Book Reviews

Revised Research Methodology for the Age of Media Industries Speculation

Review of *Specworld: Folds, Faults, and Fractures in Embedded Creator Industries* by John Thornton Caldwell, University of California Press, 2023

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John Thornton Caldwell's influence on media industry studies is foundational. His ethnographic "production cultures" methodology and its emphasis on analyzing industrial "deep texts," artifacts of production ephemera that allow researchers to point to larger truths about the industry, is so accessible and effective that it is a staple across film and media programs and scholarship.[1]

Yet it seems decades of employing that model to detail industry myth-making, trade narrativizing, and creative rituals has left Caldwell dubious of the sunny self-theorizing his subjects provide. A decade ago, Jennifer Holt counseled media industries scholars about the tricky balancing act of academic-industry partnerships, but Caldwell seems fed up with the imbalance between corporate protections, competing agendas, and the pursuit of

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1. John Thornton Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

scholarship.[2] Undoubtedly, the recent upheavals across the media industries in terms of finance, labor agreements, safety, technology, and social justice have contributed to this jaundice-eyed reconsideration. Responding to Hollywood's convenient and ineffective reactions to social justice movements (i.e., #MeToo, #TimesUp, and #OscarsSoWhite) and Patrick Vonderau's call for a consideration of ethics in media industries studies,[3] Caldwell has dedicated this book to providing a method for uncovering how the industry can simultaneously tout "outside-the-box creative myths" while "habitually scheming to hide, normalize and manage creative labor."[4]

Caldwell's approach has always been critical but this latest book calls for centering "deception, coercion, and extraction" as the most valued skills emerging from an interconnected media industry driven by speculation rather than the finite production, distribution, and exhibition of cultural products. Caldwell explains that the work of speculation—what he calls "specwork"—"provides the broad conditions that facilitate linkages and synergies between the malleable digital 'material' and technologies of TV production, on the one hand, and the current corporate management strategies aimed at developing a malleable and self-replicating IP, on the other (which ideally suits corporate reformatting, franchising, branding, transmedia)."[5] Everyone from hobbyists, to fans, to actors, to industry veterans, to caterers is engaged in specwork, and thus Caldwell identifies it as the institutional logic that organizes the managerial frameworks across three labor regimes: Craftworld, Brandworld, and Specworld.

Craftworld is the most familiar, comprising a site of physical production like the movie set and populated by the key players one sees mentioned in

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2. Jennifer Holt, "The Future of Media Industry Studies: Academic-Industry Collaboration," In Media Res, 2013, https://mediacommons.org/imr/2013/05/20/need-title.

3. Patrick Vonderau, "Ethics in Media Industries Research," in *The Routledge Companion to Media Industries*, ed. Paul McDonald (New York: Routledge, 2022), 518–26.

4. John Thornton Caldwell, *Specworld: Folds, Faults, and Fractures in Embedded Creator Industries* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2023), 27.

5. Caldwell, *Specworld*, 61

the end credits of a film or television show. Brandworld concerns the executives in charge of licensing and managing intellectual property; these workers often operate counter to Craftworld by prioritizing outsourcing, speed, and cost-cutting to ensure quick profits that maximize the value of a brand. Specworld is populated by the creative workers using the scraps left over after Craftworld has made a product and after Brandworld has extracted the most global value from the intellectual property. Historically, Specworld was occupied by amateurs, but as more companies adopt the horizontal hierarchies of the tech world, the idea of giving away creative labor for free, "on spec," has become standard practice for amateurs and professionals alike.

To observe this principle in action, Caldwell points scholars to below-the-line workers, as he has done in his previous scholarship. But rather than approach them for ethnographic analysis in order to learn the myths and rituals of their particular identities, Caldwell now encourages us to dive into the mud with them. Caldwell implores researchers to find fractures in tidy media industry narratives, contentious exchanges that can be found in online snark, labor disputes, failed mergers, and unsanctioned disclosures, contending that the more an object of study resembles a reality television reunion episode the more likely it is to reveal "the interfaces, fissures, and fault lines between embedded subsystems" and "provide the most productive sites for production culture research."[6] In emphasizing the utility of fractures, Caldwell joins J. D. Connor in citing major scandals, like the release of Sony executive emails on Wikileaks, as providing the rare material that is crucial for understanding the broader structural realities that shape creative decision-making.[7]

While the first three chapters outline the changes in the media industries and the corresponding methodological requirements for studying them, the remainder of the book provides a model for this "disembedding and fracture

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6. Caldwell, 37–38.
7. J. D. Connor, "The Sony Hack: Data and Decision in the Contemporary Studio," *Media Industries Journal* 2, no. 2 (2015).

research" through case studies, taxonomies, and a detailed conclusion that offers step-by-step research design instructions. The case studies examine "contact zones, partnering interactions, workshopping, and sense-making" in the YouTuber or influencer workforce. For years I have admired Alice Marwick's work in *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity, and Branding in the Social Media Age* for its ethnographic analysis of online influencers and the crushing realities of online labor.[8] Whereas Marwick debunks the "doing what you love means not working a day in your life" myth of web 2.0, Caldwell emphasizes the dangerous, even futile, conditions that an entire generation of online aspirants face as they attempt to parlay online labor into stable employment in the entertainment industries.

Caldwell accomplishes this by demonstrating how "social pedagogies," "industrial folding," and "rifts and fractures" reveal that "the maker/influencer world in the YouTube ecosystem actually functions like a stock-market exchange for creative speculation work."[9] Chapter 4 shows how pedagogical workshops across high and low production fields promise to teach aspiring content creators how to become YouTube personalities or how to work in prestige film and television. What emerges are contradictory lessons that create an "aspirant crossover dilemma" that simultaneously offers a phenomenology of production, a normalized way of working that is felt bodily across media sectors. Chapter 5 describes efforts to "fold-in" threats to the status quo and justify the system via intraindustry "contact zones" like product demonstrations, film festivals, and artists talks. This programing for aspirants tends to implicitly endorse "stress aesthetics" that justify employment precarity and insist that "agitation, confrontation, and stress are not only the historical norm but also the very key to film and television's artistic accomplishments."[10] Chapter 6 details the managerial skills that are taught in YouTuber boot camps and how-to videos regarding release

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8. Alice E. Marwick, *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity, and Branding in the Social Media Age*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013).

9. Caldwell, *Specworld*, 255

10. Caldwell, 156

schedules, subscriber management, and sponsorships maintenance. Aspects of this managerial philosophy resemble the skill sets that governed television production in the broadcast era and thus make these efforts legible to and extractable for legacy media companies. Chapter 7 is especially novel, studying involuntary disclosures in moments of industrial fracturing that were particularly prevalent during the pandemic and the racial reckoning of 2020 and 2021. Caldwell provides a menu of potential stress points where researchers may find these fractures and how to research them to reveal industrial realities. Chapter 8 offers microfinancing as a widening rift in the online creative realm and the site of a likely online creator crisis similar to the stock market crash of the Great Recession.

Caldwell's work demonstrates that the grind of Specworld that burns out so many young creatives rarely gives way to the stability of the nostalgic Craftworld, because all industry workers are consistently engaged in the hustle demanded by speculation. *Specworld* is sure to enlighten students and invigorate exciting research, even while it bursts the bubble of young creative dreamers hoping to become the next celebrated auteur. Still, the sadder but wiser student that reads this book is going to benefit and be situated to best advocate for changing the entertainment industry.