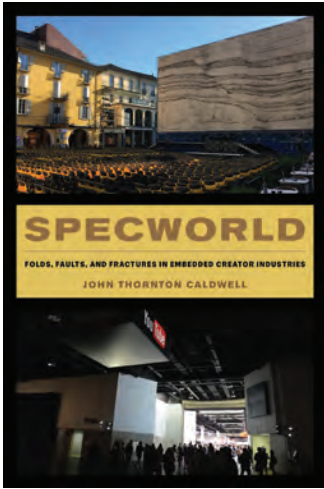


J. D. CONNOR

Specworld: Folds, Faults, and Fractures in Embedded Creator Industries, by John Thornton Caldwell

There's a way to approach John Thornton Caldwell's *Specworld: Folds, Faults, and Fractures in Embedded Creator Industries* as another of his characteristically decisive interventions in cinema and media studies driven by his decades of ethnographic work. *Specworld* is that, but that isn't how it manifests, nor is that why—for

most readers of *Film Quarterly*—it matters. What he calls “specwork” he describes as a “widely dispersed conceptualizing process” that “may be as central to the core of television/media production today as the industrial and material production of series, formats, and network programming once was” (57).

Specworld is the third in the author's trilogy of ethnographies that include *Televisuality* and *Production Culture*. Caldwell's efforts take their place in a century of thinking through the labor structures of Hollywood, from the incisive journalism typified by *Fortune* writers in the 1930s and Lillian Ross's *Picture* in the 1950s to the anthropological and ethnographic efforts inaugurated by Hortense Powdermaker's *Hollywood, the Dream Factory* (1950).

But the “Hollywood” of today is no longer a film factory with an emergent TV sector; nor is it the world of hundreds of linear channels of the cable era. The central gambit of *Specworld* is to reach out to the incomprehensibly large world of platform content creators to see how they might fit into the system formerly known as “the industry.” Is there a way that broadening the reach can yield a new level of coherence? And is that question of interest merely to scholars?

Where vast swaths of cinema and media studies have attempted to comprehend the totality of contemporary media via their shared cultural values or via the relatively medium-agnostic practices of fans, Caldwell is attempting something nearly impossible: understanding the totality of the system through the titular “folds, faults, and fractures” that unite *and* differentiate its varied worlds of practice or aspiration.

Caldwell's ethnography ranges from high-prestige Hollywood labor (“craftworld,” as in *Game of Thrones*) through more fungible, rapid-fire IP expansion (“brandworld,” as in reality TV) to the instant-upload, always-on world of YouTubers (“specworld”). But the book is not reportage; it is resolutely uncinematic in the way it presents the interactions among those worlds. There are no long set pieces that clock their way through decisive events. There are no “whole experiences” to be disarticulated. There are no rounded characters. There are no piles of redundant quotations from qualitative interviews, the bane of bad ethnography. Instead, there are bits and pieces of interviews, isolated slides from discarded PowerPoint decks, clipped marketing lines, and stills from YouTube behind-the-scenes videos. Each of these fragments sidles up to the argument only to bear more weight than you might have initially imagined. The prose is punctuated by photo illustrations of the detritus of the industry's how-to sessions, “VidCons,” and other paratexts.

The charge of Caldwell's writing does not principally lie in the emergence of “characters” or “stories.” It lies rather in his relentless invention of categories and concepts. His prose spins out hundreds of novel encapsulations to reckon with a phenomenal totality of seemingly impossible variety. For the reader who will not be undertaking such research on their own, the text is a wave to be surfed. The concepts that emerge are not the creators' own—people inside the system often “misperceive the very labor regimes they aspire to or operate in”—but they are adjacent, an inveterate “getting it,” ready to be deployed in strategic empathy.

Alongside that conceptual effulgence are the lists. For Caldwell, parataxis—one damn thing after another—is the mode of reality. The near-synonyms in his lists of nouns, adjectives, or, most importantly, verbs are not redundancies. They are calls to attend to the precise differences each of those terms might name or not quite name. Field work runs into “splintered relations, financing failures, failed pilots, derailed coproductions, finger-pointing, and

Film Quarterly, Vol. 76, No. 4, pp. 101–112. ISSN: 0015-1386 electronic ISSN: 1533-8630 © 2023 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, <https://online.ucpress.edu/journals/pages/reprintspermissions>. DOI: 10.1525/FQ.2023.76.4.101

self-justifications in the trades” (41–42). Caldwell’s verbs cumulate: “These multiple systems invariably overlap, shadow, feed, alter, monetize, or manage the specific production practice the researcher initially sets out to study” (34). The proliferating nouns appear when the system “fractures,” providing new ways of reading through the events of the cultural world; the verbs unroll when there is some registrable experience that the connotations indicate.

But that wild proliferation is not the final state of Caldwellian prose. For every so often, the unruly terminology is gathered into a table and the “multiple systems” reach toward a higher systematicity. The “semiotic square” à la Fredric Jameson or Rosalind Krauss offers a tidy arrangement of the forces that hold a set of oppositional concepts in place. It produces its effect by revealing an unexpected, diagrammatic simplicity hidden within a complex system. Caldwell’s tables achieve their power in the unhidden, the obvious. They flicker, they congeal, and the ragged edges of their comparisons are not indications of thought that is imprecise, but of the unruly, turbulent realities those conceptual containers bring to semiorder. There must be readers for whom the tables come across as arch, as false precision, as monuments to unrigor. For the rest—for me, obviously—this is where thinking gets hold of reality without squeezing it dry.

Caldwell’s *Production Culture* (2008) still acknowledged that the motor of broad interest in “film-and-television” lay in the aesthetic aspirations of products. In *Specworld*, Caldwell contends that this newly dominant labor domain moves aspiration down the scale, away from flagship products or auteur careers and into the system’s everyday interactions. The spec script is no longer an isolated product; “specwork” is everywhere. “A deep and unfortunate synergy exists between wide-ranging speculation behaviors (on production’s expressive ‘creator’ side) and folding and rift behaviors (on production’s stressed, managerial ‘industry’ side)” (19). The system has its tensions, dynamics, and metastable power arrangements. Over time, “proliferating specwork destroys craftworld scarcity even as it feeds huge amounts of new ideas into the brandworld, which large corporate conglomerates efficiently strip-mine” (80). The “dense paraindustrial buffer” is “now inseparable from industry proper” (81).

Caldwell’s work on complex systems has finally found a way around notions of the work as lodestar. All the things that might be reified in a “work of art” can be sliced and diced and distributed across the infinite churn of worker-generated content. Conceptually, aspiration is operationalized. The result is a concomitant increase in scholarly

attention to both method and ethics. “More than, say, economic ‘markets’ or strategic ‘synergies’ or ‘creative economies,’ all three dispositions (deception, coercion, extraction) necessarily involve embodied, experienced, and affective dimensions” (17). The “condition or duress” of the people who make media “should matter more in scholarship” (17).

This is a conceptually audacious solution to the problem of studying creative industries. Caldwell has not simply solved a problem that dogs ethnography or one that is internal to his own intensive attention to the systems of creative exploitation he is busy training people into. This sort of writing, with its attendant conceptual bonanza, shakes received ideas about cultural determination as a whole.

The first step toward this reconception is simply noticing alignments and analogies. Caldwell begins his case studies with a comparison of instructional rhetorics regarding breaking in or making it and the bodily pressures they presume, then moves on to a typology of “administrative production,” particularly the “televisioning” of YouTube content creation. He concludes with an outline of the ways in which production “conjures finance.” Economic aperçus proliferate: “Trade conjecture functions alongside financial speculation”; “aspiration” is “a form of managerial capital” (xiii–xix); “*all film/TV productions are pilots....* They create the possibility of endless, systematic iterations of the very same readaptable concept” (82, emphasis in the original).

Then things begin to get a little spooky. “Specwork has aligned so well with transmedia production, industry fan interactions, and viral marketing, which mirror it” because it “provides the broad conditions that facilitate linkages and synergies between the malleable digital ‘material’ and technologies of TV production, on the one hand, and current corporate management strategies aimed at developing malleable and self-replicating IP, on the other (which ideally suits corporate reformatting, franchising, branding, transmedia)” (61). Asserting that the Marvel Cinematic Universe and Mr. Beast are up to the same thing seems precipitous. Describing “specwork” this way, though, the system-of-systems begins to coalesce.

Caldwell’s account of the affects and conceptualizing processes that pervade contemporary media production compels us to ask what has brought us to this point. What determines the shape and history of culture? He offers suggestive hints that the building blocks of specworld—“speculative imagination, previsualization, prototyping, pitching, and brainstorming”—were “closely associated with innovation strategies in the arts.” Along the way, innovation was routinized; a massive “folding” brought much creative energy into the system as a whole. Today, artistic

speculations “behave more like institutional and economic bureaucracies than aesthetic principles” (119).

How did artistic speculation get swallowed? Were the concepts always vulnerable to cooptation? Or did early “specwork,” perhaps unknowingly, run just ahead of the economy that would inevitably capture and profit from it? I am, by training and inclination, bound to see such ironies as the mediated results of the mode of production as a whole. And yet. And yet perhaps the starkest challenge Caldwell’s work issues is to that Frankfurt School materialism. “[You] could say that YouTube and its affiliates partner together as a public trading floor for the microfinancing of aspirant creators” (255). You could, and once you plunge into the distilled rhetoric of creators and corporations you probably should. But for that system to work, something else is supplementing it. “The automated therapeutic management” that gluts these platforms helps shore up “specworld’s vast micromedia speculation stock market” (272). Here’s how to deal with burnout; here’s how to deal with disappointment, mistakes, demonetization. Just keep posting. The “cultural reflation” of the creative economy after the crises of 2008 was properly affective, properly cultural.

And powerful. Caldwell’s account of “televisioning” in the world of YouTube hinges not on the conversion of YouTube into something like a linear TV network but rather the penetration of television-style management techniques into YouTubers’ overleveraged businesses. One central feature of that is an imposed scarcity mobilized to drive monetization. Just as television decides between binge drops and weekly releases, so content creators need to find ways of imposing televisual scarcity on their work, pushing audiences into higher Patreon tiers or convincing them to sit through ads.

If we take “televisioning” seriously, we find that its principles are very nearly the story of the streaming wars. In 2022, Wall Street investors demanded that streamers pivot from at-any-cost subscriber acquisition to near-term profitability. The macroeconomic environment was now dominated by postpandemic inflation and higher interest rates. Those raised the costs of delay and shortened the timeline for returns. Netflix was punished, Paramount rewarded; the industry began to shed hundreds of shows, purge library titles, launch ad-supported alternatives to their flagship channels, and tout their hyperprofitable free ad-supported streaming television brands such as Tubi, Pluto TV, and Freevee.

That may or may not be striking to you. It strikes me because it raises the question of why the model of a YouTuber’s ascent should depend on forms of “televisioning.” Was that just a foretaste of the televisioning of

the system overall? Was it the model, the paradigm, the metonym, the allegory, the subsidiary, the case study? Are these transformations the results of material and technological changes, or do they derive from rhetorics of practice? Like no other recent work, *Specworld* presses pause on the quick determination of determination.

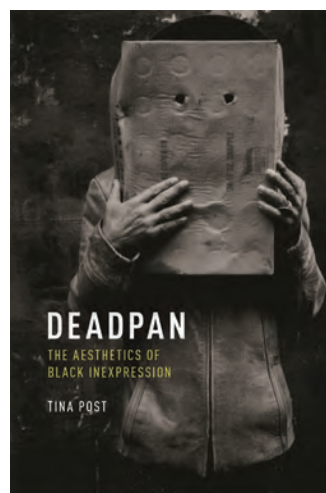
There are scholarly consequences, but for practitioners, creators, viewers, and everyone else, determination becomes a live question again. Caldwell puts industry at the center but describes an industry largely devoid of identities. It will fall to readers and other researchers to ask whether networks built on race, queerness, school, and so on that cut across the industry are mere deviations from the system or whether they erect countersystems, counter-subsystems within the whole. It may require finding new locations of fracture and enfolding. It will absolutely require Caldwellian levels of attention, vision, and language to measure up to the complexities of the world.

J. D. CONNOR is an associate professor in the Division of Cinema and Media Studies at the University of Southern California. He is the author of *Hollywood Math and Aftermath: The Economic Image and the Digital Recession* and *The Studios after the Studios: Neoclassical Hollywood, 1970–2010*.

BOOK DATA John Thornton Caldwell, *Specworld: Folds, Faults, and Fractures in Embedded Creator Industries*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2023. \$85 cloth; \$29.95 paper. 400 pages.

LAUREN TREIHAFT

Deadpan: The Aesthetics of Black Inexpression, by Tina Post



Though the expression or inexpression of deadpan is most commonly associated with silent-film star Buster Keaton (“the Great Stone Face”), the comic actor known for the impassiveness of his face and the imperiousness of his body, Tina Post’s *Deadpan: The Aesthetics of Black Inexpression* reconsiders the historical legacy of

the concept outside of traditional accounts of comedy and humor studies by offering an impressive “investigation of the aesthetic affects at work at the intersection of blackness and embodied inexpressions” (3).