

of the “digital generation,” many of them come from a screen culture that assumes video game familiarity, if not expertise. Films and television programming are deeply imbued with these forms. Thus, scholars of film and television ought to understand born-digital media whether or not we wish to write about them. They are part of an imaging practice that is converging with what we have always called, by the most conventional definition, cinema and television. \*

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## Hive-Sourcing Is the New Out-Sourcing: Studying Old (Industrial) Labor Habits in New (Consumer) Labor Clothes

by JOHN T. CALDWELL

*When the tools of production are available to everyone, everyone becomes a producer.*<sup>1</sup>

Chris Anderson, *The Long Tail*

**B**recht, meet *Wired*. We stumble all over ourselves to engage new media, digital platforms, and online fan activities—YouTube, MySpace, critical fan sites, social networks—as a next important stage in cinema and cinema study. Yet in doing so, we may be missing a valuable opportunity. Rather than viewing film and television as one disciplinary chapter being displaced by the “next digital chapter,” film and television can be viewed as resilient organizational cultures that prefigure both participatory media’s *creative relations* and its *social practices*. From this perspective, the industry may help guide online social networks to work their democratic, unruly wonders. This realization may be a tough pill to swallow. Yet I am not cynically dragging the old “industry” warhorse out of the barn as part of a familiar project: to underscore corporate resilience and final advantage. I am not talking about traditional ideas of ideological “recuperation,” that is, where industry serves as the bad guy again hijacking good resistant activities on culture’s fringes. I am instead suggesting that much of the cultural complexity, agency, and sociality we now find in online film and fan

1 Chris Anderson, *The Long Tail* (New York: Hyperion, 2006), 73.

media activities have also been unfolding for some time, decades even, in the very local cultures and work worlds of film and television production. This is why SCMS scholars, at this retrospective vantage point, would benefit by refiguring older models of industry practice, economics, and *labor* in order to understand current new media practices. Such a refiguring would allow us to go beyond certain utopian theorizations about new media, and to consider “digital media” on terms other than its own.

Several disciplinary assumptions guide my argument here. First, much can be gained in film studies by understanding media industries not just as corporate institutions, but as collective cultural activities and embodied social communities as well. Second, viewing “cultures of production” in this way in no way undercuts or prevents political economic analysis of industry. Far from it, my own critical fieldwork on production cultures largely confirms the insights of many contemporary political economists like Dan Schiller, Toby Miller, and others (about conglomeration, runaway production, post-Fordism, etc.), even as it underscores some of the sobering human consequences of recent economic changes. Third, film studies scholars can gain rich insights—about larger historical projects, political economy, and onscreen texts—through the material, grounded study of workers, their tools, and their work habits. Finally, I hope to draw out these notions by looking at production culture’s mirror image (or “flipside”) of the “participatory” fan culture—or “networked sociality”—that Henry Jenkins and others have so ably mapped out.<sup>2</sup> It is around these linked cultural flipsides (production work and consumer work) that I hope to provide some historical grounding and parallels that complicate recent, optimistic claims about participatory media culture.

**Changing Production Labor Markets.** Many Hollywood executives now complain that viable or profitable business models for film and television no longer exist. They alternately base their chorus of pessimism on “losing control of distribution,” the unrealistic and “industry-killing” demands of unions and guilds, and/or the ad hoc proliferation of technical platforms that prevent “monetization” of content once thought to be secure and proprietary. I have argued, however, that underneath these public complaints, the industry complainers have *in practice* adopted a profitable new business model. Specifically, the creeping, long-term goal of many contemporary media corporations now seems to be to acquire content for little or no cost, and to get everyone to work for free.<sup>3</sup> Reactions to this spartan but opportunistic state of affairs vary widely—depending on whether one is an above-the-line executive dredging the outlands for user-generated content or a below-the-line film and television craft worker trying to stay employed and pay the rent.

The industry now talks out of both sides of its mouth. Even as some media conglomerates continue selectively flogging their old big-budget standbys (out front)—tent-pole pictures and A-list television programming—their sub-brands, basic cable niche networks, and online sites are finding ways (out of their back door) to encourage

2 Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

3 John T. Caldwell, *Production Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 324. Perhaps the best theory and systematic analysis of the push for “free labor,” outside of Hollywood, emerging from broad-based Internet activities is Tiziana Terranova, “Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy,” <http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/technocapitalism/voluntary> (accessed March 30, 2009).

consumers, fans, and users to either “add value” to or “produce” screen content for the conglomerate. Just as Hollywood responded to television in the 1950s, media conglomerates respond today: when in doubt, place your bets on all of the competing alternatives in play, then make the beneficiaries of those bets feed off each other. This schizophrenic posture means that a lot of the big ideas surging around digital and online changes have been ringing down the hallways of big-time producers and executives. Yet Hollywood’s take on participatory culture, networked sociality, and digital interaction with viewers is neither as visionary nor as enabling *for production* as key theorists like Henry Jenkins, Chris Anderson, Yochai Benkler, and others have shown it to be in consumer and marketing contexts.<sup>4</sup> There is a dark side to all of this enlightened “sharing” outside of the network and studio walls—something that hits labor hardest. In addition, much of this new participatory digital talk is quite familiar to the industry, and not nearly as unruly and radical to corporations as some theorists assume.

Film studies would benefit by considering several examples of the current upside-to-fan/downside-to-labor dynamic that I’ve sketched out here. For this “In Focus” section, I’ll map the possibilities for analyzing this flipside dynamic through a series of four propositions.

**Hive-Sourcing Is the New Out-Sourcing.** Marketing tomes urge the cultivation of engaged online communities since this “hive” of motivated online fans and users can add great value to media sites. This “crowd-sourcing” or “hive-sourcing” is posed as an antidote to top-down corporate buzz-generating strategies that tend to stall. Scholars, in turn, take up the charge and probe the cultural implications of UGC (“user generated content”), uploaders, YouTube, and Wikiculture, but seldom consider how this flood of UGC and peer production impacts film and television workers. Although the hive is a vivid zoological metaphor, remember that bees are also unpaid drones. In fact, the corporate dispersal of creative and economic work to the hive represents only the latest stage in Hollywood’s steady march toward total “outsourcing.” Continuing a half-century trend—from the breakup of the studio system, the development of the package system, to contract outsourcing, to visual effects boutiques, digital sweatshops, and vast cadres of nonunion reality-TV workers who have absolutely no upward career mobility in Hollywood—executives fully recognize the genius of the hive. Even more so than contract outsourcing before it, the hive promises the Holy Grail of post-Fordist profitability: even lower overheads, greater externalization of risk, the elimination of costly long-term labor “entitlements,” and organizational and investment flexibility. Some corporatists would argue that this extreme new flexibility is essential for survival in the cluttered trend-obsessed industry markets. Mirroring this history is another arc that now feels more inevitable to many of the quarter-million film and television workers in Los Angeles: the steady, decades-old march from fully employed, to underemployed, to unemployed, to free or volunteer labor. The economic value of “free” or unpaid fan labor has generated much recent conjecture. Yet the economic value of “free” or unpaid professional labor has received little attention.

4 In addition to Anderson’s *The Long Tail* and Jenkins’s *Convergence Culture*, see also Henry Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers* (New York: New York University Press, 2006); and Yochai Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006).

**Industrial Idea Theft as the Prototype for Textual Poaching.** Jenkins's influential 1992 book *Textual Poachers* provided a prescient primer and lexicon for the complex varieties of fan activities that were both creative and productive. Since the release of Jenkins's book, I've realized that these same forms of "unauthorized" agency and cultural highjacking were fully at work inside the industry as well. Producers and workers, that is, poach, filk, mash-up videos, and circulate them off-screen in social gatherings as well—as unauthorized individuals and as small craft groups and associations struggling to survive in the industry. In some ways my own work, since that time, has mostly operated on what feels like the "dark side" (the industry's subterranean cultural activities) while Jenkins's work has operated on the implicitly "sunny side" (the enabling public side) of the industry-audience interface. Marketing specialists now fully embrace the perspectives and terminology of *Textual Poachers* and its more broadly social and cultural sequel *Convergence Culture* in their own commercial discourses, trade conventions, and business plans. The research framed by these two influential books has in fact provided a road map for corporations as they struggle to rationalize the increasingly unruly markets of the online and socially networked rules. As far as I can see, no other paradigm from academic critical film and media studies has been so extensively adopted, mined, and publicly deployed in the corporate sphere as Jenkins's poaching and participatory culture paradigms. This is no small accomplishment.

What I've spent considerable time trying to understand in my own research, however, is why industry and worker poaching, hacking, social networking, worker-fan-fic, and spoiling have not received the same sort of attention from scholars or from the media corporations that employ these same "unruly" craft and professional workers. In my experience, the marketing specialists and corporate executives that so ably pursue and attend to the needs and nuances of fan-consumer poaching and networked sociality have little interest in the *same* kinds of unauthorized activities by workers inside their corporate walls. With few exceptions, the media industries that now obsessively research external, morphing, and unruly consumer markets show little interest in researching their own internal, morphing, and unruly labor markets.<sup>5</sup>

I've begun to understand—through my fieldwork on aspiring writer "pitch-fests," camera "shoot-outs," editing "bake-offs," effects "reveals," and producer "hook-ups"—that the poaching-social-networking revolution in consumer culture has a long prehistory in four sanctioned and well-oiled industry practices and conventions: idea-theft, distributed creativity, work-for-hire, and the vast oversupply of workers and aspiring workers. Unlike practices in almost any other US business sector, the broad-based practices of serially "pitching" story ideas to producers and executives through short, intense meetings arranged by agents means that ideas for new screen projects that circulate around Hollywood dwarf by thousands of times the relatively few feature films and TV shows actually produced. In practice, nobody really "owns" the flood of pitched ideas until some studio, network, or production company actually contracts and develops the rare, lucky project. This means that a huge number of

5 There are, admittedly, a lot of management books that optimistically promote new and visionary forms of employee relations and institutional reorganization. See, for example, Lynda Gratton, *Hot Spots* (London: Berrett-Koehler, 2007). Workers themselves have mounted alternatives to the business press tomes, like Greg Costykian's *Scratchware Manifesto*, <http://209.120.136.195/scratch.php> (accessed March 15, 2009).

hijackable ideas are in the air at any one time, ripe for picking, poaching, hybridizing, and reiterating by producers and executives when they inevitably borrow from this morass of other people's ideas. Of course, the fact that writers in Hollywood have been legally defined as "work for hire" rather than "authors" has helped decouple ideas from "owners" in this pitch-driven free-for-all. But it doesn't stop there. Once producers poach ideas from the vast aspirant-hive, they "distribute" the concepts to groups and socioprofessional networks that then brainstorm them into scripts, films, and series. The "writers' room" is but one heavily rationalized example of this form of "distributed-then-harvested creativity."<sup>6</sup> A dozen writers, working sixteen-hour days, collectively generate, shoot down, and hybridize the culled ideas into working form. Executive producers then dredge this story-idea pit for narrative and script elements from which episodes and series are produced. But the hiving and distribution doesn't end there at production's "front end," since each script poached from the writers' room is then sent out and broken down by all of the area heads and distributed among their own production departments' "hives." This distribution/harvesting continues until production's "back end," when the producing power structure artificially determines which executives will hijack "creative" credit for features or series actually created by hundreds of other lower-level workers.

**Hollywood as an Open-Source Movement.** The examples of textual poaching just described all unfold inside well-paid production sectors. Poaching gets even worse outside the signatory studios and networks, among the vast oversupply of underemployed and unemployed workers and aspirants. In these sectors the labor-hive is even more agitated, furious, and prone to poaching—and being poached. This frequently unfolds in venues ostensibly hosted to "teach" and "help" the underemployed "make it" in the industry. Theatrically staged "pitch fests" allow desperate ideaholders to give out their closely held pitches not just to celebrity agents onstage, but to hundreds of their registration-paying competitors out in the "professional" audience as well. Sound editors screen segments for employed and unemployed craft colleagues and reveal their secret recipes in "bake-offs" (à la Pillsbury and Betty Crocker bake-offs). The visual effects society does the same through their annual "reveals."<sup>7</sup> Equipment companies like Sony stage competitive "camera shoot-outs" from which they poach the best spec scenes filmed by participants with new Sony equipment for use in Sony corporate demo tapes. Studios host competitive weekend "shoot-outs"—manic, two-day short productions filmed by alienated below-the-line tenant workers on the lot—who want to be "discovered" as above-the-line candidates through on-the-lot screenings that end the "festival" weekend. Nobody pays for the profusion of new ideas that churn out of these dirt-cheap, industrial creative idea hives, although a rare few win "awards" or make "contacts" that might help them careerwise.

Rote denials to the contrary, various iterations of the concepts freely circulated in these venues inevitably wind up in someone else's screen content. This is why I

6 For a good introduction to some of these issues, see Felicia Henderson, "The Writers' Room," in *Production Studies*, ed. Vicky Mayer, Miranda Banks, and John Caldwell (New York: Routledge, 2009).

7 See Paul Malcolm's fieldwork on the Visual Effects Society and their "reveals" in his essay "The Craft Society," in *Production Studies*.

frame Hollywood as an “open-source movement.” This source opening does not follow the collective DIY (“do it yourself”) sharing ideology that circulates around software development. Hollywood now opens up more of its backstage world to the public than ever before (through “making-of” documentaries, show-biz programming, DVD bonus tracks, directors’ blogs, etc.). At the same time, not coincidentally, it forces its desperate workers and aspirants (locked in a protracted battle against each other to get work) to freely “open up” their own private intellectual capital to corporate employers. Sadly, this industrial strategy—stealing freely from workers to give freely to consumers—evokes the specter of a new “*commercial commons*,” a problematic free-for-all sanctioned by the therapeutic career discourses of “mentoring,” “enabling,” and “making it.”

**Un(der)paid Work in Production Culture’s Gift Economy.** Much has been made recently, by scholars like Yochai Benkler, of the shift from traditional forms of industrial and consumer capitalism (identified with “sales” and “old media”) to participatory “gift economies” (identified with “sharing” and “new media”). Economists now recognize that wealth can be generated through social networks that are driven by collective sharing among community members. Yet corporations in practice still struggle to find ways to “monetize” and “harvest” financial value from social networks like MySpace and “gift economies” like fan communities and YouTube (where creative work is “given away for free” on a massive scale). Some firms try to incorporate the kind of “peer production” characteristic of sharing sites “inside” of commercial organizations, but they face backlash when they impose payment schemes on users. Successfully making the transition to a gift economy means recognizing how other forms of “capital” drive the new social order beyond the “selfish rationality” at the foundation of classical economics. Specifically, personal motivations like reputation, career status, noncommercial artistic value, and mutuality can all be understood as nonfinancial forms of payment. Many individuals will in fact work productively to earn these highly subjective and symbolic forms of capital.

Oddly, media conglomerate marketing divisions try to understand, incorporate, and rationalize gift economies, apparently ignorant that the very same media conglomerates’ production divisions have been financially exploiting gift economies *among workers* for a very long time. Because of the oversupply of workers in the industrial hive described earlier, a vast culture of quid pro quo exchange has developed in film and television labor markets since the 1970s. This includes worker “donations” of free or discounted labor for both nonprofit and for-profit productions, which trained and competent professionals, not just aspirants, offer. Early on, the “payment” for donated work might come in the form of “points” (a small financial percentage of distribution if the spec project scores distribution). Now a pervasive, even more immaterial scheme is in play: payback in the form of “credits.” Still other professionals will work “below scale” or in trade-off arrangements on nonunion shoots to set themselves up as future beneficiaries of labor paybacks.

Several factors fuel these professional labor giveaways. First, the shift to contract “outsourcing” since the 1980s, in which studios off-load specialized work to digital boutiques, has meant that vast legions of nonunion animation, CGI, and VFX artisans

are regularly denied on-screen end-title credits for professional work. This discrediting is a matter of some concern, since credits are legitimizing tickets used to gain a digital artisan's next job. Second, the career *aspirations* (and frequently the training for many on a set) typically reach far higher (producer, director, screenwriter) than the menial jobs that most actually perform on a set (gaffer, grip, second assistant camera, assistant director, etc.). Bitterness is acute, if you have a graduate degree in film studies from a prestigious university and years of experience but are still "pulling cables" on a set or "getting coffee" as a "desk slave" (aka producer's assistant). The opportunity to claim creative above-the-line credit on an outside film means that many frustrated aspirants stuck in the lower labor castes will sacrifice their weekends and off hours to work for someone else. Although blue-collar United Auto Workers assembly line workers in Detroit don't credibly aspire to the executive suite, an upward-mobility fantasy does rule Hollywood labor. The fact that almost everyone imagines he or she is overqualified for an unfulfilling present job fuels a willingness to offer others free work for points or credits. Third, the perceived cultural "illegitimacy" of low-budget commercial genres—like infomercials, reality TV, pornography, straight-to-video B films—means that many workers in those formats will sacrifice their meager rates to gain "legitimate" credit on more authentic "indie films." For workers ashamed to use their real names on porn credits, or denied credits on reality or infomercials, films pitched with "Sundance potential" offer the worker long-shot odds of career redemption and advancement. This kind of nonpaid symbolic and cultural capital can be worth its weight in gold, at least for those who aspire to career identities way above their "normal" pay rate. Fourth, the "nomadic" ways that crews form, work, and move on to the next project impacts Hollywood labor's gift economy. The short lifespan of productions means that workers on a set must look for their next jobs even as they start their current one. Crews morph and mutate as they move from job to job, and this spurs many to offer work in order to get work. Social "networking" and labor trading are as crucial for below-the-line workers as they are for producers. Finally, the growth of nonunion projects and runaway production of the sort that Miller and others have documented means that many craft workers work fewer days each year.<sup>8</sup> The downward horizon of expectations dramatizes the present labor market as overcrowded and contested. The future looks bleak in the predictions and trade war stories of the underemployed, underappreciated, and/or underutilized workers on a crew.

Part of the genius of the Hollywood system—and one reason many other U.S. industries aspire to mimic Hollywood's corporate structure—is that it has profitably exploited industry's outsourcing and poaching practices together with labor's gift economy for several decades. This produces a "dues-paying culture" of the worst kind, in which the pain of unpaid work now is justified as a ticket to upward mobility later.<sup>9</sup> Hollywood production's gift economy is based on mutuality, quid pro quo exchanges, social networking, and a great deal of free work provided on a "spec" basis. These industrial habits might at first evoke the new participatory social networks revolution-

8 See Toby Miller et al., *Global Hollywood* (London: British Film Institute, 2002).

9 On the "dues-paying culture" see especially Erin Hill, "Hollywood Assistanting," in *Production Studies*.

izing consumer culture. Yet they also cultivate a formidable pairing: the long-standing capitalist principle of (endlessly) “deferred gratification” among workers together with the “flexibility” and “mass amateurism” that theorists hail in the new “knowledge economy.”

### **Networked Mutuality or Zero-Sum Game? Labor Questions in Film Studies.**

The legitimacy, fairness, and economic value of “unpaid fan labor” has been the subject of much recent concern. Yet I am more concerned about the legitimacy, fairness, and economic value of “unpaid professional labor” *caused by* “unpaid fan labor,” user-generated content, and peer production. Likewise, “intellectual property rights,” “fair use,” and sharing by fans have generated considerable comment; yet I am more concerned about the intellectual property rights of workers, who have long had their creative ideas strip-mined and ripped off by producers, networks, and studios, and who now face the loss of any remaining syndication rights due to the fan sharing “revolution.” Finally, the creative and “aspirational” needs of fans and fan communities (many of whom now want to be recognized and valued as creative artists by media corporations) have been lauded in recent articulations of the new social networks. Yet I am as concerned with the “aspirational” needs of underemployed and underutilized professional workers—including the legions of well-schooled “manual” and “craft” workers who have long sought recognition that they too are creative artists who merit at least threshold authorship rights. Given the stressed workforce currently being outsourced and displaced by the media conglomerates in their rush to monetize fan activities and peer production, the new networked sociality looks a lot less like a mutually beneficial gift economy to me than a zero-sum game. At this rate peer producers in fan communities will arguably attain the same abysmal status as the outsourced production workers before them, while outsourced production workers will finally achieve the economic end-state of peer producers in fan communities who have made working for free fully acceptable.

Part of the problem is that media scholarship and commercial marketing research alike (strange bedfellows indeed) tend to use a binary model of media industry and culture. In it, industry’s above-the-line producers interact with consumers to produce entertainment and economic value. Unfortunately, this model simplistically conflates “industry” with “producers”—a thin stratum that comprises only industry’s “executive crust”—and completely ignores an important third leg of the industry-culture stool: production workers. The marketing executives I have talked to show resignation but little concern for the production workers their own industry is downsizing, outsourcing, or displacing; downsized workers are seen as old media dinosaurs that inevitably need to be replaced by the newer (and less expensive) viral social networks. Yet scholars, with a different “bottom line” than marketers, would do well to reconsider labor as a crucial category in critical film and media studies research. After all, production workers, their tools, their environments, and their habits are fundamental forces that generate the screen content and narratives we devote the lion’s share of our time and energies to in SCMS. Yet we as scholars seldom grant these grounded, material work practices the kind of complex agency they deserve. \*