce not simply one time and space, but a multitude of contemporaneous space-time topologies.[10] Practice is often used in conjunction with other different yet related terms such as performance, action, behavior, or doing.

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Armed with knowledge of the fundamental language of ANT, it can therefore be highlighted throughout the discussion of the production and distribution of *Three Dollars*. In this way, the practices of the actants will be explored through the qualitative data presented, and the project itself can "tell the story" of project-based production, rather than reverting to a "top-down" metanarrative articulation which, as we have seen, ANT offers an alternative to.

Three Dollars Case Study

Arena Films, which is based in the Surry Hills area of Sydney, Australia, produced the film *Three Dollars* in 2005. *Three Dollars*, originally a novel by Elliot Perlman published in 1998, tells the story of one man's downward spiral to homelessness. Juxtaposed with his material vagrancy, his fluctuating personal relationships give him a feeling of hope and satisfaction at the finale. As well as my own personal interviews with Robert Connolly and other key actors in the filmmaking process, my research involved accessing a plethora of published work on *Three Dollars*, including newspaper and magazine articles, websites, radio and television programs that could be used as data sources, as well as watching the film itself.

Three Dollars is directed by Robert Connolly, who is a Sydney-based feature film director and producer, co-founder of Arena films and Footprint films, a graduate from a Sydney film school and an Australian Film Institute (AFI) award winner. When writing the screenplay for the film, he sought the help of the novel's author Perlman, and together they wrote the screenplay, for which they won the AFI award in 2005. As Connolly explains, the screenplay differs in chronology from the novel, but still retains all the critical narrative and character elements:

> I think *Three Dollars* was a different, tougher nut to crack [than his previous
> film *The Bank*] in that respect, because the politics of Elliot's novel are much

clearer and we were very keen not to be didactic. So there was a common level of discussion amongst the entire creative ensemble I work with about how we were going to sneak this one under the radar.[11]

The story of *Three Dollars* revolves around a single character, Eddie, played by David Wenham, and was filmed in Melbourne, despite Arena films being based in Sydney. Perlman, who lives in Melbourne, explains how he became enrolled into the production network by visiting Sydney:

> They flew me to Sydney for a while and we had a series of meetings over four days, this was the beginning of it. And I walked into the room with a document that I'd prepared. I'd essentially condensed 380-something pages of the novel into around 40 or 50 pages, so that every single thing that happened was there in point form, cross-referenced to the page in the novel ... And Robert walked into the room with a series of cards, I think they were different coloured cards, and he divided the story into three acts, a different colour for each act. And although I had met him before, I didn't know him all that well and it was the first time we'd actually talked about the work and how we were going to structure the film.[12]

This process shows how the script is an intermediary, coming to existence through the association of Connolly, Perlman, and the novel. Also, it could be argued that Perlman has had to reopen the black box of the novel, to revisit the structure and content of the story. As the film differs in chronology to the book, there has been a reworking of the narrative in order to become a feature film. When there is a screen adaptation of a novel, there remain very few instances where the story in the novel is not changed in some way, but the degree to which this happens can be seen as the degree to which the original novel is the opening of a black box. In this case, it was Connolly and Perlman in conjunction that completely reworked the novel itself, adapting the narrative to suit the big screen.

Once the script had been finalized, there then began a process of pitching the script to various institutions to acquire financing. Connolly explains:

> So in the development stage, networks would involve dealing with agents, negotiating, our lawyers, funding bodies to raise finance, with a video distribution—we work with the company in Melbourne called Madhouse— although having said that we doubled our money with a special program at the Australian Film Council (AFC), so we deal with the AFC and the Film and TV office (FTO). Because we were shooting in Melbourne and Victoria, we contacted Film Victoria as well. During that development stage, acquiring the rights for the project ... often may involve international communication,

someone like David [Wenham] had an American agent, and when we are in the financing stage we have our relationships directly with financiers, the Film Finance Corporation (FFC), state agencies, video distribution, Dendy Cinemas to secure a theatrical release, and Dendy were involved in the release of the film internationally, kind of broadening out.[13]

The enrolment of various institutions in both Sydney and Melbourne can be viewed as a process of lengthening the actor-network, enrolling actants from other cities, thereby associating the cities together through the project—in this case the development of finances for the film. When a Sydney-based filmmaker is looking to make a film, the financing provides a common stumbling block, with many firms struggling to obtain sufficient funds to make the film that they have in mind. So the differing amounts of institutions and distribution firms that were contacted (enrolled) by Robert Connolly show that he had applied for a multitude of financing options. He contacted the AFC, the FFC, video distributors, and Dendy Cinemas and each contributed capital toward the production of the film. Once the money had been raised, the process of recruiting the filmmakers began. Connolly follows, "Then in production, we set up a whole new set of complex relationships, casting agents, you really end up broadening your production and postproduction networks."[14]

The enrolling of key crew members and actors in this type of production (actor-network) is more reliant on the relationships that Connolly had than in a production with a larger budget, as he had almost complete creative control over the final film. For instance, he used David Wenham for the main role, an actor he has worked with on all three of his previous films—*The Bank* in 2001, *The Boys* in 1998, and *Roses are Red* in 1995—as they have a strong working relationship. The cast and crew numbers are small and there are fewer departments than on Hollywood films, which is in part due to the intimacy required by the director, but also due to the lack of finance with which to employ a larger crew. For many films made by Sydney-based filmmakers (and indeed in other cities around the world where the budgets for their films are relatively small), there is an ethos, a general filmmaking philosophy of subsistence filmmaking. The small crew means that the production of the film is more intimate, with a greater degree of creative control at the hands of the director than there would be on a production with more executive producers. However, this increased creative control is malleable, as proved to Connolly by the 10-year-old actor playing Eddie's daughter Abby in the film.

I remember on set there's a scene where she [Abby] has come back from hospital and she says, "I was on a bed with wheels on it in the hospital," and her grandmother says, "That must have been fun," and Johanna says, "No, everyone had them." And on set I said to Johanna [who plays Abby], "Look maybe in

this next take could you show a bit more attitude towards your grandmother, you know, that you're a bit frustrated she'd ask you such a dumb question." And Johanna thought about it and she turned to me and said, "I don't think my character would be rude to her grandmother." And I felt this crew of 40 people looking at me going, "The kid's right, how's the director going to handle this?" It was quite daunting.[15]

It could be said in ANT terms, then, that Johanna is a mediator, changing the outcome of the product through her practice. This effect is opposed to (for example) the light used to illuminate her during a shot, since the light as an intermediary rarely changes its outputs beyond off and on (unless of course it malfunctions, in which case the light becomes an actor-network of electrical parts—the black box of the light is opened up).

Once the shooting period was completed on *Three Dollars*, the film and recordings from the production sets and locations were transferred and forwarded to the image and sound editors so that the next phase, editing or postproduction could begin. On this project, postproduction was conducted not in Sydney but in Melbourne because, as Connolly explains, "It's not done on a cost basis, it is done on a relationship basis. Nearly everyone that I have mentioned, it is an ongoing relationship."[16] Again, the nature of the connections is portrayed as a relationship, not simply a question of which firm will be the cheapest, and the work was conducted by a company that Connolly trusted and knew could do the job that was up to the standards that he required. In ANT terms, his gambit short-circuits the network when Connolly contacts people he trusts, thereby cutting out the practice of finding the cheapest, best, most reliable postproduction provider. This process of trust is crucial when casting; indeed, one of the actors in the film, Sarah Wynter, working on an Australian film for the first time suggested "they work in a way that's very collaborative, but not to the point where I felt like an outsider. I was very welcomed."[17]

Three Dollars initially received limited distribution throughout Australia, and was released in an arthouse cinema chain, Dendy Cinemas (as one of the original financers of the film, Dendy secured cinematic distribution rights to the film). The other areas of distribution (regional and international markets, as well as the various TV and electronic media outlets) are owned by the original firm. Arena films produced the film, and Footprint films, which has ancillary markets for video and pay-TV, provided the Australian distribution rights. Many films produced by domestic filmmakers open in arthouse cinemas such as the Dendy cinema chain, which has locations in Sydney (Newtown and Circular Quay areas), Melbourne, Brisbane, and Byron Bay (all of which are nonhuman actants, essential to the success of the film). There are very few national cinema chains (the largest being Village Roadshow, Hoyts, and Greater Union) that will screen Australian-made

films because the fees charged by the larger cinema chains are unaffordable to local filmmakers. With fees upward of AU$1 million, Australian independent films have to rely on ratings in the preliminary weeks in the arthouse cinemas. If strong enough, the larger cinema chains will then start to show these films. The arthouse cinema chains are thus very important to the distribution of the films made by Sydney filmmakers, and as such, their importance to the network of not only this production, but also most independently produced films in Australia, is crucial. This is why Connolly embarked on a vigorous marketing campaign which saw him visit Darwin, Cairns, and Byron Bay in three consecutive days in order to promote the film to local cinemas, to the local press, and to television stations.[18] If a film is successful enough to make the transition to national release (as was the case with *Three Dollars*) the arthouse cinemas lose out on their exclusive rights.[19] The Dendy cinema in Newtown (an inner-city suburb of Sydney) was the first cinema to show *Three Dollars* as it suited the particular market that the manager was looking for. However, once the film "went national," the audiences then began to watch the show at the larger cinema chains rather than the Dendy cinema in the Newtown inner-city suburb of Sydney.

The type of distribution a particular film receives can also play an important role in the financial and critical success of a film. The Cinema Release Calendar (CRC) is an important force in the distribution business as it largely determines when a particular film is going to be released. Studios that make a film for a particular audience, for example a Pixar animated film aimed predominantly at families, may decide to hold off release to the next school holiday as a distribution strategy. Hollywood majors, with their integrated production and distribution facilities, can "date dump," meaning that they can release a number of their own films on a particular date in order to reduce competition.[20] The CRC can be used as another example of the importance of nonhuman actors in the networks of film distribution, so incorporating and accounting for the CRC in the ethnography again highlights the role that nonhuman actants (in this case, an industry-wide scheduling protocol) can perform in the spacing and timing of the film industry's distribution and exhibition practices.

Once the film had been released and run its course of show times in the various cinema chains that Connolly managed to secure, it was released as a DVD, its rights sold to television networks to air it. In general, once this practice is underway, it could be argued that the film itself is an intermediary. While it may be experienced as a different product depending on where it is viewed (an arthouse cinema, multiplex, or on a DVD player at home), the actual product itself (i.e., the frame-by-frame procession of images) rarely changes form as it is passed around the network (unless there are director's cuts or different versions of the same film). While the medium is altered by the technological differences involved in the transfer of content, unless the film is subtitled or dubbed, then the DVD version is essentially the same film that

might air on television. Then, the translation would occur through the enrolment of the film into other "areas," such as the sound system or quality of television used to view it, the purpose for which it is being viewed, and the social, cultural and personal makeup of the audience.

Hence, the final film product functions as an actant-network. The film is also a black box of associations that has been "opened-up" through this case study, something that an ANT approach to a case study has allowed. There are obviously many other interrelated actors and institutions that could have been articulated in this project-based case study. The network would extend, for example, to the locales used for shooting, the extras, the lawyers, the agents, the projectionists who work at the cinemas. The list could be literally endless. Opening up the black box of *Three Dollars* in this way shows how, as researchers, we can gain a better insight into those practices that are successful, and those that are not so successful. Describing the action of the humans and nonhumans in the network allows for this, as it provides the reader with a better and more nuanced understanding of the processes involved that develop and maintain the film production networks.

That's a Wrap

This chapter has argued that production research using an ANT-inspired methodology can serve as a crucial tool for analyzing and understanding the more intricate, project-based and temporary aspects of the film industry. This is because ANT ties together and considers the differing moments, times, and spaces of a specific production in a single study, *as a networked whole*. Succeeding at this sort of "project ecology" in the context of production studies, Latour asks us to "tell a story" through empirical description and ethnographic research.[21] This project-based research methodology allows researchers to examine the film industry through various techniques, including photographic ethnographies, filmic ethnographies, time-space budget diaries and so on. Such techniques are relevant because they deliberately highlight the "messiness" and complexities of the actor-networks of film production.[22] Using ethnographies as a methodological technique resonates with ANT, as they allow for more *relational* data to be gathered,[23] more descriptive accounts of practice, and therefore more information regarding how spaces (and timings) of networks are created.

ANT, while being criticized in some quarters for downplaying particular human traits (such as emotion and feelings[24]) can provide a crucial methodological language for not just researching the film industry, but for studying project-based industrial organization as a whole. Moreover, the creative industries in general, unlike other heavy industries, are characterized by project-based labor[25] and as ANT provides a more functional "way in" to researching this mode of operation,

the coupling of the two (i.e., ANT research into the cultural industries) promises to become increasingly productive in social science and humanities inquiry.

Notes

1 The major studios, for example, include: Universal, Twentieth Century Fox and others. See Allen Scott, *On Hollywood* (New York: Princeton University Press, 2005) for a comprehensive overview of the so-called "majors."

2 See Jeremy Rifkin, "When Markets Give Way to Networks," in *The Creative Industries*, ed. John Hartley (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 363. The quote contains my emphasis.

3 This project-based mode of production is described and examined as "migratory production churn" and a "nomadic labor system" in John Caldwell, *Production Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 113–119.

4 See, for example, Helen Blair, "'You're Only as Good as Your Last Job': The Labour Process and Labour Market in the British Film Industry," *Work, Employment and Society* 15, no. 1 (2001): 149–169; Malcom Long, "Solving Box Office Blues: Australia Needs More Working Dogs," *Australian Financial Review*, February 24, 2005, 44; Galina Gornostaeva, "The Film and Television Industry in London's Suburbs: Lifestyle of the Rich or Losers' Retreat?" *The Creative Industries Journal* 1, no. 1 (2008): 47–71.

5 See Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 88.

6 There has been an advancement of the nonhuman debate by Heike Jöns who suggests that there is a "complex trinity of actants" that forms a continuum ranging from immaterial entities, through dynamic hybrids to material entities; see Heike Jöns, "Dynamic Hybrids and the Geographies of Technoscience: Discussing Conceptual Resources beyond the Human/Non-human Binary," *Social & Cultural Geography* 7, no. 4, (2006): 573.

7 Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 39.

8 John Allen, "The Whereabouts of Power: Politics, Government and Space," *Geografiska Annaler B* 86, no. 1 (2004): 19–32. Forms of enrolment include "problematization," which is the identification of a network goal; and "interessement" which is "the group of actions by which an entity ... attempts to impose and stabilize the identity of other actors it defines through problematization." Quoted from Michelle Callon, "Some Elements of a Sociology of Translation: Domestication of the Scallops and the Fishermen of St. Brieuc Bay," in *Power, Action and Belief: A New Sociology of Knowledge*, ed. John Law (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986), 208.

9 Michael Serres and Bruno Latour, *Conversations on Science, Culture and Time* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995).

10 Jonathan Murdoch, "The Spaces of Actor-Network Theory," *Geoforum* 29, no. 4 (1998): 357–374.

11 Michelle Dawson, "Interview with Robert Connolly," *Byron Shire News*, June 21, 2005, 5.

12 *ABC: At the Movies*, July 1, 2005.

13 Robert Connolly, interview with the author, May 11, 2005.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Quote from Sarah Wynter in Sacha Molitorisz, "It's All About the Buck," *Sydney Morning Herald*, April 22, 2005.

18 Dawson, "Interview with Robert Connolly," 5.

19 Ibid.

20 Mark Sarfaty, interview with the author, June 2, 2005.

21 On "project ecologies," see Gernot Grabher, "Learning in Projects, Remembering in Networks? Communality, Sociality and Connectivity in Project Ecologies," *European Urban and Regional Studies* 11, no. 2 (2004): 103–123. For discussion of necessity of "story-telling", see Latour, *Reassembling the Social*.

22 John Law, *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research* (London: Routledge, 2004).

23 Harold Bathelt and Jonathan Glucker, "Toward a Relational Economic Geography," *Journal of Economic Geography* 3 (2003): 117–144.

24 Eric Laurier and Chris Philo, "The Region in the Boot: Mobilising Lone Subjects and Multiple Objects," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 21, no. 1 (2003): 85–106.

25 Kate Oakley, "Not So Cool Britannia," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 7, no. 1 (2004): 67–77.