

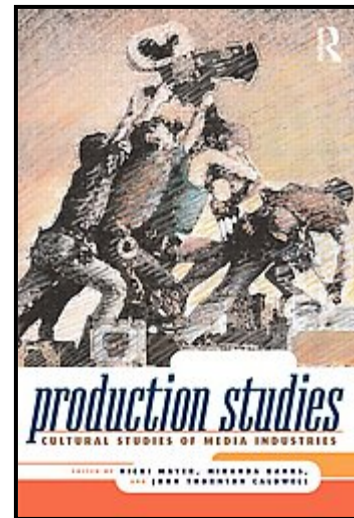
Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John Thornton Caldwell (Eds.), **Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries**, Routledge: New York, 2009, 264 pp., \$125.00 (hardcover), \$34.95 (paperback).

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Early studies of the media paid much attention to the power of the producer, a focus later called into question by those recommending more audience-centric approaches. In recent years, a trend of scholarly attention to producers has returned, this time more conscious of the complexity of power dynamics. Appearing in the wake of notable publications by John Caldwell and David Hesmondhalgh, this edited volume marks an ambitious attempt to bring together a wide variety of new work giving shape and direction to the current wave of production studies. It is a volume that speaks largely to the contributors' academic peers, encouraging the pursuit of this line of scholarship by showing snippets of the kind of work that might be achieved.

Exploring the cultural practices of media industries allows (arguably requires) a meshing of cultural-critical with political economy approaches. Happily, the editors of this volume recognize the need to "move beyond the unproductive segregation of cultural studies and political economy" (p. 5), and the contributions featured generally press in this same direction. Moreover, the authors represent a range of academic disciplines and levels of professional media experience, and a useful interdisciplinary bibliography is included. This wide-angle approach is refreshing and appropriate, providing a multifaceted look at our multifaceted media industries. At the same time, the editors recognize that the emphasis on film/TV production in the English-speaking world leaves out other important media industries, geographic sites, and communities. This focus does not, however, detract from the value of the efforts included.

The volume is divided into four parts, the first being "Histories of Media Production Studies." In this section, Vicki Mayer, Amanda Lotz, John Sullivan, and Matt Stahl contribute chapters drawing together the past and present of production studies. Mayer considers the Marxist concept of alienation, found in some earlier production studies, and argues for its continued utility in such research despite the media industry's changing political economy. Lotz takes Todd Gitlin's *Inside Prime Time* as the standard bearer in industry-level research, noting old and new challenges facing such studies. Sullivan addresses the subject of Hollywood producers and their exercise of power, lauding Leo C. Rosten's work as theoretically and methodologically foundational to today's production studies. Stahl takes a legal perspective on definitions of creativity and authorship under copyright law, with particular attention to the doctrine of "work for hire."



In the second part, "Producers: Selves and Others," Laura Grindstaff, Miranda Banks, Denise Mann, and Christine Cornea discuss the identities of media professionals. Grindstaff speaks on "ordinariness," reality television, and celebrity. Banks champions a feminist production studies, investigating the gendering of professional roles in the industry with a focus on the "women's work" of costume design. Mann considers the expanded and expansive brand management role of writer-producers — "showrunners" in industry parlance — within a big-budget, cross-platform production environment. Cornea responds to Mann with a view from the UK, utilizing *Doctor Who* in a complementary study of showrunning.

The third section, "Production Spaces: Centers and Peripheries," features Candace Moore, Jane Landman, Elana Levine, and Serra Tinic exploring the geography of production. Moore places *L Word* screening parties within this geography, examining the roles of those present — not just the fans, but also those formally associated with the show — who attended with various motivations and varying consequences. Landman uses an American sci-fi series produced in Australia to suggest that such "runaway" productions are better seen as sites of local-U.S. collaboration than of Hollywood-based cultural imperialism. Levine and Tinic both consider Canadian production; Levine investigates the question of geographic identity in the production of a globally-viewed Canadian television series, while Tinic suggests a "mediation" role for Canadian-produced television in its reflection of both Hollywood and European sensibilities.

The fourth and final part, "Production as Lived Experience," highlights the importance of knowledge of the everyday with contributions by Sherry Ortner, Stephen Zafirou, Oli Mould, John Caldwell, Paul Malcolm, Erin Hill, and Felicia Henderson. Ortner suggests that production scholars often are not studying "up" or "down," but "sideways," looking at members of their own social class. Zafirou discusses producers' efforts to decipher audience tastes, noting how many are informed by their own families, and suggests that rather than clearly standing with or away from the audience, these power players attempt to straddle the line between those two positions. Mould suggests the utility of Actor-Network Theory for production studies, providing the Australian film *Three Dollars* as a case study. In the final chapter, Caldwell interviews three scholar-practitioners (Malcolm, Hill, and Henderson), revealing insights and tips helpful for all production scholars, not only those with practitioner status.

A recurring theme in this volume, and a primary point in the current wave of production studies more generally, is the need to question who gets to count as a producer or author in media studies. Stahl, for instance, talks about how animation storyboard artists contribute new material toward the development of characters, stories, dialogue, and gags, yet they are denied any official recognition of this authorship. Similarly, Grindstaff brings reality-show participants into consideration, and Moore attends to the role of fans. Indeed, one of the book's most valuable contributions is this demonstration of united support for the expansion of the definition of "media producer." Mayer's forthcoming *Below the Line: Producers and Production Studies in the New Television Economy* promises to continue in this important direction.

Another key theme, appearing both explicitly and implicitly, is the methodological difficulty of conducting production studies. Mayer mentions how observational methods are limited, and helpfully

suggests that scholars pay more analytical attention to accessible “failures” in the production process. Ortner notes that the hurdle to access is higher with the more powerful, and echoes Caldwell in placing value on the times and places where the industry reveals itself in interactions with the public. Mann describes the difficulty of dealing with sources that will not talk on the record, while Lotz recommends the use of trade publications to gain quotes from people she could not access for an interview. This problem of access is acknowledged frequently throughout the volume [and the world of production studies], but is far from the only — or most pivotal — methodological concern. Lotz, for instance, suggests that it is increasingly difficult to make any broad industry-level claims as so much is niche-dependent, questioning how much can be taken from any one production study. Clearly, this is not to say that such studies should not be done, but rather that a particularly discerning eye must be turned on the argued implications of given research. Perhaps most critically, Mann points to academics’ inclination to take practitioners’ words at face value as a fatal flaw of some production studies projects.

I would argue (and it seems Mann would agree) that work which blurs the line between scholarly and journalistic should not be as feared as some suggest, *so long as the academic rigor and goals are achieved*; but this is precisely the requirement unmet by work which overestimates the utility of practitioners’ words as truth. Certainly, there are many times when there is no other source available to crosscheck what is being said, but if these practitioner-offered texts are to contribute to the formation of a conclusion, there must be a fully-realized attempt to imagine, explain, and argue against other interpretations. Most, but not all, contributions to this volume would meet this standard. It should be noted that shortcomings in this arena may or may not be simple consequence of the tightly packed volume structure. While commendable for its ambition, 16 chapters plus an introduction stuffed into 264 pages (229 excluding bibliography, bios and index) makes for an often frustrating read, as many pieces feel more like teasers, with insufficient time to get into the meat of the topics at hand.

The premium put on space is not only a drawback in terms of methodological evaluations and content concerns, but for establishing takeaway conclusions and recommendations. This is perhaps best exemplified by those contributors who mention an overt interest in wishing the industry to be different than it is. For instance, Mayer seems particularly interested in the space for “resistance,” but her take on this popular term and what it might mean in practice (for the practitioner and/or the industry) does not receive attention in this text. Similarly, Stahl expresses the wish that media researchers not take existing structures as desirable, “that established institutions and relations need not be accepted as legitimate or fixed, and that they can be changed” (p. 66), but includes nothing further as to what kind of change might be desired and how it would be achieved. Banks notes the need to establish fair compensation rates for female-gendered work in the industry. As a goal, this is both wonderful and necessary, but how might it be accomplished?

Some may argue that further elaboration (if room existed to offer it) would be a different project entirely, and not one particularly suited for academic writing. However, production studies as an approach prides itself on combining practice and theory, and foisting reality upon myth. It seems that it may be time to follow through — to suggest explicit practices from our theories, and force reality on our own glorified myths of potential change and resistance. While this is certainly outside the scope or size of this particular volume, it is a necessary project for the production studies community: If wishing for a different

state of affairs, consider what explicit form this idealized process of change would take, and to what practical ends for the workers, the industry, and the greater culture.

One of the pinnacle texts of production studies, Gitlin's *Inside Prime Time*, is saturated with a desire for change and a negativity toward industrial output. While there is unquestionably a place for this kind of critical take, as it offers important foundational revelations and analyses, we should challenge ourselves to press farther. If really concerned with change and resistance, we *must* offer more contributions with an eye toward attainable recommendations, whether for practitioners, policy, or an audience. The ability to take time to think — about resistance, about possibility — is one of the luxuries of academia. We are in a unique position to provide thoughtful evaluations of what specifically could change and how. If we do not make the effort to lay out a specific map for change, the corporate entities often at the center of our critiques will not fill that analytical void.