

Studying Production

I am cognizant that there are several researchers currently looking at cultural production and its diverse locations as well as producers and their attendant practices. New disciplinary formations, such as the sociology of culture and the anthropology of media, correspond roughly with new nomenclatures in communication and film schools calling for entertainment studies, cultural industry studies, and, my favorite, creative industry studies. The problem I see with these terms is their inability to chart a critical course in relation to social hierarchies, cultural subjectivities, and power relations. Whereas terms such as entertainment and industry already hew our research questions within the confines of the demands exerted by the current political economy, one that pushes commercialization and corporate hierarchies, I believe the term production gets at the ontology of what it means to create media and to be a participant in its political economy. Production studies for me is the correlate to reception studies, another branch of cultural studies that developed in the 1980s. Reception studies grew from a concern among feminists first, and later critical race, queer, and post-colonial scholars, that the ways people interpret the range of cultural products around them were both reflective and constitutive of social hierarchies, cultural subjectivities, and power relations. Reception studies are not audience studies. Audiences are aggregates of already-identified consumers on the basis of cultural demographics or fan tastes. Audiences are packaged by industries. Audiences are sold to other industries, institutions, and polities. Given the commercial colonization of audiences by media industries, is it any wonder that audience studies as a field has tended to ignore people who don't fit neatly into a demographic category, a niche market, or a fan community?

Reception studies took as a starting point that interpretation is a productive process, that readers or viewers negotiated cultural texts creatively but within the constraints of their positions in a nexus of social fields. Similarly, I have wanted to think about production as an interpretative process. I want to start with the assumption that all people labor to produce media, but that not all labor is recognized as such, and workers frequently are negotiating the meaning of their labor in social fields that seek to marginalize them. We might then ask Miranda Joseph's two questions that she raised in *Social Text* some years ago. First, what role do cultural subjectivities play in shaping us as particular kinds of laborers? And, second, how does being a particular kind of laborer produce our cultural subjectivity?

Television production is an excellent place to offer some insights into how we might answer these questions. Over the last two decades, the new economy for television has become so expansive that while we see the convergence of the medium, its personnel, and its texts with those in other industries, some observers predict television will disappear into an omnipresent video culture of the future. In the meantime, though, television studios and networks, and its attendant scholars, tell us that television production is a privileged activity, managed by a few corporations, mostly located in Hollywood and steered by a handful of key creative professionals. Celebrated in entertainment news, policed through production studies scholarship, the boundaries of who we might consider creatives or creators in an industry that captures an ever growing share of laborers is the subject of the rest of my presentation.