Media Work, Management, and Greed: A New Agenda?

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Abstract:

Given the celebratory policy rhetoric around Hollywood film production as a generator of jobs and creative economies today, it does media scholars well to look at the beginnings of various film economies during the silent era, a time when film producers sought a place to locate their studio operations. As an illustration, I present a case study that reveals how, even in the early 1900s, producers manipulated romantic feelings about film and its supposed economic benefits to the public. This case suggests that while scholars may think about film producers as creatives or managers, they should also consider their less noble motivations, such as greed.

Keywords: Economics, Film, Hollywood, Labor, Political Economy

There is romance and magic in the story of the moving picture industry. The magic of the Midas touch, of Aladdin's lamp. The romance of poverty turned to wealth, of millions made from hundreds. – Diamond Film Company (1917)²

In a public relations piece that could have been written yesterday, the budding entrepreneurs behind the Diamond Film Company used economic hyperbole and place-based marketing to tout the founding of a new film economy in New Orleans. The company claimed to have everything, from an eager and expert workforce to a state-of-the-art studio in a picturesque location. They reprinted the exuberant newspaper reports of stars that preferred films produced in New Orleans and the six-figure salaries that film executives made after getting their start in the city. Within months of publishing this pamphlet, the company sold its stock and a few reels before going bankrupt.

This would be the end of the story, except that in researching the company's board of directors, I realized that Diamond never actually planned to make films. At least, the films themselves were a small part of the business model. The directors took the money and set up another shell company for bayou oil exploration, selling stock this time to naïve oil, not film, investors. Many of them were eventually caught, ensnared by the energy investors who sued for fraud. And yet the mythology of their magical film industry lives on. With it, I would like to put greed on the agenda for the study of media industries.

In the early twenty-first century, we have entered an era of runaway film romance. Cities and regions compete for major studio and independent house investments. No longer needing a penny stock market for their wares, film production companies may now draw directly from public tills, which offer generous incentives, from direct paybacks, to tradable tax write-offs, to in-kind gifts of infrastructure and labor. In the process, both policy makers and producers proclaim the sure benefits of public financing: a new jobs market for the middle class, shiny new and ecologically clean infrastructure, increased tourism, and other ancillary investments in the overall economy. There have been plenty of debates, mostly among urban geographers and planners, about the veracity of these claims. Like Wall Street, Hollywood is not immune to cycles of boom and bust. Channeling the Diamond profiteers of 1917, however, might raise another set of questions yet to be answered. Namely, to what extent are promotions of film economies laced with avaricious aims? How does greed at the top trickle down, so to speak, through media industries? Or is greed spreadable, like the convergent texts themselves?

Over nearly one hundred years of studies about media industries, two discourses about their workers have dominated, with a third one ascendant today.³ These discourses organize the kinds of stories we tell about media work and the people who do it. First, in line with studies of organizations and work, media workers' goals could be characterized as the ability to create media within a system of constraining rules and structures. This narrative ran parallel with a second one, which predominated in film and media studies: Media producers have special creative or innovative capacities that can be expressed through their own entrepreneurial activities. Although creative visions were individual in both of these discourses, the pursuit of the visions was universal. The final discourse, which has roots extending at least back to Frankfurt, was that workers may still pursue creative autonomy or even a creative community but only after they secure stable employment. The new economy for media production has succeeded in replacing the narrative of creativity within constraints with one of getting a gig, if not three gigs, each with their various constraints. The studies of media work today pivot on themes of worker flexibility, networking, emotion work, and brand management. I am to be held accountable for at least perpetuating this discourse in my own attempts to humanize the workers that I see on the margins of media industries. The glamour surrounding media jobs has been dulled by the precarity of work and a workload that never seems to end, at least in academic accounts.

Meanwhile, we are surrounded by journalistic accounts of the sheer wealth of media moguls and the continued profitability of media and entertainment industries in an otherwise miserable marketplace. Journalist Ken Auletta was among the first to profile the luxurious lifestyles and naked ambitions of the Hollywood highwaymen, publishing regular stories in *The New Yorker*.⁴ Where else does greediness concentrate in media industries? From celebrity hair stylists, to pompous staffers, to legendary assistants willing to do anything for fame, there would seem to be no shortage of ambition driven by envy, anxiety, and greed. Read between the lines of the coverage of new media entrepreneurs and we see how the same qualities that characterize precarious media work can be directed to greed over need. For example, ad agency art director James Ames stays up nights, working long after he put his kids to bed, to make six-second videos on Vine. It's a second job, which he does in a "makeshift studio" on his home couch. Working for major corporations, he was composing a stop-motion video that would take him all night to complete, according to an NPR story.⁵ Before we bemoan the needs to make ends meet in the new economy, the reporter tells us Ames is using the money to take his family

to Hawaii. This is hardly the kind of goal that scholars typically promote as the ends of media work.

It should be the task of media industry scholars to reconcile the good goals and virtues of media work with those that seem to be neither inherently good nor virtuous. According to the economist David Levine, greed is a natural outgrowth of capitalism, expanding from the basic desire to stockpile capital for the future, and as a way of staving off future losses.⁶ Greed is also a capable substitute for community. Those with enough capital can survive hardship solo, while others have to rely on the kindness of others. Yet beyond this means for autonomous survival, capital provides a fantasy of its own limitless reproduction. Unlike income, which comes in exchange for work, capital is generated simply from its present investment and future value. Capital can be wasted in consumption or invested in getting others to work for you. Either way, the owner of the capital pursues the dream of a day when work is unnecessary and when the possibilities of what one does are infinite, since capital can seemingly go towards any goal or direction.

One problem with this common fantasy is when the dream of capital is separated from actual production; that is, somebody has to actually work to generate the things that become the object of the capitalist's desire. Our pursuit of not working must be on the backs of those who do; our pursuit of the limitless life implies more limits for those working under us. Greed also implies competition with others in the same position since, unlike goods, capital has to be regenerated to maintain value. Through competition, capital becomes both the object of desire and the subject of our misery, since we must work harder to get more of it. Levine quotes Durkheim, who called this competition the "disease of the infinite," which manifests as a tendency to devalue what we have in pursuit of what we lack.⁷ Greed is the driving force behind the disease. It becomes the agent and individuals are its victims—or its "fetishes," in Marxian terms. Greed, in Levine's exposition, is a system, one that we hope to opt out of one day, whether through meaningful work or freedom from it.

Put in this framework, media industry scholars might take a closer look at the competitive nature of different kinds of media work and media workers. The corrupting fantasy of the infinite life must have various guises. A socio-analysis of greed in media industries would help us better understand the human aspects of labor exploitation, the motivations that pair worthy and less worthy goals in making media. It would also connect media industry studies to those other "greedy bastards," the ones we vilify in media portrayals of banks and hedge fund firms, car dealerships and law offices. After all, imitation still is the sincerest form of flattery.

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² Diamond Film Company, *Filmland: the Kingdom of Fabulous Fortunes* (New Orleans: Schumert-Warfield-Watson, 1917).

³ Vicki Mayer, *Below the Line: Producers and Production Studies in the New Television Economy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

- ⁴ Ken Auletta, *The Highwaymen: Warriors of the Information Superhighway* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1998).
- ⁵ Daniel Hajek, [“On Vine, Brands Look to Deliver their Message in Six Seconds,”](#) NPR.org All Tech Considered, August 9, 2013.
- ⁶ David Levine, *Pathology of the Capitalist Spirit: An Essay on Greed, Loss and Hope* (New York: Palgrave Pivot, 2013).
- ⁷ Levine, *Pathology of the Capitalist Spirit*, 20.

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