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Cultural labor is a complex term. Does “cultural” refer to the basic inputs and outcomes of an industry, or can it apply to an industry where cultural marks are epiphenomenal (Miller, 2009)? How much of the work done has to be cultural for it to characterize the overall *nature* of that work? Is a carpenter on a film set doing cultural labor? Is a designer in an automobile factory *not* doing cultural labor? Should we accept a distinction between workers “below” and “above” the mythic “line” that is drawn on a class basis by Hollywood accountants, where drivers, caterers, electricians, carpenters, secretaries, interns, and the like are placed in the lower category while writers, producers, executives, directors, actors, and managers reside in the upper? Is the cultural labor force divided along classic Taylorist lines of industrial work, distinguishing blue-collar workers who undertake tasks on the line from the white-collar workers who observe and time them (Scott, 1998a: 18)?

Epistemologically, is work a generative or descriptive category, a Marxist or Weberian one—is it about a relationship to the means of production, or one’s position within a labor market? Must work be productive in capitalist terms in order to be counted as such? Or are moviegoers who buy tickets engaged in cultural work, given that they dress, drive, drink, smell, swear, inhale, and interpret in keeping with their idols? If people make YouTube videos for fun and free, are they working? And how far up- or downstream from Hollywood should we go when we speak of Hollywood workers—to enslaved people in Congo who mine the raw materials that go into cell phones that are used months later to communicate on a studio set, or artisans doing initial production work on animation in VietNam that is then “corrected” in LA? Finally, how do we study these workers, and what questions should we ask as we do so?

There is a voluminous scholarly literature about cultural labor, starting with ethnographies of newsrooms (Gans, 1979; Tunstall, 1971 and 2001; Boyd-Barrett, 1995; Ericson *et al.*, 1989; Golding and Elliott, 1979; Fishman, 1980; Tracey, 1977; Tumber, 2000; Breed, 1955; Domingo and Paterson, 2008 and 2011; Cottle, 2003; Dickinson, 2008; Hannerz, 2004; Willig, 2013; “Worlds of Journalism,” 2006; Tuchman, 1978; Riegert, 1998; Jacobs, 2009). Fictional and factual cinema and television have been

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anthropologically scrutinized since Hortense Powdermaker (1950) named Hollywood “the Dream Factory,” on through John T. Caldwell’s account of its “production cultures” (2008) to Sherry Ortner’s investigation *Not Hollywood* (2013). Researchers have written about the proxemics and deictics of making horror movies, science fiction, documentary television, independent cinema, police procedurals, and soap opera (Buscombe, 1976; Alvarado and Buscombe, 1978; Elliott, 1979; Moran, 1982; Gitlin, 1994; Tulloch and Moran, 1986; Tulloch and Alvarado, 1983; Cantor, 1971; Espinosa, 1982; Silverstone, 1985; Dornfeld, 1998; Ginsburg *et al.*, 2002; Abu-Lughod, 2005; Gregory, 2007; Ytreberg, 2006; Mayer *et al.*, 2009; Mayer, 2011 and 2013; Kohn, 2006).

The primary emphasis of most of this work has been how meaning is encoded at the point of production. Like textual analysis and audience research, these studies generally seek the answer to a particular if endlessly recurring and seemingly universal riddle: why do screen texts matter and what makes them meaningful? The fundamental problematic animating such work is the question of consciousness—specifically, how consciousness is expressed and imbued in cultural production and experienced and interpreted in cultural reception.

This is both venerable and legitimate. But it is not the only means of studying cultural labor. What would happen if we sidestepped consciousness (just for a moment, between us) and loosened its hold on research? What if we accepted that worker consciousness matters, but no more in Hollywood than it does in Detroit? And what would we find if we looked beyond it?

Instead of exploring how cultural workers encode texts and spectators decode them, we might see cultural labor as a post-industrial exemplar that incarnates the latter-day loss of life-long employment and relative income security among the Global North’s industrial-proletarian and, most recently, professional-managerial classes. For the truth is that a rarefied if exploitative mode of work—the artist and artisan—has become a shadow-setter for conditions of labor more generally.

Hollywood is a classic instance of this transformation. A car-assembly-like studio system of production (Fordism) applied to the industry between about 1920 and 1970, though it dramatically eroded from the late 1940s as a consequence of vertical disintegration, suburbanization, and televisualization (Miller *et al.*, 2012). A combination of trust-busting bureaucrats and judges leery of corporate power, returning white GIs clutching preferential housing deals, and the spread of TV across the nation turned urban moviegoers into suburban homebodies. That legal, demographic, and technological shift also transformed Hollywood labor from a regimented but reliable studio life, with longstanding relations of subordination and opportunity, into chaotically marketized, irregular employment.

One important *caveat* to the notion that the classical Hollywood studio system was truly Fordist is that while films were made *en masse*, the routinization, deskilling, and invigilation that manufacturing machinery forced on automotive and other factory workers rarely occurred. Many studio employees participated at various points in the labor process, and their work was not easily substituted. In addition, they had strong social interaction across class barriers (Powdermaker 1950: 169). Ironically, these differences from classic working-class *anomie* helped open the way to intense networking as a substitute for factory discipline.

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The US film industry became a pioneer of the type of work beloved of contemporary management (post-Fordism). With jobs constantly starting, ending, and moving, it came to exemplify “flexible specialization”—a shift from life-long employment to casualized labor (Piore and Sabel, 1984). The pharmaceutical sector, for instance, looks to Hollywood’s labor exploitation and avoidance of risk as a model for its own pernicious development (Franco, 2002; Surowiecki, 2004).

Hollywood workers and bosses strike complex, transitory arrangements on a project basis via temporary organizations, with small or large numbers of divers hands involved at different stages, sometimes functioning together and sometimes semi-autonomously. Networks are fluid:

independent contractors coalesce for a relatively short period of time around one-off projects to contribute the organizational, creative, and technical talents that go into the production of a film. The inherent transience of this production system results in a high rate of tie formation and dissolution
(Ferriani *et al.* 2009: 1548)

It’s a bit like the hothouse of a conference or convention (Moorhouse, 1978). Places, times, and groups affect textual cues, contracts, technology, laws, insurance, policy incentives, educational support, finance, skills, costs, and marketing. Work may be subject to local, national, regional, and international fetishization of each component. This matches the way that the labor undertaken is largely fetishized away from the final text, rendered invisible other than to those dedicated credits watchers in theaters who peer around the bodies of the early rather than the dearly departed. Conventional organizational charts cannot adequately represent Hollywood, especially if one seeks to elude the conventions of hierarchy through capital whilst recognizing the eternal presence of managerial surveillance. Business leeches want flexibility in the numbers they employ, the technologies they use, the places where they produce, and the sums they pay—and inflexibility of ownership and control. The power and logic of domination by a small number of vast entities is achieved via a global network of subcontracted firms and individuals, in turn mediated through unions, employer associations, education, and the state.

This relates to wider shifts in the economics of labor in the Global North that were predicted, ideologized, and planned for over several decades. Fritz Machlup, a neo-classical prophet of the knowledge society, produced a 1962 bedside essential for true believers in doctrines of human capital. New and anticipated developments in the media and associated knowledge technologies were likened to a new Industrial Revolution or the Civil and Cold Wars, touted as a route to economic development as well as cultural and political expression/control. By the 1970s, “knowledge workers” were identified as vital to information-based industries that generate productivity gains and competitive markets (Bar with Simard, 2006). Cold War futurists like National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski (1969), cultural conservative Daniel Bell (1977), and professional anti-Marxist Ithiel de Sola Pool (1983) saw converged communications and information technologies moving grubby manufacturing from the Global North to the South and ramifying US textual and technical power, provided that the blandishments of socialism, and negativity toward global business, did not stimulate class struggle.

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This suited the ideological, investment, and managerial agendas of policy makers and think tanks, but it occurred against a seemingly inimical backdrop—the statist project of mid-century liberal politics, to build a “Great Society,” a term coined by the Edwardian Fabian Graham Wallas (1967). Wallas’ student Walter Lippmann spoke of “a deep and intricate interdependence” that came with “living in a Great Society.” He worked against militarism and other dehumanizing tendencies that emerged from “the incessant and indecisive struggle for domination and survival” (1943: 161, 376). This idea was picked up by Lyndon Johnson (minus the anti-militarism) and became a foundational argument for competent and comprehensive social justice through welfarism and other forms of state intervention.

Ronald Reagan launched his successful 1966 campaign for the governorship of California with a clear alternative, birthed from the idea of human capital: “I propose ... ‘A Creative Society’ ... to discover, enlist and mobilize the incredibly rich human resources of California [through] innumerable people of creative talent” (1966). Reagan’s rhetoric publicly birthed today’s idea of technology unlocking the creativity that is allegedly lurking, unbidden, in individuals, thereby permitting them to become happy, productive—and without full-time employment.

Much of the “Great Society” vision has been undermined by decades of neoliberalism, as per the influence of Reagan and his kind. That deregulatory revolution has ultimately disempowered the very people around whom it was built: the educated middle class. Hollywood showed that workers with abundant cultural capital could move from security to insecurity, certainty to uncertainty, salary to wage, firm to project, and profession to precarity with smiles on their faces. It’s that theoretically bizarre but industrially apt moment when scientific management embraces human-relations management. Capital luxuriates in the disciplined and disciplining love-in that ensues.

Following this logic, US residents hone their education and vocation in the direction of “immaterial labor” (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 286, 290–92). As a consequence, many Hollywood workers come from highly educated, middle-class backgrounds and tailor their education to suit technological and economic change. But against the prevailing *nostra*, that has often resulted in proletarianization: “While capitalist labor has always been characterized by intermittency for lower-paid and lower-skilled workers, the recent departure is the addition of well-paid and high-status workers into this group of ‘precarious workers’” (Gill and Pratt, 2008: 2).

A quarter of a century ago, the lapsed leftist Reaganite Alvin Toffler (1983) coined the concept of a cognitariat to describe the workers who would come to characterize this new age. Today, an autonomist, Antonio Negri (2007), applies the term to people mired in contingent media work who combine fulsome qualifications with marked expertise in cultural technologies and genres. This cognitariat plays key roles in the production and circulation of goods and services, through both creation and coordination.

Work is not defined in terms of location (factories), tasks (manufacturing), or politics (moderating ruling-class power and ideology). What used to be the fate of artists and musicians working on a casualized basis—where “making cool stuff” with relative autonomy was meant to outweigh the benefits of ongoing employment within a controlling corporation—has become a norm. The outcome is contingent

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labor as a way of life. The cognitariat is comprised of downwardly-mobile (yet hyper-mobile!) people whose immediate forebears, with similar or less cultural capital, were confident of secure health care and retirement income. Today's cognitariat lacks both the organization of the traditional working class and the political *entrée* of the middle class from which it sprang.

Needless to say, the prevailing ideology sees the situation quite differently from the critical perspective I adopt. In cybertarian fantasies of this new era, flowers bloom all around in a phantasmagoria of opportunity. New technologies supposedly allow us to be simultaneously cultural consumers and producers (prosumers)—no more factory conditions, no more factory emissions. The result is said to be a democratized media, higher skill levels, and powerful challenges to old patterns of expertise and institutional authority—hence the popularity of “disintermediation”: the putative demise of gatekeepers patrolling the boundaries of meaning (Graham, 2008; Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010).

Time magazine exemplified this love of a seemingly immaterial world when it chose “You” as 2006’s “Person of the Year,” because “You control the Information Age. Welcome to your world” (Grossman, 2006). On the liberal left, the *Guardian* is prey to the same touching warlockcraft: someone called “You” heads its 2013 list of the hundred most important folks in the media (www.theguardian.com/media/2013/sep/01/you-them-mediaguardian-100-2013). Rupert Murdoch was well behind, at number eight (www.theguardian.com/media/series/mediaguardian-100-2013-1-100).

The comparatively cheap and easy access to making and circulating meaning afforded by internet-based media and genres has allegedly eroded the one-way hold on culture that saw a small segment of the world as producers and the larger segment as consumers, while the economy glides into an ever greener, funkier, more flexible post-industrialism. As barriers to the culture industries crumble, hitherto unimaginable freedoms proliferate: readers become writers, listeners transform into speakers, viewers emerge as stars, fans are academics, and *vice versa*. Zine writers are screenwriters, vanity bloggers are citizen journalists, children are columnists, and bus riders are witnesses.

This pseudo-de-professionalization-and-democratization of the media takes many fancy forms. Think of the job prospects that follow! Coca-Cola hires African Americans to drive through the inner city, selling soda and incarnating hip-hop. AT&T pays San Francisco buskers to mention the company in their songs. Urban performance poets rhyme about Nissan cars for cash, simultaneously hawking, entertaining, and researching. Subway’s sandwich commercials are marketed as made by teenagers. Cultural-studies majors become designers. Graduate students in New York and Los Angeles read scripts for producers, then pronounce on whether they tap into audience interests. Precariously employed part-timers spy on fellow-spectators in theaters to see how they respond to coming attractions. Opportunities to vote in the Eurovision Song Contest or a reality program disclose the profiles and practices of viewers to broadcasters and affiliated companies so they can be monitored and wooed. End-user licensing agreements ensure that players of corporate games on-line sign over their cultural moves and perspectives to the very firms they are paying in order to participate (Miller, 2012; www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/big-data-sustainability-podcast?CMP=twf_lgu). In other words, corporations are using

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discounted labor whenever and wherever they can and banking on hipsters and desperates alike colluding in their own exploitation.

Business leeches want flexibility in the people they employ, the technologies they use, the places where they do business, and the amounts they pay—and inflexibility of ownership and control. The neoclassical economic *doxa* preached by neoliberal cultural chorines favor an economy where competition and opportunity cost are in the litany and dissent is unforgiveable, as crazed as collective industrial organization (you know—unions). In short, “decent and meaningful work opportunities are reducing at a phenomenal pace in the sense that, for a high proportion of low- and middle-skilled workers, full-time, lifelong employment is unlikely” (Orsi, 2009: 35). Even the US National Governors Association recognizes that many tasks that are historically characteristic of “middle class work have either been eliminated by technological change or are now conducted by low-wage but highly skilled workers” (Sparks and Watts, 2011: 6).

The way that marginal cultural labor, from the jazz musician to the street artist, has long survived *sans* regular compensation and security now models the expectations we are *all* supposed to have, displacing our parents’ or grandparents’ assumptions about steady employment (Ross, 2009). Hence the success of concerns such as Mindworks Global Media, a company outside New Delhi that provides Indian-based journalists and copyeditors who work long-distance for newspapers whose reporters are supposedly in the US and Europe. There are 35–40% cost savings (Lakshman, 2008; mindworksglobal.com). Or the US advertising agency Poptent, which undercuts big competitors in sales to major clients by exploiting prosumers’ labor in the name of “empowerment.” That empowerment takes the following form: Poptent pays the creators of homemade commercials US\$7,500; it receives a management fee of US\$40,000; and the buyer saves about US\$300,000 on the usual price (Chmielewski, 2012; www.poptent.com/creativenetwork).

How does this work in Hollywood? People are employed on a precarious basis by thousands of small firms dotted across the hinterland of California that offer post-production services, DVD film commentaries, music for electronic games, reality TV shows, and the like (Banks and Seiter, 2007; Scott, 1998b). Highly-qualified graduates and experienced artists and artisans increasingly look for jobs in visual effects, animation, and game development (Cieply, 2011). Many currently ply their trade in wonderfully satisfying jobs at YouTube’s hundred new channels, the fruit of Google’s US\$100 million production (and US\$200 million marketing) bet that five-minute on-line shows will kill off TV. Explosions are routinely filmed for these channels near my old loft in downtown LA. The workers blowing things up are paid US\$15 an hour (Thielman, 2012). Luxury, really. But they’ve all got smart phones ... and not-so-smart loans.¹

Those who come from Los Angeles or flock to it may not even obtain such precarious employment, let alone the fabulous spoils they anticipated, in part because of monetary incentives for film and television to move elsewhere. In 2010, 43 US states sought to “attract” Hollywood through US\$1.5 billion in public subvention. Critics argue that regardless of where projects are shot, most of the key labor force is only temporarily transplanted from the north-east and south-west, specifically New York, traditional home of network TV, and LA, traditional home of film. So

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the plum jobs go to people who spend most of their income and pay most of their taxes outside the places where they briefly work. The locals, by contrast, get distinctly below-the-line positions, as caterers and hairdressers—non-unionized sectors that do not build careers (Tannenwald, 2010; Foster *et al.*, 2013).

Susan Christopherson sees things differently, suggesting that the impact on southern California has been dire:

Entertainment media jobs in the Los Angeles metropolitan region declined by 7.7% between 2005 and 2010, manifesting the impact of the financial crisis. However, for Los Angeles, which has consistently maintained at least a 45% share of the US national film and television employment and is the single most important centre of film and television production in the USA ... , the crisis punctuated a longer-term decline in employment and production capacity ... on-location shooting of feature films reached a high of 13,980 days in 1996; by 2009, it was only 4976 days ... location activity for television productions reached a high of 25,277 days in 2008, reflecting the expansion of low-cost reality and dramatic productions for cable television. Demonstrating the impact of the recession, on-location television production days in Los Angeles dropped by almost 17% in 2009. So, the more-lucrative film production jobs were replaced during the decade by less-lucrative television jobs. These jobs then decreased as the recession took hold ... the number of workers employed in films, television programmes and commercials in 2010 in Los Angeles County was lower than that in any year since 2001. In addition, because of the supply chains that are connected to project-based production, California state employment numbers actually undercount employment losses in the entertainment industry agglomeration in Los Angeles: they do not include unemployment of part-time workers (nearly a quarter of the industry workforce) nor unemployment in ancillary business services such as property, houses and equipment rental shops, which depend on Los Angeles productions for their employment and profits

(Christopherson, 2013: 142)

As well as the complex impact of runaway production on workers, the system is structured in gender inequality. Women are severely over-represented and disempowered in the Hollywood cognitariat. In 2012, they held 18% of above-the-line, off-camera positions in Hollywood's top-grossing 250 motion pictures—an increase of just 1% on 1998. Such inequities are common in project-based industries because of a tendency towards parthenogenesis when looking for employees quickly, as opposed to hiring in more stable organizations that are governed by personnel policies inflected with equal opportunity or affirmative action (Lauzen, 2013; Klos, 2013; Skilton, 2008: 1749).

Conclusion

As Hollywood transmogrified from Fordism to post-Fordism, it modeled a new world of insecurity and uncertainty, an economy founded on risk and anxiety. The

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cognitariat that resulted has been in the forefront of vanguardist capitalism, enabled by cultural workers' cybertarian self-exploitation that colludes in their oppression. The ideology of cybertarianism delivers workers into college and grad school debt, followed by an existence lived from project to project, with lengthy liminal time and space occupied and colored by serving drinks and clearing tables. It's not a good look.

That said, social movements linked to precariousness have made large claims for new alliances of cultural workers and other, yet more marginal, subjects, via the notion of a shared experience of mobility, powerlessness, isolation, competition, and new forms of work founded in risk and responsibility (Gill and Pratt, 2008). Cognitarians unite. You have nothing to lose but your precariousness. But you'd best lose your cybertarianism along the way, dudes. Party on.

Note

- 1 In 1993, 45% of undergraduates nationwide borrowed to pay tuition. Today's figure is 94%. Almost 9% of debtors defaulted on student loans in 2010, up 2% in a year. Average debt in 2011 was \$23,300. Across the country, people graduating with student loans confronted the highest unemployment levels for recent graduates in memory: 9.1% (Martin and Lehren, 2012).

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