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Company Town

Editors' Introduction

The historic core of Hollywood was anchored by a small cohort of major studios premised on a model of industrialized creativity that unleashed a torrent of films and television programs around the world. This prolific system of production bolstered the power of a few employers whose influence extended beyond the studio gates and into the community, leading many to observe that Los Angeles—like its counterparts in Detroit and Pittsburgh—was a company town. Indeed, even today, the *Los Angeles Times* brands its website coverage of the entertainment industry under the title "Company Town."[1] Moreover, the studios' influence extended even further, shaping the operating procedures and work routines of media producers around the world. That's why the opening section of this book focuses on the practices and principles of this quintessential company town, and does so from the bottom up.

Each production employs hundreds of workers in dozens of job categories, so what follows is a sampling of perspectives that offer specific details about the duties and challenges that workers confront, while also demonstrating the passion, commitment, and skills that are sometimes absent from discussions about film and television craftwork. For instance, sound recording is a highly intricate process that requires technical virtuosity to mix multiple inputs into a master recording as well as unsparing vigilance to determine and eliminate potential sources of "noise." The subtle scuff of shoes on a wooden floor or the soft hum of an oscillating fan—these sounds are trivial, if audible at all, to the untrained ear, but to a sound recordist, such minor background noises can be fatal to the film's final audio track.

Our interlocutors take conspicuous pride in both their creativity and their professionalism, the latter defined by one's ability to contribute to complex collaborative ventures under demanding and constantly shifting circumstances. Consider as an example the elaborate motion picture sets built for *The Hunger Games* series (2012–15). Each set was the outcome of extended deliberations among directors, production designers, art directors, illustrators, builders, and set decorators. Drawings were done, models were made, budgets were negotiated. Materials, colors, and lighting setups were debated, sometimes up to the very last minute. Each set was therefore the product of consensus and consultation—a single, collective outcome of numerous individual creative flourishes. Thus, many of our interviewees, regardless of their particular job titles, emphasize teamwork, communication, and problem-solving skills as fundamental aspects of their everyday labor, all of which underscores the high degree of sociality that characterizes production work.

And yet we also heard workers contrast these attributes with what they see as managerial practices that are illogical and inefficient. Bureaucratic layers separate decision makers from frontline practitioners, a distance that has grown significantly with the rise of global media conglomerates that are beholden to Wall Street financial markets. Conglomeration has many deleterious effects, but perhaps the most significant impact on workers is the way it prioritizes cost containment strategies that gnaw away at employee compensation and extract novel forms of unpaid labor. This tendency is exacerbated by relentless comparisons that corporate officials make between production costs in Hollywood versus other places. Los Angeles–based workers are especially sensitive to these comparisons, having watched countless projects flee to distant locales—what they refer to as "runaway productions."

Studio executives exploit these sensitivities by telegraphing their budgetary concerns to workers at every level, often via disingenuous suggestions that corporate cost equations are derived from nothing less than natural law. Unlike the glory days of the 1930s, when most workers were full-time employees with union representation, today only a fraction of the workforce is actually employed by the major studios. The vast majority work for small companies that service the studios on a contractual basis, providing cinematography, set design, and makeup services. Moreover, these contractors mostly hire freelancers who sign on for particular projects. To managers in distant offices, these enterprises and their workers are treated as interchangeable parts, but as our interviews reveal, this perspective glaringly contrasts with the essential sociality of film and television production.

For example, a costume designer or a cinematographer who is making hiring decisions crucially relies on his or her personal knowledge of the skills and capacities of prospective crew members. If they have to look outside their immediate circle of tried-and-true freelancers, they rely on trusted colleagues to recommend alternatives. One's personal work ethic and creative skills are therefore distinguishing attributes that are communicated within a tightly integrated network of professionals.

But by treating workers as interchangeable parts and keeping them on edge about future employment prospects, corporate executives exert leverage in their negotiations. They not only demand more for the same amount of compensation, they turn up the temperature in the workplace so that it's common to hear veteran employees confide that folks aren't having fun anymore, that the job has become a grind. That's not to say that every workplace is beleaguered by hardball management tactics and that the magic of motion pictures has simply vanished. But in those cases where workers do express satisfaction, it's often attributable to the power of an exceptional producer or director who can push back against corporate demands and set a positive tone for the crew.

As jobs vanish and workplace pressures increase, it furthermore affects hiring practices and workplace diversity. Hollywood has become a closed circuit of diminishing job opportunities that is dominated by managerial imperatives and crew bosses who simply hire those they know. We often see headline stories about leading female actors being paid less than their male counterparts or about the lack of racial diversity among top-line talent. Many of our interviewees acknowledged how both employers and unions act as gatekeepers, making it difficult for outsiders to secure work. Freelancers find it hard to get a foot in the door, let alone to land a string of gigs that will qualify them for union benefits. Those who have union status are often scrambling to maintain it.

The situation is especially challenging for women and minorities who confront both personal biases and structural obstacles. Consider the fact that "boy wonders" are indulged and rapidly promoted, while female workers are overlooked or even disparaged. Such personal biases are complemented by institutional preferences that favor big-budget star vehicles and action-adventure stories over productions that specifically address black or Latino audiences. The hyper-commercialism of the industry undervalues these audiences, which in turn sets off a chain of decision making that affects the conception and staffing of shows. Other structural factors discourage diversity as well. Long hours and a lack of family support services make it difficult for women to hold certain jobs.

Systemic issues like these evolve out of institutional choices that are rationalized by common-sense explanations rather than clear-eyed analysis. "We simply can't afford childcare" is a common excuse for failing to support a diverse workforce. And giving audiences "what they want" deflects attention from the fact that market research values audiences in prejudicial ways. Moreover, time pressures and cost consciousness leave little room to experiment with structural reforms that could address these concerns. As the following interviews show, workers make tactical efforts to nurture one another, protect benefits, and open up the hiring process, but we see little evidence that major studios are willing to take on the deep structural obstacles to diversity.

Lest we seem nostalgic for the good old days, it's important to remember that struggles between labor and management have been waged throughout the history of Hollywood. During the glory days of the 1930s and 1940s, studios were integrated factories that offered long-term contracts to workers in almost every aspect of production. Working side by side and often living in the same neighborhoods, screen media laborers embraced unionization during the New Deal era of industrial organizing. In the midst of Hollywood's prosperity they battled and bargained for lucrative wages and benefits, and they gained limited authority within their respective artistic, craft, and service categories. Their geographic proximity and continuity of employment helped to swell their influence.

Today, the situation is far different. Unions have a difficult time organizing freelance employees who work for hundreds of small-scale employers, each servicing discrete productions. The challenges facing unions have grown even more complex due to the mobility that producers now enjoy. Given these circumstances, most of the workers we spoke with seem to understand that unions—with all their shortcomings—remain a necessary and vital force in Hollywood.

Despite the corporate and globalizing pressures outlined above, we also see reasons why this company town remains a central hub of the motion picture business. For it is a place where reputations are built and professional networks are anchored. It's where contractors score their next project and assemble their core workforce even if production duties are distributed to distant locales that offer tax subsidies and other cost economies. Although many workers today realize that they must be mobile to remain employable, their home base and their personal lives remain in Hollywood. Yet this takes a toll on creativity and on family life. It also raises safety issues. In light of these concerns, some have rescaled their ambitions while others have left the business altogether. Nevertheless, Los Angeles is still one of the largest and most productive creative communities in the world. For all its globe-trotting ways, Hollywood remains a company town, a point made abundantly clear by those who spoke with us.

NOTE

1. "Company Town," *Los Angeles Times*, http://www.latimes.com/business/hollywood/.