Book Review:

deWaard, Andrew. *Derivative Media: How Wall Street Devours Culture.* (California: University of California Press, 2024)

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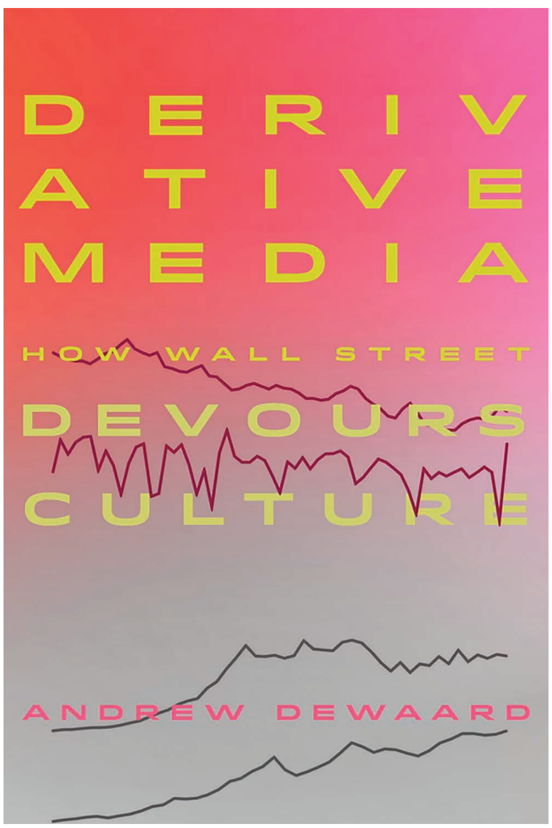

In 2024, Netflix announced to shareholders a dramatic shift in how they would report their financial health. For years, speculators carefully watched for subscriber growth across various regions; the new policy would be to forget all that.[1] Netflix explained it no longer mattered how many subscribers there were, which productions performed well, or the revenue per average user. The only thing that would matter is profit.

Andrew deWaard's *Derivative Media* explains how not only Netflix but also how every major media companies shifted financial priorities through the investments and directives of private equity and venture capital firms. Challenging a decade of literature conjecturing for a digital revolution to bring forth a utopic and diverse media landscape. deWaard examines how Hollywood has been essentially victims (or collaborators) of a hostile takeover. This is not just optimizing creativity as scholars of the Classical Studio System theorized, but a story of how media conglomerates became "mere investment and profit-extraction opportunities for truly powerful finance firms" that include BlackRock, Vanguard, and Silver Lake.[2]

This is where *derivative* becomes an essential term. Derivatives for the financial industry are simply the act of "pooling assets into a new financial instrument," such as mortgage-backed securities many might remember from the 2008 Recession.[3] But in terms of studying media and media workers, deWaard notes how films, television shows, and music under private equity's control now often feels weightless and imitative, whose use value exists in intellectual property rights and is thus derivative.

deWaard's book falls into a growing literature on private equity as central to the destruction of dozens of industries, but the first to map its role in the culture industries.[4] While the business of media has never exactly followed traditional economic principles, private equity firms have refocused the operation of studios and music company to focus on "speculative risk management, extractive logic, highly leveraged debt, and short-term profits."[5]

Derivative Media thus takes the theory Janet Wasko attempted back in her seminal (and strikingly undertaught) text *Movies and Money* by connecting the actual working of high finance to the media texts on screen for the contemporary era.[6] More than simply relying on trades, deWaard turns to quarterly earnings reports and anonymous interviews to understand this critical signal crisis. To call deWaard's text essential would be an understatement.

The first two chapters of the book takes readers through the ins and outs of how various machinations in the pollical economy set up this moment for media companies. Building on the scholars of the New History of Capitalism, deWaard weaves readers through legislation, deregulation, and federal interest rate policy.[7] Wonky as it may be to cover how high finance has evolved since the beginning of the neoliberal era, deWaard lines the chapters with charts that any reader can easily understand, such as private equity investment in the six major media companies all growing to 15–20% of total ownership in the last 25 years.[8] This shift toward dividends and stock buybacks has thus worked to limit the power of workers by taking profits and reinvesting them in financial boondoggles (such as streaming) and the consolidation of intellectual property via mergers (such as Disney–Fox or Amazon–MGM).

If my summary of these chapters seems a bit slim, it is perhaps because the details are quite overwhelming. In Chapters 3 and 4, deWaard pinpoints the transformations in the music and film industries and their "cartel like behavior."[9] More than simply seeing music as a move to Spotify and YouTube, deWaard traces how firms like Bain Capital worked to take over internet radio, concert venues, and ticketing services like Ticketmaster, creating the fee kerfuffle that has enraged fans across the globe.[10] Meanwhile, the Big Three music labels began negotiating what deWaard calls "black box" deals with digital distributors whose set-up favors the companies with back catalogs where music assets are more "managed" than "produced," all while leaving actual musicians into starving artists.[11]

In Chapter 4, he turns to film to track the slow development of what deWaard notes as "shadow studios" such as Silver Lake and TPG Capital, which have used agencies to expand their business well beyond simply deal-making to also production and ownership of studio payroll companies. These firms have perhaps limited the role of "development hell" that has frustrated creatives and executives alike for decades, but in deWaard's telling, they mostly work toward "facilitating consolidation, running roughshod over labor, enriching the wealthy, and profiting handsomely in the process."[12] And for those hoping for the independent film sector such as A24 to save cinema, deWaard demonstrates the large web of principle investors in these distribution companies are often one in the same.

deWaard's first half provides a litany of legislation, capital market firms, and economic concepts than might leave viewers bedazzled if not also pessimistic (there's a glossary at the end for those in need). In the second half of the book, he returns to more familiar territory for scholars of film and media by attempting to trace financialization into the form of media texts. Looking at a mix of rap music, sitcoms, and IP-(over)loaded films, deWaard argues that these works "advance the cause of cultural financialization through their innovative forms, while also offering educational and subversive commentary on the same process."[13] At the same time, he tries to bring the same "database-informed analyses" to show these effects on scale, whether the transformation of Jay-Z's music via references to high-end luxury brands or by cataloguing the companies discussed on *30 Rock* (Tiny Fey, 2006–2013). These charts are fascinating if less effective than those tracing economic concepts; while a graph is essential to understand investment patterns, lining out the references in a media text often can seem a bit self-evident.

A broader question, however, is an actual theory of how to trace policy of high finance materially transforms media texts. deWaard limits *what* he attempts to quantify within these media texts, but it leaves a lot on the table in terms of how technology, labor, and other aspects of the industry can change the aesthetics of film style across the board. For example, many have noted the transformation of cinematography and the development of "Netflix Sheen," and it would seem ripe for an explanation by the role of these studios and their financial outlooks.[14] While finance matters, often decisions get hardened out in the deal-making process, which is where the two sides must necessarily meet in order to move production forward.[15] More so, scholars like Landon Palmer have shown the odd monetary shell games that have always been at the center of turning money into something akin to entertainment.[16] It's certainly true that Jack Warner cared more about the product than David Zazlav has at the studio the former built, but there remains space for discussion.

deWaard's final chapter rebounds abandoning a data approach for a Theodor Adorno-like ranting on contemporary Hollywood filmmaking. In what he amusingly calls "mise-en-synergy," the result is an attempt to paint the idea that films like *Ready Player One* (Steven Spielberg, 2018), *The LEGO Movie* (Phil Lord and Christopher Miller, 2014), and *Space Jam: A New Legacy* (Malcolm D. Lee, 2021) grapple with their own concentration as a form of speculation and securitization. deWaard is only slightly less biting than Adorno, but he can be particularly cutting toward films made "to develop a fantasyland made in the image of the financialized marketplace, reflecting our dystopian reality back to us as a playful fantasy."[17] Most of these texts ultimately exist to "reassure adults that their commodified memory is all in good fun," a bleak outlook as one could imagine.[18]

The broader question that deWaard–nor I–cannot answer is what an alternative would look like. The conclusion offers positions on regulation in broadcasting and broader antitrust enforcement (alongside more growth in public media) that would limit private equity's carnivorous practices, but "the current financialized media system actively impedes such a transition because of its structure that rewards profit extraction and derivative content."[19] Making an independent film or music might be easier today than a decade ago, but alternative distribution–not only theaters and concert venues but also the infrastructure of digital release like YouTube, Amazon Web Services, and Google Search–can make *reach* feel as impossible as it once felt for the producers of *Salt of the Earth* (Herbert J. Biberman, 1954).[20] Journalism has at least found an answer in working collectives that can sustain a modicum of life in *Defector*, 404 *Media*, and *Flaming Hydra*.[21] But the biggest new media voice in leftist media, Hasan Piker, makes his name on a service owned and operated by Amazon.[22] "I'm condemned to use the tools of my enemy to defeat them!" screams a character on *Andor* (Tony Gilroy, 2022–2025), which centers the difficulty of building a revolution against an all-consuming empire. *Andor* is of course a *Star Wars* IP spin-off to a spin-off on the streaming service on Disney+.

It seems inevitable though that, as films and television have become "content" and given how generative artificial intelligence turns as content to "slop," private equity has played a major role in that development.[23] After all, AMC Theaters invested in a gold mine to increase its investments rather than in theaters.[24] But the role of Media Studies provides a golden opportunity to change hearts and minds the way that private equity's other targets might not. People *care* a lot of film, TV, and music. And as deWaard argues, "connecting finance to culture is an opportunity to both concretize its dangers and imagine a more sustainable alternative."[25]

In a recent roundtable, scholar Evan Elkins suggested, "While I use [streaming services] quite a bit and enjoy a great deal of what I hear and see on them, at a fundamental level they don't exist for me or us."[26] *Derivative Media* tells us who does benefit.

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1 Todd Spangler, "Netflix Will Stop Reporting Subscriber Numbers Starting in 2025," *Variety*, Published electronically April 18, 2024, https://variety.com/2024/tv/news/netflix-stop-reporting-subscriber-numbers-starting-2025-1235975341/.

2 Andrew deWaard, *Derivative Media: How Wall Street Devours Culture* (University of California Press, 2024), 107. For studies of the traditional studio system, See Thomas Schatz, *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* (Pantheon, 1989); David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960* (Columbia University Press, 1985).

3 deWaard, *Derivative Media*, 7.

4 Gretchen Morgenson and Joshua Rosner, *These Are the Plunderers: How Private Equity Runs—and Wrecks—America* (Simon & Schuster, 2023); Rosemary Batt and Eileen Applebaum, "Private Equity Pillage: Grocery Stores and Workers At Risk," *The American Prospect*, https://prospect.org/power/private-equity-pillage-grocery-stores-workers-risk/; Julie Froud and Karel Williams, "Private Equity and the Culture of Value Extraction," *New Political Economy* (2007); Megan Greenwell, *Bad Company: Private Equity and the Death of the American Dream* (Dey Street Books, 2025).

5 deWaard, *Derivative Media*, 5.

6 Janet Wasko, *Movies and Money: Financing the American Film Industry* (Bloomsbury Academic, 1982).

[7] Seth Rockman, "What Makes the History of Capitalism Newsworthy?," *Journal of the Early Republic* 34, no. 3 (2014). For a critique, See Eric Hilt, "Economic History, Historical Analysis, and the 'New History of Capitalism'," *The Journal of Economic History* 77, no. 2 (2017).
[8] deWaard, *Derivative Media*, 56. Part of deWaard's attempt here is to also continue the work of data analysis he and his colleague Shauna Kidman have built with the extremely useful Media and Consolidation Research Organization (MACRO) Lab at the University of California, San Diego. See: https://macrolab.ucsd.edu/
[9] Ibid.
[10] Anna Steele and Kara Dapena, "Who Is Making Money on Your Concert Tickets? It's Not Just Taylor Swift," *The Wall Street Journal*, Published electronically May 23, 2024, https://www.wsj.com/business/media/concert-ticket-money-2326873d.
[11] deWaard, *Derivative Media*, 90.
[12] Ibid., 115.
[13] Ibid., 146.
[14] Gita Jackson, "Why Does Everything on Netflix Look Like That?," *Vice*, Published electronically August 15, 2022, https://www.vice.com/en/article/why-does-everything-on-netflix-look-like-that/. For a more technical explanation, See Devan Scott, "Did You See (and Hear) That? Why Home Viewing Can Be Dark and Inaudible," *Filmmaker Magazine*, Published electronically March 18, 2024, https://filmmakermagazine.com/125430-home-viewing-problems-audio-video-streaming/.
[15] Peter Labuza, "When a Handshake Meant Something: The Rise of Entertainment Law in Post-Paramount Hollywood," *JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 60, no. 4 (2021); "Putting Penn to Paper: Warner Bros.' Contract Governance and the Transition to New Hollywood," *The Velvet Light Trap* 80, no. 1 (2017).
[16] Landon Palmer, "Between the Movie and the Money Packaging the 1970s Motion Picture Tax Shelter," *Media Industries* 9, no. 2 (2022).
[17] deWaard, *Derivative Media*, 182.
[18] Ibid., 188.
[19] Ibid., 206. For more on antitrust, See Peter Labuza, "Under the Electric Cloud: Cinema at Paramount's Twilight," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 62, no. 2 (2021).
[20] James J. Lorence, *The Suppression of Salt of the Earth: How Hollywood, Big Labor, and Politicians Blacklisted a Movie in Cold War America* (University of New Mexico Press, 1999).
[21] Maria Bustillos, "The Future of Media Is Journalist-Run," *The Nation*, Published electronically March 29, 2024, https://www.thenation.com/article/society/journalist-run-media-flaming-hydra/.
[22] Nathan Grayson, *Stream Big: The Triumphs and Turmoils of Twitch and the Stars behind the Screen* (Simon & Schuster, 2025). In recent years, Piker has also forgone the interstitial and algorithmic advertising on the platform, relying exclusively on the subscriber aspect of the platform.
[23] Dexter Thomas, "Inside the Economy of AI Spammers Getting Rich by Exploiting Disasters and Misery," 404 Media, Published electronically April 15, 2025, https://

www.404media.co/inside-theeconomy- of-ai-spammers-getting-rich-by-exploiting-disasters-and-misery/.

[24] Catie Keck, "Examining AMC's 'Embarrassingly Stupid' Investment in a Literal Gold Mine," *The Verge*, Published electronically March 16, 2022, https://www.theverge.com/2022/3/16/22981454/amc-gold-mine-investment-memestock-adam-aron.

[25] deWaard, *Derivative Media*, 20.

[26] "Distribution in the Streaming Era: A Scholarly Roundtable," *The Velvet Light Trap* 90, no. 2 (2022): 73.