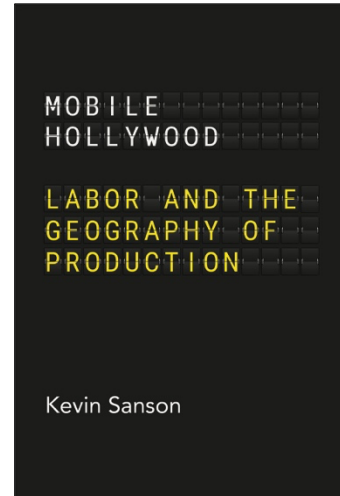


Kevin Sanson, **Mobile Hollywood: Labor and the Geography of Production**, Oakland: University of California Press, 2024, 242 pp., \$34.95 (paperback).

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Hollywood is both a place and an idea. Over the decades, the word has become synonymous with the U.S. film industry, and its meaning often overlaps with the history of the physical location. Hollywood stands as a symbol of cultural power, exporting stories on a global scale and generating enormous amounts of money every year. However, today, large parts of production activity take place outside Los Angeles—in fact, they are increasingly scattered across the world. In **Mobile Hollywood: Labor and the Geography of Production**, Kevin Sanson investigates the sociospatial relations of contemporary film and television production. Particularly, how material and structural shifts displaced labor practices and the perceived value of cultural producers involved in this ecosystem, fundamentally shaping Hollywood’s reach. What logistical efforts are necessary to move production sites across multiple countries? Who are the professionals handling this task, and at what cost? And what can their experience tell us about the contemporary media ecosystem?



The book’s strength lies in its methods. Scholarly discussions tend to focus on above-the-line workers, like directors and actors, usually investigating themes such as authorship, fame, and artistic distinction. Yet, Sanson opts to conduct in-depth interviews with “below-the-line” workers. These professionals have worked in production hubs located in countries such as Australia, Cuba, Czech Republic, England, Hungary, Ireland, and Scotland, as well as U.S. cities like Atlanta (Georgia), Los Angeles (California), and New Orleans (Louisiana). By choosing below-the-line workers, the author shines a light on the more technical, practical, and often invisible aspects of screen production. Sanson tackles these interviews from a critical media industry approach. This interdisciplinary framework allows researchers to understand industry practices, emphasizing the complexity of power relations between companies’ strategies and workers’ tactics, as well as the consequences of these dynamics for cultural production (Havens, Lotz, & Tinic, 2009). It highlights the disputes, negotiations, and the agency of the people who participate in this process, unveiling challenges and tensions that usually do not appear on the macro-level surface.

This is the foundation that supports the central argument of the book: Nowadays, Hollywood is a mobile mechanism that requires strong logistical coordination to allow a nimble mode of production. In that way, production activity is no longer “a comparison between purpose-built soundstages and exterior locations but a deliberation among Los Angeles, Atlanta, London, Vancouver, and Budapest, all of which have well-developed physical infrastructures, diverse geographies, and deep labor pools to service large-scale productions” (p. 51). But, instead of a well-oiled machine, Hollywood operates as an unstable and fragile endeavor. While high-budget studios control financial resources and demand an efficient and responsive mode of production, it falls to the cultural workers to put out the fires that arise along the way, such as

finding the best location for shooting, securing permits, transporting equipment, and several other unseen activities. Many times, the price of a “job well done” comes at the expense of cultural workers’ personal lives and professional careers—components that, in this line of work, are inevitably intertwined. This drive for mobility results in the development of labor pools of local hires and a class of nomadic workers who must constantly relocate as part of their profession, ultimately reconfiguring the spatial dynamics of labor itself.

In total, the book features six chapters. Chapter 1 lays out the structure of the book, outlining the main questions, methods, and arguments. More importantly, it contextualizes how governments turned to production incentives as a strategy to attract film and television production and stimulate the local economy. The first one was Canada, in 1997, followed by several other countries and U.S. states during the 2000s. Chapter 2 goes further in the intricate topics surrounding capital expansion, geography, and labor. This chapter provides the theoretical and historical frame that enabled the rise of Mobile Hollywood. In a sea of available production incentives, Sanson suggests that Hollywood does not operate exactly “as a rational outcome of economic logics and policy interests” (p. 34) but as a flexible yet contradictory enterprise that depends on labor power to enable agile production. This dynamic appears at the Locations Show, an annual event that gathers representatives from all around the world to showcase the benefits of filming at their locations. While the conference’s rhetoric emphasizes the rationality of matching the best location with the best contracts at the best price, attendees’ experiences reveal that this process features a myriad of social relations shaped by anxiety, uncertainty, and competition. This is not collateral damage but a fundamental part of this structure.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 focus on three distinct case studies. Chapter 3 focuses on the emergence of service producers in production hubs. These cultural workers act as intermediaries. On one hand, they answer to the interests and whims of foreign capital securing that production activities go smoothly. That means coordinating logistics, contracting local hires, ensuring legal compliance, and translating (sometimes literally) the culture and bureaucracies of the region. On the other hand, they have to manage local resources, both human and infrastructural, to maintain the hub as a sustainable environment in the long run. Service producers and firms evolved in tandem with policies designed to make locations more film friendly. However, in this process, they play a key role in Mobile Hollywood: stitching together different interests and agendas—including their own—and taking on the responsibility of resolving potential complications through a “whatever it takes” mentality.

Chapter 4 centers on location experts. These professionals are responsible for finding locations that are fit for television and film production. It is about much more than simply searching the “best looking” place; it involves assessing whether the location can support the full production infrastructure, as well as developing contingency plans for unexpected obstacles. The chapter addresses a dual dynamic, exploring the pleasure and sense of pride involved in scouting and curating available options, while highlighting the health and safety concerns inherent in a job defined by constant, lonely, and occasionally dangerous travels. Additionally, the chapter explores how technology has impacted workers in the sector. Although the Internet has made it easier for location experts to search for images and communicate with professionals, it has also transformed their workflow. If a few decades ago location experts met with the creative team to present carefully curated photos and pitch the perfect locations for a project, today they upload hundreds of photos to a secure website and send the link via email.

Chapter 5 examines how transportation teamsters have protected their jobs as production activities leave Los Angeles and relocate to distant locations. These cultural workers are responsible for driving and delivering people, equipment, and resources where they need to be. The author shows how Local 399, the union representing teamsters in Los Angeles, strategically leveraged existing entitlements and pushed for legislative changes that enabled its members to cross borders and follow “Hollywood” to other states and countries. Rather than framing the relationship between workers and studios as a binary of conflict and concession, Sanson reveals the complex, sometimes uneasy alliances formed during the process. More importantly, the chapter situates Mobile Hollywood as a common goal of studios, government bodies, and unions, even though their motivations may vary. Finally, chapter 6 concludes the book and offers insight into possible futures for Hollywood movie and television production, considering recent frictions in the industry following the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the tense discussions surrounding the renewal of work agreements between the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees and the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers in 2021, and the on-set shooting death of cinematographer Halyna Hutchins in the same year.

The book would benefit from a tighter editorial approach, as certain points are revisited in ways that may come across as repetitive. At the same time, the particularities between movie and television production could be better distinguished. While both industries share similar production activities, their structural differences are significant: Film production operates as a short-term project completed within months, whereas television shows tend to require long-term location commitments that may span multiple seasons.

Nonetheless, *Mobile Hollywood: Labor and the Geography of Production* accomplishes its attempt to comprehend movie and television production beyond the glamorous offices and big studios of Los Angeles. By doing so, it invites us to “understand the global scale of Mobile Hollywood without losing sight of some of the details that make it all possible” (p. 174). Overall, the research contributes to documenting how Hollywood’s image as an efficient and rational enterprise is, in fact, constructed through the systematic outsourcing of contingent tasks to workers down the line and dispersed in distant locations. Therefore, this book offers a worthwhile read for scholars, students, and professionals interested in Hollywood, globally-scaled creative industries, and cultural production from workers’ perspectives.

### Reference

Havens, T., Lotz, A. D., & Tinic, C. (2009). Critical media industry studies: A research approach. *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 2(2), 234–253. doi:10.1111/j.1753-9137.2009.01037.x