

Reviewed by Peter Labuza

## *Hollywood's Artists: The Directors Guild of America and the Construction of Authorship*

by Virginia Wright Wexman.

Columbia University Press.

2020. 312 pages.

\$90 hardcover; \$30 paper; also available in e-book.

## *Below the Stars: How the Labor of Working Actors and Extras Shapes Media Production*

by Kate Fortmueller.

University of Texas Press.

2021. 216 pages.

\$45 hardcover; also available in e-book.

Reversing major declines in labor organizing and participation that began in the 1980s, many Americans are once again turning to unionization to survive increasing economic precarity.<sup>1</sup> Newsrooms across America formed unions throughout the last half decade to stop the gutting of both online and local news outlets.<sup>2</sup> Strikes by teachers in 2018 and 2019 across states such as Okla-

1 See US Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Union Membership in the United States," September 2016, <https://www.bls.gov/spotlight/2016/union-membership-in-the-united-states/pdf/union-membership-in-the-united-states.pdf>. The causes are myriad, divided across the political as well as social spectrum. See Nelson Lichtenstein, *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor*, rev. ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013); and Reuel Schiller, *Forging Rivals: Race, Class, Law, and the Collapse of Postwar Liberalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

2 Steven Greenhouse, "Why Newsrooms Are Unionizing Now," *NiemanReports*, March 21, 2019, <https://niemanreports.org/articles/why-newsrooms-are-unionizing-now/>.

homa and West Virginia won critical pay increases.<sup>3</sup> In Hollywood in 2019, the Writers Guild forced the major talent agencies to halt predatory practices that siphoned off writers' profit share, and the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) voted resoundingly in 2020 to authorize a strike only to avoid doing so on a technicality.<sup>4</sup>

Unsurprisingly, these movements have been met with renewed anti-union action, including *Janus v. American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees* (2018) and *Cedar Point Nursery v. Hassid* (2021), two landmark court decisions by the increasingly conservative US Supreme Court.<sup>5</sup> The contentious passage of Proposition 22 in California in 2020 stymied the potential organization of gig economy workers, while companies such as Amazon and Starbucks have attempted to crush labor organizing efforts across their worksites.<sup>6</sup> Debates over police unions and their association with the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) have prompted questions about how to build coalitions.<sup>7</sup> Despite the Biden administration's failure to make any manageable gains in labor protections, unions are once again dominating headlines through their grassroots efforts.<sup>8</sup>

Two books about unionization in Hollywood demonstrate how media studies scholars should theorize and teach labor organizing and media industry structures. Each author centers a different set of workers: Virginia Wright Wexman's *Hollywood's Artists: The Directors Guild of America and the Construction of Authorship* focuses on the Directors Guild of America (DGA), whereas Kate Fortmueller's *Below the Stars: How the Labor of Working Actors and Extras Shapes Media Production* highlights precarious actors and extras in the now-defunct Screen Extras Guild (SEG).<sup>9</sup>

3 Andrew Van Dam, "Teacher Strikes Made 2018 the Biggest Year for Worker Protest in a Generation," *Washington Post*, February 14, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/us-policy/2019/02/14/with-teachers-lead-more-workers-went-strike-than-any-year-since/>.

4 Joy Press, "The Agents Certainly Did Not Like Being Called Crooks: How Hollywood Writers Won a War," *Vanity Fair*, February 25, 2021, <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2021/02/how-tv-writers-won-a-war>; and Alex N. Press, "The IATSE Contract Vote Is a Worst-Case Scenario," *Jacobin*, November 15, 2021, <https://jacobinmag.com/2021/11/iatse-contract-union-basic-agreement-area-standards>.

5 *Janus v. American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees*, Council 31, 138 S. Ct. 2448 (2018); and *Cedar Point Nursery v. Hassid*, 141 S. Ct. 2063 (2021).

6 Josh Eidelson, "The Gig Economy Is Coming for Millions of American Jobs," *Bloomberg News*, February 17, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2021-02-17/gig-economy-coming-for-millions-of-u-s-jobs-after-california-s-uber-lyft-vote>; Noam Scheiber, "Mandatory Meetings Reveal Amazon's Approach to Resisting Unions," *New York Times*, March 24, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/24/business/amazon-meetings-union-elections.html>; and Alex N. Press, "Starbucks Is Desperate to Stop Unionization, So It's Firing Worker Leaders," *Jacobin*, April 6, 2022, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2022/04/starbucks-union-drive-nlrb-worker-union-leaders-firing-ulp-laila-dalton>.

7 Kim Kelly, "The AFL-CIO's Untenable Stance on Cops," *New Republic*, August 5, 2020, <https://newrepublic.com/article/158712/afl-cio-police-unions-labor-movement-power-struggle-cops>.

8 Sam Adler-Bell, "Do Democrats Really Want Amazon's Workers to Win?," *New York Magazine*, April 8, 2022, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2022/04/do-democrats-really-want-amazons-workers-to-win.html>.

9 Virginia Wright Wexman, *Hollywood's Artists: The Directors Guild of America and the Construction of Authorship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020); and Kate Fortmueller, *Below the Stars: How the Labor of Working Actors and Extras Shapes Media Production* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2021).

Since Murray Ross's *Stars and Strikes* was published in 1941, scholars have explored the unique labor dynamics that have defined the entertainment industry.<sup>10</sup> More recently, such scholarship has shifted from large-scale histories of guilds and unions to analyses of the day-to-day work of media laborers, including the status of freelancers, creative standards and their effect on aesthetics, and gender and racial discrimination.<sup>11</sup> Neither the DGA nor the SEG has been the central focus of a book before, but more importantly, both Wexman and Fortmueller push labor studies to look at how these unions engage the industry and their members.

Wexman emphasizes the DGA's role in transforming the profession from one made up of workers to one of artists and how its members "negotiate creative matters separately from other labor issues."<sup>12</sup> She focuses on the guild's central goal coined by Frank Capra: "one man, one film," that is, a director is *the* critical creative voice.<sup>13</sup> *Hollywood's Artists* builds on Wexman's previous research on directing and authorship, and she often contextualizes the union's fights alongside historical theories of auteurism embraced by *Cahiers du cinéma* and Andrew Sarris, among others.<sup>14</sup> Without discounting this cultural or broader industries' history, however, *Hollywood's Artists* centers the numerous initiatives the DGA has taken "to position directors as the singular artists who create Hollywood cinema."<sup>15</sup>

The book is organized around the fight to secure and maintain what the DGA has called "creative rights." In chapter 1, Wexman describes the formation for the Screen Directors Guild, the DGA's predecessor, against the backdrop of Hollywood's industrialization in the mid-1930s. As Hollywood studios moved toward efficient production lines, studio directors turned to unionization to avoid what John Ford called the "committee method" of directing, wherein individual directors would work on segments rather than an entire film.<sup>16</sup> Directors' power grew throughout the era of independent production; by the 1960s, the DGA's Creative Rights Committee had successfully added clauses in their agreement to control decision-making during pre- and post-production. Chapter 2 expands on these issues by explaining

10 Murray Ross, *Stars and Strikes: Unionization of Hollywood* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1941); Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund, *The Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community, 1930–1960* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1980); Mike Nielsen and Gene Mailes, *Hollywood's Other Blacklist: Union Struggles in the Studio System* (London: British Film Institute, 1995); and Gerald Horne, *Class Struggle in Hollywood, 1930–1950: Moguls, Mobsters, Stars, Reds, and Trade Unionists* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001).

11 See Miranda J. Banks, *The Writers: A History of American Screenwriters and Their Guild* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015); Catherine L. Fisk, *Writing for Hire: Unions, Hollywood, and Madison Avenue* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016); Eithne Quinn, *A Piece of the Action: Race and Labor in Post-Civil Rights Hollywood* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019); and Ronny Regev, *Working in Hollywood: How the Studio System Turned Creativity into Labor* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019).

12 Wexman, *Hollywood's Artists*, 10.

13 Quoted in Wexman, 30.

14 Virginia Wright Wexman, ed., *Film and Authorship* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003); and Virginia Wright Wexman, ed., *Directing* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2017).

15 Wexman, *Hollywood's Artists*, 118.

16 Wexman, 16.

how directors created a unique aura around their work that allowed them to remain free from interference. The union battled actors, writers, editors, and studio heads who strived to make creative decisions that directors saw as central to their work. In doing so, the DGA “cultivated an aura of masculine privilege” by defining charisma and machismo as their professional characteristics while limiting the advancement of women.<sup>17</sup> Although Wexman outlines DGA’s initiatives to expand access beyond a select few, this section sometimes reads like a pamphlet written by the guild that mitigates the struggles still faced by directors from marginalized communities today.

Much of *Hollywood’s Artists* stresses that the distinction of “artist” has relied more on perceptions created by the guild rather than their actual contractual gains. Wexman traces the many public battles the DGA waged to create awareness for directors as equal to that of novelists and painters. In her discussion of the DGA’s battle to secure the possessory credit (e.g., “a film by”), she argues that the term is “weighted with symbolic meaning for the industry and for the public at large.”<sup>18</sup> Later chapters recall well-known disputes within the industry, including the guild’s internal battle against an agreement to remove communist-affiliated members in 1950.<sup>19</sup> She argues that the framing of this meeting in the press by the DGA was critical to its mission, noting how they insisted the directors’ interest in freedom of speech while secretly working to clear their names.<sup>20</sup> This emphasis on public battles continued into the 1980s with the DGA’s infamous fight against colorization of classic films and advocacy for “moral rights” through congressional testimony. As Wexman suggests, the DGA had “little to show for its decades-long effort to extend its creative rights agenda to the legal arena” but still created a public perception of the director as artist that has paid hefty dividends in their industry role.<sup>21</sup>

Wexman mentions more conventional union issues such as wages and safety in an appendix, but she makes a compelling case for including the DGA’s role in a discussion of auteurism that has either centered cultural debates or focused on the commercialization of auteurism by studios. If there is perhaps too much attention to authorship, it might simply be that for better or worse, to turn a phrase, we are all auteurs now.<sup>22</sup>

One brief section in Wexman’s book stands out: the directors’ debates over whether to expand their numbers to include assistant directors and production managers who were more interested in wages and job security than creative rights. This split is where Fortmueller begins. Her particular focus—the below-the-line actors and extras whose work is critical to production—

17 Wexman, 62.

18 Wexman, 85.

19 For the full details of this event, see Kevin Brianton, *Hollywood Divided: The 1950 Screen Directors Guild Meeting and the Impact of the Blacklist* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2016).

20 Wexman, *Hollywood’s Artists*, 94–97.

21 Wexman, 116.

22 A reference to Elena Kagan’s remark, “We are all textualists now,” reflecting on the profound influence of Justice Antonin Scalia in reframing jurisprudence on the United States Supreme Court. Elena Kagan, “The Scalia Lecture: A Dialogue with Justice Kagan on the Reading of Statutes,” Harvard Law School, YouTube video, November 17, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dpEtszFTOTg>.

pushes against the idea of “creativity as justification for why the workers being studied are important.”<sup>23</sup> Rather than artistic success, she centers precarity, freelance, and instability as central parts of the industry from its origins. Indeed, her analysis of work in Hollywood cuts against media histories that center occasional silver linings in favor of a century of exploitation.

While some media scholars have used the idea of precarity to build a constellation of media theorization, *Below the Stars* is grounded in a material history of Hollywood and the lives of individuals struggling to make ends meet (including Fortmueller’s own grandfather). Each chapter is devoted to a critical rupture in industry practice as unions at least attempted to quell “unpredictable labor conditions and hierarchical divisions within the large and unwieldy population of actors.”<sup>24</sup> As chapter 1 explains, the development of Central Casting in the 1920s promised to clear out predatory agents, but consolidation did little to make the careers of freelance actors easier to navigate. Fortmueller does not even particularly celebrate SEG’s founding in 1945, tracing how the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) was suggested to be “founded for actors only” to delineate ranks (particularly along race and gender lines) that left many of its less prestigious members unprotected.<sup>25</sup>

As the book traces the limited opportunities for extras, Fortmueller focuses on technological disruptions that have shifted the priorities of freelance actors. In chapter 2, she outlines the battles between labor groups in the 1950s to represent actors within the new television landscape. While details of jurisdictions and mergers are occasionally difficult to follow, Fortmueller emphasizes how this debate often centered the cultural distinctions of the mediums, coming “at the expense of material benefits” for those who might make a living through opportunities on the new medium.<sup>26</sup> Chapter 3 takes a similar route, narrating SAG’s negotiation for residuals for television reruns and the new home video market. Freelance actors saw value in limiting television reruns in the hope of increasing production, and the newly formed committees centering parity in race and gender also raised the issue of declining opportunities throughout the 1970s. The eventual establishment of residuals, a payment system from which few actors have materially benefited, ignored the increasing reality of unemployment. SEG remained a union of aspirations rather than reality, rejecting a potential merger with the Teamsters in the 1980s over concerns about being associated with blue-collar work. (In 1992, SEG came under the jurisdiction of SAG.)

Fortmueller’s archival research demonstrates a keen ability to find Hollywood workers often missing from other archival collections. But in her final chapter, interviews with working actors provide a striking look at the precarity of employment that defines our contemporary media moment. Rather than celebrate convergence culture and liberated fandom, Fortmueller notes how working actors must perform a whole new set of tasks to remain employable. “Our unparalleled access to content,” she argues, has “exacer-

23 Fortmueller, *Below the Stars*, 6.

24 Fortmueller, 49.

25 Fortmueller, 43.

26 Fortmueller, 74.

bated worker instability.”<sup>27</sup> She focuses on voice actors in both animation and video games who have dealt with a myriad of issues: overworked voice muscles, little knowledge about the projects they are working on, and losing their office-home distinction by having to build home sound booths.<sup>28</sup> Even though streaming has provided new opportunities across media platforms, Fortmueller argues this has only exacerbated “scant-career pathways that lead to lucrative or middle-class acting careers.”<sup>29</sup>

What I find refreshing in Fortmueller’s framing are the ethical dilemmas it presents to Hollywood and to the field of media studies itself. Our dissections of texts or stars or even audiences writ large often rely on ignoring the exploitation of below-the-line workers.<sup>30</sup> Even when centering particular trailblazers for the social influence of their work, scholars can easily forget to consider or acknowledge the countless people who received a barely livable wage for their work. For these actors, the artistic possibilities or stories of success will, as Fortmueller phrases it, always “undermine their position as workers.”<sup>31</sup>

Both books essentially ask us to recognize the use-value of a union, an issue that many segments of academia have only recently caught up to in their own growing awareness of precarious labor.<sup>32</sup> I could not help but see the battle to limit classroom topics and fears of critical race theory reflected in Wexman’s account of these directors framing creative rights as a free speech issue. And as a precariously employed scholar hoping to land a tenure-track position, I saw parallels in how Fortmueller describes the “aspirational nature” of extra work by hopefuls “willing to ensure the normalized hardships of a competitive industry” that “undermines their collective identity of workers.”<sup>33</sup> This review, for example, could have easily been sold to a public-facing media outlet for direct compensation; instead, I wrote it on good faith that this “service” might lead to future “star” (tenure-track) employment, even as the correlation between publication record and employment offers has dissipated throughout the university system.<sup>34</sup>

As our field faces questions over the future of employment and precarity, I have found that students are more curious about theorizing their future work than media texts. Labor history provides a critical model for building

27 Fortmueller, 123.

28 Fortmueller, 145.

29 Fortmueller, 123.

30 If there was one benefit from the momentum around IATSE’s potential strike in 2021, it was the countless stories published by scholars, critics, journalists, and activists on the labor practices in the industry. See Peter Labuza, “Hollywood Workers Are Ready to Strike over the Future of How Movies and TV Shows Are Made,” *Polygon*, October 15, 2021, <https://www.polygon.com/22728659/how-iatse-strike-2021-affects-movies-tv-industry>.

31 Fortmueller, *Below the Stars*, 158.

32 Bruce Brassell et al., “Organizing Precarious Labor in Film and Media Studies: A Manifesto,” *JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 59, no. 4 (2020): 1–7.

33 Fortmueller, *Below the Stars*, 29.

34 According to one STEM-based study, “The benchmarks traditionally used to measure research success—including funding, number of publications or journals published in—were unable to completely differentiate applicants with and without job offers.” Jason D. Fernandes et al., “Research Culture: A Survey-Based Analysis of the Academic Job Market,” *eLife* 9 (2020), <https://elifesciences.org/articles/54097>.

political organizations that provide alternatives to the existing system; it is a blueprint. More than that, scholars should support the organizing work of graduate students and adjunct faculty, who are often fighting to simply keep a roof over their heads, or at least should stop ignoring the fraught working dynamics they impose on their precariously employed colleagues and teaching assistants. While reading these two books, which analyze Hollywood workers and unions both historically and today, I cannot help but recall those familiar lyrics by Florence Reece: “Which side are you on?”<sup>35</sup>

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35 “Which Side Are You On? An Interview with Florence Reece,” *Mountain Life and Work* 48, no. 3 (March 1972): 23.