

Book Review

Michael Curtin, and Kevin Sanson, eds. Voices of Labor: Creativity, Craft, and Conflict in Global Hollywood. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017.

Ishita Tiwary

Scholarly work on labour in screen industries has predominantly focused upon the mode of production. The most influential and well-known work is that of Janet Staiger. Staiger engages with the Marxist mode of production, arguing that a shift from capitalism to advanced capitalism encourages a “detailed division of labor,” whilst at the same time strengthening the discourse on efficiency and the star and managerial systems (Staiger 2006, 316). This division, she argues, was compounded by inter-union rivalries and the workers’ struggle for recognition. Taking this work forward, Toby Miller et al. (2005) observe that the compliance of labour organizations and governments led to Hollywood studio operations extending across the globe, where producers took advantage of the competition, thus, leading to the rise of an international division of labour which negatively impacted wages and working conditions. In his work on film and television production, John Caldwell (2008) notes that media industries are essentially socio-cultural communities that live by and follow their own rules and rituals of work and socialization. Film production, on the other hand, is based on “militaristic ordering” wherein behaviour, roles, and even spaces are carefully governed and codified

to create and maintain an ordering of bodies and materials (Caldwell 2008, 31).

The edited volume entitled, *Voices of Labor: Creativity, Craft and Conflict in Global Hollywood*, by Michael Curtin and Kevin Sanson builds upon the above-mentioned work through a selection of detailed interviews with off-screen workers engaged in the mode of production for Global Hollywood. The book derives its title and form from the early WCFL radio show based in Chicago in 1926, which highlighted the lives of the workers. Through interviews, the volume highlights the craft and stresses the pleasure which off-screen workers derive from their work. One is reminded then, of Jacques Ranciere’s work, in which he makes the link between aesthetic desire and labour. In it, the workers wanted to cross the barrier that separated those who produced art from those who performed labour. In this volume, we find the off-screen workers talking with love and excitement about their craft, the skill taken to accomplish a task, and the precarious condition they now confront in Global Hollywood due to diffusion of labour.

One of the interviews in this illuminating edited volume, discusses this diffusion which is currently taking place in Hollywood. The inter-

view is with a sound recordist, who observes that the biggest threat facing Hollywood off-screen workers, is the siphoning off of their jobs to other places in the United States, Canada, and England. He elaborates upon this by pointing out how each territory has different contractual labour terms which force Hollywood guilds to make concessions to the industry. Moreover, tax incentives from other places also lead to studios moving to other geographic areas as productions costs come down. This particular anecdote captures the larger impulse of this volume — how processes of globalization are changing relationships of labour in Hollywood, and the effects this has on the personnel behind the screen—professionally, creatively, financially, and personally, as well as its large-scale implications on the Hollywood studio machinery.

The book's delineation of these considerations, is divided into three parts: "Company Town," "Global Machine," and "Fringe City." "Company Town," focuses on the city of Los Angeles, the beating heart of the Hollywood Machinery. Interviews in this section include those with a showrunner, a screenwriter, a director, an art director, a costume designer, a makeup artist, a cinematographer, a grip, a sound recordist, and a musician. While these interviews insist that LA is still the creative and financial center that sustains the industry, they do acknowledge the effects of conglomeration. These effects are manifested through budget cuts, unionization, hiring processes, and creative decisions. What emerges is a growing sense of precarity, one in which the creative process is sidelined in favour of profit, leading to a working ecosystem that is predominantly white, male, with their insurance under threat, facing pressure to abandon a stable sense of home, in order to constantly move around the globe in search of work.

The migration and diffusion of off-screen labour in Hollywood is explored in the second part of the book, "Global Machine." In this section, the editors interview a studio production executive, service producers in Prague and Hungary, a production and location manager based in Scotland, and a Hollywood-based location manager. The interviews in this section reflect

upon the complexity of global film and television production and pushes back against the notion of workers in other locations stealing jobs away from Southern California. This section focuses on the intricacies of "service production," which is managed by expatriates who are experienced line producers with Hollywood credits and offer production services in other locations. Their primary duty is to negotiate and manage the needs of the visiting producers and those of local crew and bureaucracy. This set of interviews highlights the delicate tightrope of relations between transient and local crews and how the latter are given scant opportunity of upward mobility in the career ladder. Here, precarity is highlighted through the subsidies offered by local governments and their ramifications. For instance, in this section, it is observed that Prague established itself as a center to shoot big budget Hollywood films and developed the local infrastructure to support this. However, government subsidies were not Hollywood friendly, and thus Prague now finds itself losing out to Budapest. This shift affects not only service production companies but also the workers, who now find themselves facing scant job opportunities.

The last section of the book "Fringe City," examines the role of visual effects (VFX) and the people behind creating it. The editors argue that VFX workers lie on the margins of Hollywood due to the origins of the field in the digital start up culture of the 90s. Its precarity lies in its geographical dispersion, supply firms outnumbering the demand (hundreds of firms as opposed to six major studios), the removal of directors from the physical production processes, and an atmosphere of fear and isolation amongst the employees who work in small cubicles at these firms. This section lays bare, that although VFX forms the backbone of the Hollywood global blockbuster, the labour behind it is perhaps the most exploited.

The importance of this book lies in laying bare the infrastructure of the Global Hollywood mode of production, the method used to collect these interviews, and future direction it can offer to other studies on labour and screen production. While infrastructure illuminates the

social, technical, and creative underpinnings of film production, the interviews in this book shed a light on the personal costs to the people involved in labour, the sociality that is needed to get a job and to manage runaway production, the technical know-how required for each task, and the skill set and creative acumen which are deployed to give a flair to what we see on screen. Susan Leigh Star observed that “Infrastructure is something that other things ‘run on’, things that are substrate to events and movements... Good infrastructure is by definition invisible, part of the background for other kinds of work” (Star 2002, 116). Taking a cue from Star, can one think of Hollywood as good infrastructure as it makes invisible the labour behind what we see on screen? The interviews in this volume, however, indicate the precarity that the workers contend with on an everyday basis ranging from safety precautions, the waning influence of guilds, and the dispersal and diffusion of labour to other geographic regions. These interviews suggest that perhaps, studies of labour and film production can stimulate and provoke future infrastructure studies.

The book stands out for being an exercise in method—how extensive and in-depth field interviews can illuminate certain conceptual interests of screen studies. While previous work on labour and film production has mostly focused on archives and textual analysis, this edited volume makes a case for interviews and ethnography as an added layer to labour and screen studies. It would have been fascinating had the editors explained in further detail, their process of finding and cultivating contacts, how they structured their interviews, and how they were able to get articulate and elaborate responses from their interlocutors, as this would have helped future researchers to design their research models and to understand how to access the field.

It would also be interesting to see how studies of film production in the Global South, particularly those on Bollywood (perhaps the only national cinema that has long resisted the dominance of Hollywood), respond to the forces of globalization vis-à-vis labour, in conversation with this volume. For instance, Madhava Prasad

argues that in the context of Hindi cinema, the texts mirror both cultural factors and the modes of production at work. This industry was characterized by a fragmentation of the production apparatus, kinship networks, and reliance on merchant capital, conditions that were mirrored in the “textual heteronomy” of the films, which Prasad labels a “heterogenous mode of production” (Prasad 1998, 44-45). While Prasad uses the framework of textual analysis, Pawanpreet Kaur (2017), conducts an ethnographic study of stuntmen employed in the spectacular production sequences of the action films in Hindi Cinema. Vartikka Kaul’s (2013) work combines both textual analysis and field interviews to examine visual effects in contemporary Hindi cinema and how they create what she terms a “non-indexical realism.” Overall, this edited volume opens up possibilities to think through questions of infrastructure, method, and comparative screen studies. The book will be of interest to academics, practitioners and those who are interested to know more about the inner workings of the Hollywood mode of production.

References

- Bordwell, David, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson. 2006. *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film, Style & Mode of Production to 1960*. London: Routledge.
- Caldwell, John Thornton. 2008. *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Kaul, Vartikka. 2013. *Mythology of the “Real”: Visual Effects and the Aesthetics of Indian Cinema*. New Delhi. Unpublished MPhil dissertation. Jawaharlal Nehru University.
- Kaur, Pawanpreet. 2017. *Missing in Action: Stunt Artists in the Mumbai Film Industry*. New Delhi. Unpublished MPhil dissertation. Jawaharlal Nehru University.
- Miller, Toby, Nitin Govil, John McMurria, Richard Maxwell and Ting Wang, editors. 2005. *Global Hollywood 2*. London: BFI Publishing.
- Prasad, M. Madhava. 1998. *Ideology of the Hindi*

Film: A Historical Construction. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

- Ranciere, Jacques. 2009. "The Nights of Labour Revisited." Preface to the Hindi edition of *Nights of Labour: The Workers Dream in Nineteenth Century France*, translated by Abhay Dube, English translation of preface Rana Dasgupta. New Delhi: Sarai.
- Star, Susan Leigh. 2002. "Infrastructure and Ethnographic Practice: Working on the Fringes." *Scandinavian Journal of Information Systems* 14, no. 2 (January): 107-122.