Entertainment Production as Contingency Planning

Review of *Mobile Hollywood: Labor and the Geography of Production* by Kevin Sanson, University of California Press, 2024

PATRICK VONDERAU

Production isn't what it used to be. Hollywood has gone a long way from physical film and television production to today's aspirational cultures of digital media and the twisted industrial system that manages and monetizes them. Accordingly, processes of film or television production now often are studied not so much in relation to the specificity of their products but in regard to work relations that aren't specific for Hollywood anymore. Rather than simply a practice, production today is seen as a global system of sometimes barely media-related actors and activities that includes data specialists (as in Violaine Roussel's current research) or financers (Andrew deWaard) alongside legacy production companies and entertainment celebrities. It's a system that pushes for advances in labor theory (Vicki Mayer) and also requires us to think ethnographically through the media entertainment universe's various "specworlds," where "bringing rationality to the unpredictable supply chain lies at the heart of making profitable media."[1] Much like the infrastructure on which it is based, this new media work is "boring" rather than glamorous and thus asks for an approach that sees film production's "trucks, wardrobe

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

https://doi.org/10.3998/gs.8498

trailers, massive cables, signs and barriers" as "trace elements of the more unsung, wearying, and less visible work screen media laborers perform"—a key premise of Kevin Sanson's brilliant new book.[2] If media production is a social construct rather than just artistic craftwork and industry practice, a construct built upon material infrastructures and a global reconfiguration of labor much of which remains hidden, invisible, or obscured, how to study it?

For a start, it doesn't hurt "listening to labor," something Sanson now has done for almost a decade.[3] In *Voices of Labor* (2016), Sanson and coeditor Michael Curtin listened to various above-the-line and below-the-line professionals in film production to situate forms of what they termed "excessive labor," or uncontrolled growing work pressures, on a map that included Hollywood's "company town" as much as entertainment's "global machine" and distant "fringe cities." Continuing this line of work, *Mobile Hollywood* follows the experiences of below-the-line screen media workers in different parts of the world in order to understand "what value they provide in the name of labor"[4] and how such value cocreation may relate to the structures and operations of global capital expansion. What, exactly, are the job functions and working conditions of Hollywood service producers, location managers, and transportation teamsters and what can we learn by speaking to them about the industrial dynamics that coordinate geography in the economic and creative interests of Hollywood? In attempting to answer these questions, Sanson draws from more than twenty interviews in the United States, Europe, and Australia but also background conversations with production executives and film commissioners, observations at industry events, location visits, and analyses of trade papers, industry reports, or promotional materials. Based on this research, he astutely shows what it means to be employed (or not) within a mobile mode of production; how professional

2. Kevin Sanson, *Mobile Hollywood: Labor and the Geography of Production* (University of California Press, 2024).
3. Michael Curtin and Kevin Sanson, *Precarious Creativity: Global Media, Local Labor* (University of California Press, 2016).
4. Sanson, *Mobile Hollywood*, 172.

roles, conditions, and divisions of labor have changed; and also how media work now constantly leaks into other areas of social activity well beyond the making of movies, such as lobbying for reform, persuading municipal authorities, or appeasing suburban residents, not to speak of all the affective or emotional labor known from earlier decades of film production.

In doing so, Sanson demonstrates the need for a conceptually more rigorous understanding of both media work and media production. Too often screen workers have been seen as "either the happy faces of booming production hubs or the downtrodden victims of lost employment"[5] rather than as actors to be taken seriously in the ways they contribute to creation. How to think beyond precariousness in media work? A similar point has recently been made by French sociologist Jeremy Vachet in regard to music professionals navigating between a "compelled entrepreneurialism," side jobs, and waged jobs outside the music industry, showing that media research across sectors needs to move beyond professional/nonprofessional or successful/nonsuccessful divides.[6] In his book, Sanson not only shifts the focus from creative work to value creation and value capture but also insists on looking at the global system of related work practices. He sets his research agenda against a backdrop of earlier works that, by his own account, have been limited to either small-scale or historical narratives of policy development and implementation or, alternatively, stuck in generalizing macro analyses of and polemic debates about Hollywood runaway productions and their financial incentives. Although inevitably contributing to a research field within the political economy of media that, in the wake of Toby Miller's account of a new international division of cultural labor,[7] attempted to map the global

5. Sanson, 14.
6. Jérémy Vachet, *Fantasy, Neoliberalism and Precariousness: Coping Strategies in the Cultural Industries* (Emerald Publishing, 2022).
7. Toby Miller and Marie Claire Leger, "Runaway Production, Runaway Consumption, Runaway Citizenship: The New International Division of Cultural Labor," *Emergences: Journal for the Study of Media & Composite Cultures* 11, no. 1 (2001): 89–115.

impact of US runaway productions on macro level, Sanson aims to theorize the supply chains of today's media experiences from the ground up.

Taking its cue from social anthropology, most notably Anna Tsing's ethnographically informed work on global supply chains, as well as social and political theory, especially Sandro Mezzadra's and Brett Neilson's *Border as Method, or the Multiplication of Labor* (2013), Sanson's account of mobile production is framed by an overarching interest in "friction" or crisis as symptomatic of a "fraught and contingent mode of production that subsumes disjuncture within and across its division of labor."[8] Rather than studying, say, production incentive systems in the Czech Republic or focusing on economic-cultural dynamics between the Global North and Global South, Sanson studies day-to-day practices of "contingency planning and collaboration among disparate stakeholders" that characterize the work of service producers or location managers, among others.[9] Redefining media work as a kind of coordination work means to look at skills and practices needed to "contain the disruption, disjuncture, and sheer messiness of Mobile Hollywood by constantly putting out fires or squashing, often temporarily and tentatively, potential impediments to capital expansion."[10] Occasionally, coordination workers may die, such as Carol Munoz Portal who was murdered while scouting locations for Netflix's *Narcos* (2015–2017) in Mexico;[11] always, however, are they embedded within subcontracting, outsourcing, and allied arrangements that come with new organizational styles and subjectivities. Accordingly, Sanson defines mobile production as "a distinct spatial assemblage that is generated by the protocols and processes necessary for it to maneuver back and forth across an elastic production geography. It is constituted by a translocal network of social relations and operational logics that certainly emerge from and intersect with particular national economies

8. Sanson, *Mobile Hollywood*, 4.
9. Sanson, 11.
10. Sanson, 19.
11. Sanson, 102.

and local cultures but nevertheless reconfigures these territories into a geographic formation that is greater than the sum of its parts."[12]

After laying out the framework and themes in the first two chapters, Sanson's book proceeds through three detailed, grounded case studies on the aforementioned groups of workers and their experiences before concluding with a final and again more conceptually weighted chapter that describes how Hollywood adapted to travel restrictions and safety protocols during the COVID-19 pandemic. His book testifies to the need for more research on "logistical coordination, service-oriented work, and relational labor"[13] that create the conditions for production today. It also shows the difficulty of defining what "production" in production studies actually is or has come to be. One might indeed argue that much of production isn't production anymore and hasn't been in a very long time. What I miss in this otherwise illuminating and richly researched book is a clearer differentiation between the various modes of production that have evolved over the past century and still come together simultaneously: classic studio production, the "projectification" of creative work in the wake of outsourcing and flexible specialization tendencies since the 1950s, and finally the "productization" of virtually everything, such as, for instance, urban spaces in London turned into a Harry Potter event space. In order to chart these developments, Sanson's book also might have benefited from a cross-sectoral view on media industries, drawing together comparative developments in, say, games and music production. For an account so clearly interested in theorizing from the ground up, I also partly missed the proximity to the field, a sense of place, of being "there" in this field of mobile production, wherever it is.

12. Sanson, 41.
13. Sanson, 35.