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Breaking Ranks: Backdoor Workforces, Messy Workflows, and Craft Disaggregation

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The recession has accelerated production labor's alarming but seemingly inevitable "race to the bottom." The corporate goals fueling labor's steep dive are familiar: to achieve greater corporate flexibility and externalization of risk through labor outsourcing, multitasking, digitalization, ending long-term labor "entitlements," and disaggregating rational labor relations. The boardroom fantasy here imagines that companies can now cut through the multimedia, multichannel clutter with distinctive screen content but without the pesky obligation to maintain closely allied

professional workforces. As the dust clears from the crash, in Los Angeles at least, the outlines of a new model of industry emerge — one that is above-the-line and management-heavy, with below-the-line workers so off-shore they are inconsequential if not invisible. Of course, this out-of-sight/out-of-mind specter of a “workerless industry” is far less alarming to the below-the-line workers from other states and countries who directly benefit from runaway production and transnational co-production. So, my account of worker anxiety or welfare must be placed within a specific regional context — in my case, the vast communities of underemployed workers in Los Angeles where I live and work.

Five trends have unfolded alongside the recessionary dive: 1) the collapse of traditional workflows; 2) the disaggregation of professional craft groups and labor coalitions; 3) the disruption of traditional mentoring and apprenticeship needed to maintain proficient, collective, creative knowledge databases; 4) the spread of unauthorized “worker-generated-content” (WGC) alongside user-generated-content; and 5) the emergence of new forms of “backdoor access” to “shadow production worlds.” I have detailed several of these trends elsewhere, specifically WGC and online videos in the age of ubiquitous “viral marketing”; the organizational quandary of maintaining creative, reproducible knowledge databases; and the creative logic (to management) of collapsing workflows (2005, 2008, 2009). Here, more specifically, I attend to “backdoor access,” “shadow production worlds,” and the ways that recession-era digitalization has confused traditional ways of “distributing” cognition and creativity across groups of workers and crews.

I begin above-the-line. Even before the 2006–2007 Writers Guild of America (WGA) strike, outsider, nonunion creative workers began to enter traditional union workspaces and perform work similar to the unionized “creatives.” Studios justified these newcomers as specialists in “online” platforms, website design, and multimedia fan initiatives. Yet these newcomers were writing scripts (for mobisodes), developing media (for portable screens), and producing content (for websites and online extensions of the series) nevertheless, which studios and networks defended as mere “marketing.” This excuse did not cut it with either the writers at NBC/ABC or the WGA, which pulled the plug to stop the opportunistic conflation of marketing activities and screen content production. In the three years since the strike, this unregulated world of writers, producers, and directors for studio/network *online* activities has continued to grow unabated. Because none of these workers has come up through traditional union/guild training ranks and none has or will likely become members of the WGA or Directors Guild of America (DGA), two prospects have emerged. First, these large and growing ranks of illegitimate “creatives” from the marketing side — employed deep within the signatory studios that have contracts with the “real” creative unions — will likely be kept on as cheaper, alternative, creative development teams (which prevents them from certain job and seniority protections and from earning standard payments for what is essentially episodic work). This same-work-but-less-pay status places these up-and-comers in the same sorry, unrecognized status as the many industry stealth “writers/producers” who have toiled in game shows, reality television, and animation for decades — without the same high fees that WGA writers would earn for the very same work. Or these upstarts from outside might occasionally move up from low-budget mobisode production to episodic work in the writers’ room and earn WGA membership. Such a leap would disrupt the standard seniority and advancement arrangements “hard-bargained” by labor over many decades. In effect, “outsourcing” is now being cultivated even *inside* these unionized studio workspaces. This engineered internal workplace competition unsettles “creatives,” whether they are unionized or union-wannabes. The arrangement also promotes a new kind of

“backdoor access” to the higher levels of industry (to which both professionals and younger online workers alike aspire). In some ways the resulting shadow production workspace may provide a more viable “farm system” for moving up Hollywood’s ranks than older, official WGA/DGA trainee and apprenticing schemes. These cheaper online shadow production worlds being pushed by marketing departments may supplant Hollywood’s earlier “minor leagues,” that is, commercial and music video production, which have served as development “proving grounds” for production talent since the 1980s.

The recessionary dive has disaggregated and conflicted labor in other ways as well. For example, the genius of the production system lies in effectively “distributing creativity” to teams of artists and workers even as it “harvests” and manages this collective idea-churn to create screen content. The writers’ room exemplifies Hollywood television’s creative distributing-and-harvesting process. Although distributed creativity there can alternately function like brainstorming research and development, group family therapy, or a deadlocked jury room, the environment has proven crucial in cultivating large multiepisode story worlds, partly because the room’s large writing team learns its craft over time in a system of graduated “assistanting,” apprenticeships, mentoring, and producing. The sitcom has been difficult to resurrect because the genre’s near disappearance in the mid 2000s cut-out the collective training ground necessary to groom new, competent *sitcom* show-runners. A dynamic like this also unfolds in physical production, in camera crews and postproduction teams. Recession-era digitalization has unsettled both groups. While production and postproduction have utilized digital applications of one sort or another in support roles since the early 1980s, digital technologies now fully dominate both the front and back ends of physical production. The perceived value of digitalization, however, varies widely, depending on whether one is management or a craft worker.

On the upside, digitalization gives creators a much bigger palette of aesthetic options from which to work. Camera crews can push beyond traditional contrast and exposure limits, cook up color schemes impossible to create in earlier film and analog systems, then lock down these diverse new styles into a set of rapidly recyclable in-camera “looks” or preferences. Digitalization has also provided editing teams with: endless possibilities for “undoing” and reworking scenes; the ability to rapidly recall recorded images and sounds from mountains of data; the expectation of choice from a menu of stylistic solutions for any given scene or sequence “problem”; and intuitive graphic user interfaces to make sense of this exponential increase of computerized production complexity.

These benefits ought to make this a win-win solution for productions. *Creative workers* have considerably more options to “individuate” their shows, a requisite for rising above the multichannel clutter. Every look does not have to be rebuilt from the ground up for each scene. This allows for much greater leeway and experimentation once filming begins. Rather than having to build each transition from scratch, as in the past, editors as well have hundreds of premade effects from which to rapidly cut-and-paste. On the *business* side, producers exploit digitalization to cut corners, reduce labor costs, and channel these physical production savings into marketing and escalating above-the-line costs. In this juxtaposition, stylistic sophistication increases as material production costs decrease, thus fulfilling the industrial obligation to wed artistic quality with economic affordability wherever possible. Yet digitalization also has downsides — darker outcomes evident on both sides of the line. Because digital’s positive “revolutionary” benefits sketched-out above also function as business “short-cuts,” they also frequently disrupt conventional crafts requiring distributed creativity. Three recessionary tendencies

dramatize digitalization's production shakedown: blurred and collapsed work-flows, accelerated on-set work speed, and multitasking expectations.

BLURRED AND COLLAPSED WORKFLOWS

Traditional workflows between production and postproduction involved a linear, serial sequence of discrete tasks and progress benchmarks. Shooting followed set building and lighting, logging followed recording or filming, fine-cutting followed rough cutting, effects were added late in post, and so forth. Digital confuses this sequencing by allowing post activities to bleed into earlier production phases and production activities to seep into traditional postproduction environments. Now, visual effects supervisors commonly meet and plan with a producer and director at the earliest stages of a project's script development. With this preemptive invasion of *post* functions into *pre*production, who now can claim to be responsible "for the overall look of a production"? Traditionally this role was standardized and claimed (in different ways) by two long-standing crafts: the director of photography (DP) and the production designer (or art director). Adding the VFX supervisor to preproduction, however, means that there are now frequently three cooks in the kitchen wrestling over the stylistic recipe. Similarly, as Hollywood TV shifts from film mags and videotape recording to removable digital hard-drives and solid-state computer cards as recording devices on the set, who now handles and organizes the footage in preparation for post? Is it the traditional AC/loader, the video-assist operator, or the newly defined "data wranglers" or "DITs"? Production now feels more like digital "IT management" than traditional "photography," and this unsettles many workers. In both of these workflow examples, a single new digital function threatens two existing job descriptions. Bottomline-focused producers typically respond to the resulting labor redundancies by cutting out one or more of the competing crafts. Nasty inter-craft conflict ensues.

FILMING AND WORK SPEED

Computerized efficiency and speed in post has, ironically, also ramped up the pace of filming and work speed on a set. As long as production's workflow was tied to 35mm film, DPs and directors advanced their careers by mastering low shooting ratios using fewer shots. This efficiency allowed for formulaic coverage on the set and predictable cutting in post. Computerized Avids and then Final Cut Studio (FCP) software, however, allowed the same size team of editors to view, process, and manage far more, huge amounts, of raw footage. Traditional Moviola and Kem film editors simply could not manage material of this scale and complexity. This volume capability on the back-end of a production encouraged directors and DPs to shoot and experiment more on the set. It is no coincidence that the shift to largely hand-held, multicamera shooting took center stage in primetime dramas such as *NYPD Blue*, *Homicide*, *24*, *The Shield*, and *Friday Night Lights* at the same time that editing became fully computerized. Switching away from cameras locked down on tripods or dollies (and the rigid shot lists that went with them) to documentary-style "overshooting" would normally be suspect, however, for budgetary reasons. That is, shooting more typically costs more. Since producers habitually push for ever-greater cost savings, some

counter-saving was needed to make up for the overshooting. The solution involved an odd combination: actors and cameras interacted more improvisationally on the set, during much longer, multicamera documentary takes. This continuous shooting enabled crews to use far fewer camera and lighting set-ups, which have always been the costliest slow-down factors in production budgeting. This accelerated shooting mode fit the new ensemble dramas well, where multiple character arcs and subplots are now always in motion alongside of each other. The result, ironically, has been that drama production has become more like *improvisational theater*, shot in a *documentary* mode acclaimed by television critics for its edgy *cinematic* qualities. This new, shortened-and-accelerated improvisational mode only works, however, if directors are willing to distribute or delegate more framing decisions to hand-held operators and more shot choices to editors. Two factors make this new frantic mode possible: editing's computerized sophistication combined with recessionary pressures to reduce physical production costs and shorten shooting schedules. Producers, directors, and viewers get more art for their buck, but economic pressures to create ever more screen content using fewer shooting days and dollars also stresses creative professionals in acute ways.

PRODUCTION MULTITASKING

Third, digital creates greater industry pressures for production multitasking. As postproduction and effects work shrank to computer "work-station" scale, and digital filming and dailies morphed into data management, individuals using the new equipment face a set of options unheard of under the old labor agreements. As they have always done, *unions* continue their push to segregate and distribute tasks among postproduction workers so that rough-cutters cut, sound designers do sound, effects artists make effects, timers time, and online editors finish program masters. Yet, recently, a countervailing force has pushed back in the opposite direction. Hardware and software companies have loaded each computer workstation and software package with a mind-numbing assortment of options and once-segregated tasks. To take but one example, no longer limited to its original editing task, studio FCP software now boasts capabilities in almost every area of production *and* postproduction, save actual shooting. FCP devotes huge segments of its software to the once discrete tasks of: sound design, digitizing and transfer, logging, CGI and digital effects work, 2D and 3D animation, title graphics, rough-cutting, online cutting, ADR, colorizing and timing, standards conversion, camera and deck control, encoding for online web applications and mobile media, and DVD design, authoring, and burning. This represents an overwhelming set of competing user tasks that once were jobbed out to separate specialists or production companies. In addition, most FCP users probably use less than 3% of the software's capabilities at any given time, and those who want to master all of FCP face months and years of formal training to do so. This makes the software a far cry from the hardware that it obsoletes. Any apprentice editor could learn to operate an upright Moviola in a week or two. "Real editors" once dismissed this extra digital stuff as "bells-and-whistles" and "eye candy." Yet computer software now makes each bundled capability as sophisticated — and state-of-the-art — as any of the others.

Admittedly, *A-list* production still distributes graphics, effects, sound, and timing tasks to contracted specialists in those areas. But producers in middle- and low-budget production create pressures on their workers to use and incorporate the bells-and-whistles, even if they lie outside of the worker's specializations. To wit, reality TV and dating shows are largely created

in postproduction by interns and production assistants using FCP — again, the shortcut. As in any sector, multitasking stresses workers and undercuts control and focused fine-tuning. Four broad recessionary factors make digitalization's downside so acute: first, the oversupply and underemployment of professional workers; second, the constant flood of aspirants willing to low-bid on any job and to multitask for nonmonetary reasons (e.g., for free, for credits, for “dues-paying”); third, the pressures from new online practices and user-generated content (again, digital alternatives but from the “outside”); and finally, the calculated efforts of networks/studios to redefine their own creative screen content as “marketing” in order to monetize online viewing. De-aestheticizing content as marketing this way may help networks get web hits, but it also guts the system of labor incentives that have kept the artistic community intact for decades. The two disruptive strikes thus far (WGA and SAG) are likely just the first of many pending labor conflicts in the production communities. This strife and *inter-craft* contention directly follows from the economy and technology.

Recessionary shortcutting, downsizing, and multitasking — all facilitated by digitalization — threaten the ways that creativity within production groups has been distributed, cultivated, and harvested for more than a half century. Despite their economic value, corner-cutting trends undercut something more long-standing: the collective genius of the writers' room, the disciplined craftsmanship of the postproduction team, and the meticulous mentoring of the camera crew. Such things cannot be cooked up overnight by low-ball-bidding backdoor workforces.

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Media Work and the Recession

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“At least 163,400 advertising jobs have been lost since the beginning of the recession,” wrote Jim Edwards on BNET’s US ad agency layoff counter online on January 18, 2010.¹ Erica Smith’s *Paper Cuts* infographic has tracked 34,666 jobs lost in the US newspaper industry between June

¹ Source: <http://industry.bnet.com/advertising/1000433/bnets-ad-agency-layoff-counter>