

Creativity Versus Commodification

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Book Review: Andrew Stubbs-Lacey (2024) *The Talent Management of Indie Authorship: From American Independent Cinema and Short “Films” to Pay-TV and Streaming*, Edinburgh University Press (272 pages).

Based on the author’s doctoral thesis, this book is part of the prestigious Edinburgh University Press *Film, Media and Cultural Studies* series, which includes previous books on American independent cinema (Tzioumakis, 2017; Rogers, 2015).

Historically, the role of the independent film-maker was understood to rest on a daring, innovative form of film-making, emerging in the 1970s and 1980s, which operated outside of and in opposition to the aesthetic norms and commercial objectives of the Hollywood mainstream. Independent film-makers sought to minimise their aesthetic and economic dependence on the major Hollywood studios. By the late 1990s, independent cinema had been consolidated as a cinematic sub-field with its own institutions, aesthetic norms, forms of financing, distribution and exhibition, embedded in speciality divisions of the major studios. With the 2008 financial crash, the major studios began closing or cutting back on their involvement in specialty production, refocusing on the production of event films and franchises. The advent of platforms, streaming, and the “cinematization” of television by the long-form series resulted in a global expansion in the demand for audio-visual products. This was followed by the expansion in small- to medium-size studios supplying sub-cultural niche markets, which were hoping to break into the global value chains controlled by conglomerate Hollywood and streaming platforms such as Amazon and Netflix (Parker and Cox, 2013; King, 2016, McDonald and Wasko, 2008).

The success of streaming platforms encouraged the major studios to cultivate an elite of indie-auteurs. This intervention restructured the independent sector into three modes of production: “Indie” low-cost and digital film making that departs from established Hollywood genres and film conventions; “Indiewood” film productions that stay within the aesthetic paradigms of the Hollywood cinema in order to make “quirky” modest budget features with the potential to crossover to a mass market; and the upper echelon studio-based big budget event films that aim to exploit the global market and its associated merchandising spin offs (Tzioumakis, 2014).

These developments call for the re-consideration of traditional ideas concerning the nature of authorship and creative autonomy in Hollywood. Taking what is defined as a production of culture approach, the primary purpose of this book is to track the power dynamics between the major film studios and independent film makers in the era of media convergence, deregulation and neoliberal

governance of markets. Rather than focusing, as other studies have done, on the impact of media convergence and platform streaming on the industry or on the labour market and employment, this study focuses on the role of talent intermediaries, individuals positioned at the highest levels of talent representation who use their connections to big studio executives to advance the careers of high-profile (or soon to be) clients and big-budget projects (4). Particular emphasis is placed on the rhetorical and ideological processes whereby the category of independent director is replaced by the neologism “indie- auteur”—a new form of creative attached to particular directors who bring their cultural capital as innovators and rule breakers.

The first concern is to track the genealogy of the value-laden concept “auteur”. Initially formulated by the French New Wave Criticism, and introduced into American film criticism by Andrew Sarris, the auteur was a director working within the Hollywood Studio system, such as John Ford, or chiefly in B Movies and television, for example, Budd Boetticher, whose body of work expressed an artistic vision and a personal world view (Caughie, 2013; Rhodes, 2017). Theoretically, compared to an in-studio auteur, an independent auteur operating outside the system should have the highest degree of creative licence. Yet the factual dominance of Hollywood over production and, especially, distribution means that sustaining a creative career cannot avoid Hollywood’s equation of cultural significance with profitability.

Although the technology has become cheaper—Sean Baker, for example, filmed his critically praised film *Tangerine* (2015) on iPhones—the costs for script development, wages and salaries, post-production and distribution remain expensive. Finding funding to start production requires a considerable investment of time, energy and the will to persist despite the high likelihood of failure.

In these circumstances, the approach to deal-making by independent film makers varies from principled resistance to Hollywood production values through to opportunity-driven shamanistic self-branding to secure studio funding (Ortner, 2013). When the latter happens, and to the extent it does, the career of an independent director becomes crystallised around a co-dependent, variously conditional engagement with Global Hollywood. The new status of the independent director as an indie-auteur—one who works within the system—is largely the work of talent intermediaries who construct a big studio persona for their clients. As Andrew Stubbs-Lacey observes,

While a significant amount of scholarly work has considered the centrality of authorship to indie film, ..., this is the first book-length work to explore the roles that talent intermediaries play in constructing, mobilising and managing indie-auteur brands and, in turn, shaping ideas of indie and specialty production. (2-3)

The transmutation of the auteur into the “indie-auteur” signifies a form of agency which is symptomatic and constitutive of new forms of control over film making. In order to explore the rhetorical and ideological dimensions of this shift, Stubbs-Lacey presents five case studies. The first is focused on the work of the Coen Brothers. In engaging with the Hollywood major studios, few film makers have preserved their autonomy as successfully as the Coens. In their rise from small scale “artisanal” production to major studio film and long-form television production, the Coens have retained their reputation as independent film makers. This reputation remains intact largely because they write original screenplays or original adaptations of novels such as Cormac McCarthy’s *No Country for Old Men*. Underlying their creative

autonomy is a healthy cost-to-revenue ratio. Their box office performance alone has risen from US\$4 million for their break-out hit *Blood Simple* (1984) to US\$125 million for *True Grit* (2009).

The career of the Coens demonstrates that working with commercially oriented talent managers need not compromise independence. Talent management by building a “brand” preserves creative autonomy and enables the Coens to escape from the fate of most directors as freelancers for hire (35). The downside of branding is that it helps reproduce the neoliberal conception of the creator as a uniquely gifted individual (52-53). This contribution to steep inequality is ironic given that the Coens have built their careers as co-directors within a stock company of stars and “above the line” craft personnel.

The rise of the indie-auteur means, in short, that the collective ethos of independent film making, associated with directors such as John Sayles, is reduced to the creative expression of maverick “visionaries” such as Christopher Nolan (77). As the example of Nolan indicates, the directorial elite formed by indie-auteur branding is typically white and male.

The Coens case study provides a comparative baseline for the emergence of a new synthesising category of auteur—the talent intermediary. They nurture and create opportunities for highly paid unique talents. Given their formative contribution, intermediaries can be seen as creative, the auteurs of indie auteurs so to speak. Such individuals are well known in the trade but largely invisible to the general public (8).

Stubbs-Lacey devotes three chapters to exploring the business activities of the late Steve Golin and his associates. Golin as CEO played a leadership role in founding and operating two companies. The first, Propaganda Films, a talent management, advertising and video production company expanded into film making, based on the revenue earned from music video production. Subsequently, when Propaganda was taken over by PolyGram, Golin and his associates founded Anonymous Content, a production company that went on to win an impressive number of awards and came to represent an elite echelon of 50 writers, directors and actors. Anonymous expanded its production to include commercials, music videos, feature films and long-form television. From the revenue stream provided by this wide-ranging portfolio of formats, Golin and his associates’ companies developed the careers of indie-auteurs such as David Fincher, Spike Jonze, Spike Lee and showrunners, Sam Esmail (*Mr Robot*) and Nic Pizzolatto (*True Detective*). As the design of the logos of Propaganda and Anonymous Content signified, the patronage of the “suits” was not a barrier to the pursuit of an independent edgy vision.

Yet if Golin and his partners cultivated a reputation as creative visionaries, the licence afforded to indie-auteurs was always conditional. It varied according to senior management tastes and preferences; shifts in investments of energy and financing in response to general market conditions; box office performance; and contingencies arising from creative disagreements at the point of production (67). In short, the freedom offered was through negotiated accommodations to the institutional practices and conventions of mainstream Hollywood.

Although Harvey Weinstein is “arguably the most famous and influential independent and indie film producer during the previous three decades” (4), Miramax and the Weinstein Company are not given extensive analysis by Stubbs-Lacey. One reason for this is that at the time of writing, the allegations against Harvey Weinstein had not been proven. Explaining his

decision, the author notes that the occurrence of sexual abuse and exploitation undertaken by Weinstein was confined to the private realm of employer-employee relationships, thus inaccessible to scholars. Paradoxically, the author cites the pioneering work of John Caldwell, whose ethnographic accounts of backstage production discourse, if not focused on sexual abuse, prove that indirect observation is viable (Caldwell, 2013). If Pre-#MeToo, workplace sexual relationships were inaccessible, it was because individuals were afraid to talk openly about them. There is a flourishing trade in tell-all memoirs that could support some inferences (Bowers, 2013). Comparing the social climate at Miramax to Anonymous Content would have raised interesting questions about the dimensions of power in Hollywood.

In the final case study, the impact of racial bias in Hollywood on Black talent agencies (exemplified by the company Macro) is examined. Drawing on the arguments of Denise Mann and Monica White Ndounou, Stubbs-Lacey argues that White dominance of talent management substantially limits the opportunities for Black talent intermediaries to support aspiring Black indie-auteurs. When well-meaning White intermediaries support Black film makers, this, if unintentionally, operates as tokenism, concealing the actual extent of racial inequality and limiting the opportunity to tell authentic Black stories. For example, when the multi-hyphenate (writer, producer and actor) black indie-auteur Tyler Perry produces films that appeal to Black audiences, he is denied the status of an indie-auteur because his output is perceived as crudely catering to white stereotypes of Black people (even though Perry's intention is to satirise these stereotypes) (Quinn, 2013). As a result, his success as an independent film maker does not earn the kind of kudos and critical appreciation enjoyed by Steven Soderbergh, Cary Fukunaga. and David Fincher. Similarly, when Charles King, CEO of Macro, secured Perry a contract with the then Willaim Morris Agency, this was regarded as a sellout (183-184).

Overall, this book is a useful addition to the study of contemporary Hollywood's exercise of creative control. Acknowledging this, there are some gaps in the general argument worth considering. The definition of talent intermediaries, as noted in previous studies, remains ambiguous (Negus, 2003). However, it remains a fashionable concept in management discourse. Contemporary executive-level management are depicted as exercising skills approximating to those of the artist, using "gut feelings" and inspirational thinking to realise creative goals and commercial success (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2018). What is uncertain about this claim is the status of charisma, the gift of grace. This can easily become a bureaucratic artefact, a function attributed to the office rather than a personal quality of the office holder (Weber, 1968). Like other neoliberal heroes of capitalism, the talent intermediary has charisma so long as he (rarely non-White and rarely she) enhances profits and shareholder value. This imperative means that talent intermediation is not a specific role but a corporate function that a number of individuals—actor, producer, mega-producer, director, investor, financial manager—can undertake. The neoliberal entrepreneurial hero is alive in Hollywood, exceptionally rewarded and celebrated in the contemporary cinema and social media (Molloy, 2016).

It is unfortunate in this account that key terms for categories of skilled employees such as "creatives" or "talent" replicate Company Town usage. Certainly, such terms are complex and contested (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2013; Siciliano, 2021). But some working definition is clearly important if talent intermediaries are to be differentiated from other roles in the

industry's lexicon such as mega-producers, producers, show-runners, talent agents and talent managers, all terms the author cites in passing.

One root of definitional ambiguity arises from the fact that from the earliest days of Hollywood, talent agents have managed package deals (Kemper, 2010). Despite the author's claim, based on a very old source, that they are legally prevented from doing this, the talent agencies that monopolise deal-making and packaging—William Morris Endeavour, CAA and UTA—not only represent actors, directors and writers but also the Hollywood conglomerates as clients. These agencies are themselves producers (Appleton and Yankelvits, 2018). The conflict of interest arising from talent agencies working both sides of the bargaining table and its negative impact on fees and earnings was root cause of the Writers Guild of America strike that shutdown Hollywood production in 2023-24 (Giblin and Doctorow, 2022: 104-111). A further complication is that, as the author is surely aware, contemporary stars, such as Brad Pitt, Emma Stone or the venerable Clint Eastwood, are boutique producers with first-look or long-term production deals with the major studios. Since A-List stars can negotiate deals with major studios concerning the pictures they direct and produce, aren't the former talent intermediaries? Providers such as Apple, Amazon and Netflix are doubly engaged in production and distribution. They strike deals with producers of films that would otherwise not have access to audiences. Multiple participants—producers, directors, stars, writers, show runners, talent agents, talent managers, investors—operate, albeit at different levels, as talent intermediaries. More argument needs to be made as to why the talent intermediary is a distinct industry role as opposed to a form of engagement. In other words, one can argue that talent intermediaries are not a management role but an intervention by managers in a range of roles (Lotz, 2014). The author's frequent use of the phrase "rhetorical manoeuvring" alludes, correctly, to a pervasive culture of wheeling and dealing. In light of this semiotic drift, the author should have said explicitly why the companies selected as case studies are unique as talent intermediaries.

The fuzziness of terms stems from certain analytical themes. First, there is the identification of a production of culture as resting on the textual analysis of practitioner interviews, Q&A sessions and conference speeches; promotional discourse in the form of interviews, press releases and marketing materials such as posters and trailers; and critical discourse in the form of trade and popular press reports and reviews (10).

Promotional discourse of this kind is an important factor (Wernick, 1991; Davis, 2007). But there is a prior and necessary causal connection to capitalist ownership and control that generates it. In this context, a talent intermediary can be defined, citing Bourdieu, as cultural banker. But Bourdieu also states that cultural bankers are a type of agent whose power rests on the operation of what is termed the charismatic ideology which attributes creativity to the *apparent* producer (Bourdieu, 1993: 76-77, italics in original). As noted, the operation of charismatic ideology in Hollywood rests on fetishism of the box office. Incarnated by successful stars and directors, market fetishism organises and legitimates the interaction between the internal and external labour markets typical of outsourced commodity production where workers are employed on a project-by-project basis (Scott, 2004). The indie-auteur is a figure of market fetishism who like the star can be devalued or revalued, employed or not employed on the basis of box office performance.

Labour process theory distinguishes two modes of management control—direct control and responsible autonomy—which can be traced to the distinction made by Marx between real and formal subsumption to capitalist control (Friedman, 1986, Marx 1976/1990). Film production in Hollywood operates in a responsible autonomy mode. However, if there is a greater element of craft control in production, direct control can be imposed retroactively through editing, post-production and, exceptionally, the cancellation of release. More routinely, the degree of autonomy can be narrowed according to a host of contingencies—such as going over budget, failing to complete on schedule, disputes over who has the final cut, and how the completed film will be distributed and released. Furthermore, one must consider the emergence of creative differences between major studio executives, producers, directors and stars. In short, talent intermediaries do not just “mediate”, they exercise power.

Returning to the example of Harvey Weinstein, talent intermediaries derive significant personal power from their role as gatekeepers operating direct personal service labour markets, where work is highly competitive, precarious and potentially highly rewarded. In this kind of service work, of which entertainment media are the most glamorous manifestation: the gatekeeper determines who gets work and instils in those employed a sense of commitment, indebtedness and gratitude, a disposition to admire and, exceptionally, a susceptibility to requests for sexual favours. In more conventional management terms, media production companies are likely to support transactional rather than transformational forms of leadership (Bass et.al., 2003).

A particularly important concept for the analysis of power roles is de-formalisation. In this process, driven by neoliberalism, inherited or traditional creative role categories—such as star, director, producer, writer, editor and post-production editor—are “confected” for exchange (of a monetary and/or sexual nature). Given that de-formalisation is a pervasive retreat from the structure of roles to the personal and physical qualities of the seller, it might be said that in the best case, the “new” talent managers are sugar daddies who, unlike Harvey Weinstein or Sean Diddy Combs, bestow on subordinates a comfortable form of alienation (Fleming, 2018).

Finally, what is the institutional function of talent intermediaries? Overall, this is to capture trends in popular culture and popular media representations. Fulfilling this is to work to secure investment in film projects, an activity that ultimately depends on major producer-distributor involvement. In this sense, talent intermediation is the attempt to resolve the chronic problem of profitability that has emerged following vertical disintegration of the traditional studio system. In short, the contemporary box office crisis of profitability is a financialisation crisis. This may involve the failure to meet loan repayments to the investment banks and to investors, including the shareholders of the parent conglomerates who own the studios. In this situation, the least risky more promising option is not to have a contractual share in box office profits, which are unpredictable and mostly long term (De Vany, 2003). Instead, one must secure immediate income by providing services for a fee in production and/or distribution. In these circumstances, the fundamental cause of the financialisation crisis is the stratospheric fees paid to stars and indie-auteurs as stars (Leaver, 2010).

What these economic features suggest is that the exclusive overarching purpose of Hollywood as a business is not to develop cinema as an art form; rather, it is to defend the box office against the full aesthetic potential of cinema and prevent the possibility of aesthetic over-production (McMahon, 2015). Talent intermediaries are a form of agency—assumed by above-

the-line seekers after fortune and fame—that negotiates this complex, ever-shifting balance between business and art.

Despite the various criticisms I have made, which arise fundamentally from the differences between a cultural studies and political economy approach, this book significantly contributes to the ongoing enquiry concerning the cultural impact of Hollywood and the nature and limits of “creative labour”.

Author Bio

Professor Emeritus Barry King is internationally known for his writings on stardom, celebrity and popular culture. He is the author of a substantial range of articles that address issues such as mass media and social identity, reality TV as a form of life, digital stardom and the commodification of performance labour. He was a co-editor and contributor to *Studying the Event Film: The Lord of the Rings*, Manchester University Press (2008) and the sole author of two books: *Taking Fame to Market*, Palgrave (2014) and *Performing Identity: Actor Training, Commodification and Celebrity*, Palgrave (2024).

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