

Introduction

The Labour of Media (Studies): Activism, Education, and Industry

medialabour collective

The medialabour collective, formed in 2017, is a group of doctoral students in Communication and Film Studies, based at Concordia University in Montreal. As a collective, we focus on issues of precarity, casualization, competition, and colonization at the intersection of academic labour and media industries. In November 2018, the medialabour collective organized “The Labour of Media (Studies): Activism, Education, and Industry” conference that brought together scholars at different stages of their careers to discuss contemporary labour conditions within media industries in connection with the neoliberal restructuring of the university. We offer a continuation of these discussions in this special issue of *Synoptique, An Online Journal of Film and Media Studies*.

As PhD students in film and media studies, we consistently face the anxiety of precarity in our daily lives: from limited and unstable funding in the present, to limited term and part time positions that paint our probable future. We are aware that precarity is the structural condition of life under contemporary capitalism, which invades fields, industries, and modes of sociality within or outside of dominant institutions in a variety of geopolitical contexts. In introducing

a project conceived and organized by PhD students, it is important to foreground our own position as current and future contingent workers, facing entry into an industry with no promise of stable employment.

From the angle of shared precarity, media industries is a field that directly probes the connection we are trying to make in its focus on labour, even if it does not quite draw out the full entanglements we are trying to address (for influential dissections of the concept in the creative industries, see de Peuter 2011; Neilson and Rossiter 2008). Media industries scholarship as we know it began as a confluence of interests in the academy between cultural studies, media studies, anthropology, and policy, each coming from very diverse perspectives with often irreconcilable goals. Since its inception, cultural studies encompasses a history of debates about the culture industries, from the Frankfurt School critiques of popular culture as tools of ideology (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002) to the Birmingham School and cultural studies’ insistence on taking these popular industries seriously (Hall 1980; Hesmondhalgh 2013; McRobbie 1996; 2010). But absent from much of this analysis was the issue of production through an optics able to

grasp the industrial globalization of media rather than the social and semiotic observation of its particular effects. Toby Miller et al.'s *Global Hollywood*, and the concept of the "international division of cultural labor" (2002), began to articulate the implications of media globalization, the uneven spatial distribution of labour and production, and the race-to-the-bottom that it would entail. This was a concept that responded to the globalization of media industries and the increasing precarization of work within them, in regards to offshored media production as much as the disempowerment of unions in the Global North (on this "race to the bottom," see Curtin, 2013). This meant that a focus on culture, in particular media, as industry had far higher stakes than merely, say, studies of reception (Stacey 1994; Staiger 2000; Klinger 2006), or later ethnographies of "production cultures" (Caldwell 2008; Mayer 2011), but was tied up in disciplinary and methodological stakes about the place of cultural production within global capitalism (for an overview, see Holt and Perren 2009). At a certain point, once the field came to be more organized in its approaches, scholars turned their focus to the question of labour as the structuring principle of the field of production (see Mayer 2011; Curtin and Sanson 2017). In hindsight, this was a political response to a particular kind of constellation both within the field and with a global restructuring of media labour.

Concurrently, media industry studies has responded to the growing status of the neoliberal university as a cultural producer in itself, which at the same time led to the incentivized interaction of academics with industry workers and practitioners within a neoliberal contact zone (see Miller 2011; Nolan 2008). University training modules (whether providing humanist or technical knowledge) for media industries are a by-product of this global restructuring, whether in production programs that prepare students for gig work, humanities programs of Anglophone North Atlantic universities in the Global South, or even through the proliferation of postgraduate programs as a consequence of the decrease in market purchase of undergrad-

uate degrees. These training programs and professionalization requirements have also become increasingly important to the sustainability of the converging systems of education and media industries—a cheap and indebted labour force, the selling of flexibility and creativity as virtues, individualized and competitive professional socialization, the creation and maintenance of a reserve workforce based on access to opportunity and education, the naturalization of internships as blueprints for contract work, and the like.

As students and scholars, we share the same spaces within which media workers are being trained in these largely precarious and flexible fields, often in positions as lecturers, TAs, and mentors. Can these shared classrooms, hallways, offices, and facilities, be instrumental for establishing the lines of solidarity, rather than simply assuming that it's "knowledge work" that binds us? Rather, is there also something more directly spatial (and in some ways complicit) that exists as a bond between us, within the university and the industries under discussion? What forms of community and activism can be forged within the confines of the neoliberal university, and across the industries that it helps to organize?

At the outset of such a project, attending to individual positionality *within* these systems seems necessary. In the contemporary social landscape, as many discussions of neoliberal subjectivity and individualization have pointed out (Brown 2015; Dardot and Laval 2013; Lazzarato 2012), a person's movement must incessantly be invested in carving out a space of their own. This is seen as an unavoidable, and definite, mark of a person's identity. The necessity to articulate the politics around our own work seems to come as given. In the context of academic work, on the one hand, these politics are articulated through scholar's distinguishing of one's own personal history and corollary reflection on their own positionality. On the other hand, this is performed by emphasizing the significance of a specific and unique object of research, in terms of its geography, connectedness to underrepresented and marginalized communities, and theoretical fecundity. But how to move beyond this positionality restrained by the competitive

individualization?

As graduate students in film and media studies we must constantly navigate the tensions of articulating the politics inherent to our work as scholars and its valuation within specific regimes of knowledge production. As a collective project that would foreground the points of intersection between activism, academia, and questions of labour within media industries, we envisioned this as an exercise in exploring the potentials for political work within the academic setting itself. We chose to work collectively, to answer the question of how not to reproduce the work and social relations engendering mutual competition, individualization, and alienation. Throughout this project we have worked collaboratively on every aspect of organizing. It is a difficult process because the instruments that we have within academia are conceived to foster competition and individual achievements. However, our experience of collective work has been a starting point for practicing solidarity as a means to counter the despair of precarity. Collectively we imagine possible ties forged by the austerity measures that capture both academia and media industries. We also conceived this forum as an instance of solidarity among those working on/in media industries who experience flexibility, precarity and these other beautiful things as we do.

At the same time, our labour is situated within a political economy where we cannot help but become aware of the relations to media labour within and outside the university, in media industries, and within student movements, activist networks, and para-academic organizations, as many of the contributors to the Labour of Media (Studies) conference and special issue discuss. We aimed, thus, in a pursuit of the above mentioned lines of solidarity, to create a venue for discussion where we could share research, work, and debates on how we reconcile those tensions in the accessible and familiar formats supplied by academia—an international conference, a journal special issue. In other words, we have used academic resources and formats at our disposal to talk about what we think is important. Planning and organizing this project, we

found ourselves confronted with the paradoxical nature of academic work and the possibilities to operate politically within the pathways it sets for us. Soliciting the necessary funds, pitching the conference to the university, and coordinating the multitude of tasks required to put together a publication, we quickly understood the limitations of the pathways within the institution.

If traditional conceptions of activism and struggle do not easily overlap with academic work (also traditionally conceived), substantial efforts have been made with respect to practices of pedagogy to bridge prescient concerns of global conditions with knowledge production (Dickinson and Jaikumar 2018; The Edu-factory Collective 2009). It is worth mentioning that the Labour of Media (Studies) project originated in Kay Dickinson's graduate "proseminar" on Academic Labour. The "proseminar" is designed to professionalize doctoral students, to make them suitable to the demands of the job market, and at the same time to train them to meet the downward spiral of early-career exploitation with resilience and endurance. However, we were supplied the means to reconsider what is usually taken for granted as ways to acquire a diverse and marketable set of skills. Thinking about academic professionalization cannot be disentangled from the current conditions within the academy. Over the course of the seminar, we tackled not only the issue of the financialization and privatization of the contemporary university, but also the resulting precarity, competition, and flexibility of labour. While professionalism means adhering to standards of knowledge production, we learned together that our lived experience is inseparable from thinking through those issues. Becoming professional entails both the requirement to publicly communicate your research and an extreme specialization that leads to an inability to reach beyond academia, and even across disciplines and subfields. We are continuously engaged in gymnastics between arcane specialized knowledge and provocative, trendy elevator pitches (able to appeal, at the very least, to the funding agencies and high-profile colleagues).

Given the constraints increasingly shaping

academic labour, everyday practices of pedagogy in the classroom become indissociable from a self-reflexivity that both highlights the contradictions in which we are embedded, and might press against structural power relations in the educational system. These constraints are, on the one hand, an increasing reduction of students to clients, through the combined pressure of high tuition fees and quantitative surveys assessing their satisfaction. On the other hand, the competition for less precarious jobs, and the injunction to be actionable and “public-facing” are weights that we need to face every day, as they shape our research production and broadly, our academic labour. Faced with this situation, some turn to radical pedagogy (hooks, 1994; Grande, 2004), critical race theory (Harney and Moten, 2013), and feminism (Federici, 2019) to strategically resist a system of precarization and casualization. These theories provide us with key tactics for an activist research and pedagogical praxis.

For this special issue of *Synoptique*, we have adopted a slightly different format than the one usually offered by this peer-reviewed journal. The pieces collected here did not undergo a double-blind peer review process, a traditional process of quality control but also, in its very hierarchical and legitimating structure, a gatekeeping mechanism for the production of knowledge. Instead, we experimented once again with a collective approach. Every piece gathered here has been “peer reviewed” by members of the medi-labour collective, and most come from friends, comrades, collaborators, and colleagues. They are part of a continuity of the project, and come from real social bonds developed through our work.

To consolidate the reflection on the intersection of knowledge production and labour activism, the issue opens with thought pieces that provide thoughtful, reflective, and often personal commentaries on issues of media labour and media studies, and alternative and marginalized forms of knowledge. The contributors of this section, from researchers in the earlier stages of their careers to more established scholars, illuminate many of the inherent contradictions and challenges in knowledge production and labour

activism. These ruminations are fundamentally personal, though they nonetheless reflect broader experiences found throughout the academy and industry. This section brings together their research practices in fields of media studies and academic labour, and a larger critique of exploitation. Rebecca Holt elaborates on the personal and ethnographic challenges of studying pornography within the academy. Jacqueline Ristola, meanwhile, critically recalls their personal experience with graduate student unions, and points to some of the major issues that unites graduate students in the fight against austerity, increased tuition wages, and exploitation. Patrick Vonderau and Errol Salamon’s individual contributions consider digital media research in relation to industry and labour. Finally, Ned Rossiter, Brett Neilson, and Vicki Mayer, looking back at their careers as media scholars, reflect on forms of engaged pedagogies.

Similarly, other formats in the issue experiment with academic writing in a more *personal* way. The dialogical form of interviews, with scholars and activists Silvia Federici and Alessandra Renzi, brings forward the exchange of ideas between young researchers and professors whose academic research and labour are at the service of social and media activism. Importantly, Federici and Renzi discuss their scholarly projects within the context of their active engagement and experiences with social movements and media collectives.

The next section engages with the format of field notes from film practitioners, artists, and anthropologists, to reflect on the embodied practices of media labour and activism. The authors consider issues of documentary co-creation (Marcoux-Fortier) and co-production (Canella) as anti-colonial tactics of solidarity and dialogue; the uneasy relationship between art and activism within neoliberal environments such as academia and artistic milieux (Guinan); and the conflict of theorization and ethnographic observation in letting fieldwork “speak back” (Kelada). They offer a panorama of situated, embodied engagements with the themes of this special issue, and provide a hands-on reflection on the deep contradictions and compromises of activist

film and media labour.

Finally, this issue closes on a series of book and event reviews, anchoring the reflections of the medialabour collective and the contributors in a historical and contemporary landscape. They consider, alternatively, issues of media labour and film industries (Barber, Joglekar, Tiwari) and an examination of their history and historiography (Slifkin), as well as questions of gendered (Sicondolfo, Trépanier) and affective (Cochrane) digital labour. The event reviews, in turn, tackle two very different events: the highly mediated, largely attended debate between Slavoj Žižek and Jordan Peterson at the Sony Centre for the Performing Arts in Toronto, and the long table discussion organized by the Institute for Urban Futures on the issue of precarity, in the working-class neighbourhood of Montreal's Pointe-St-Charles. With different settings and publics, both events pose key questions of public outreach and dialogue, on which the contributed reviewers reflect.

With the different sections of this issue, we have intended to open a dialogue across disciplines, methodologies, and formats, to discuss the relation between the different components of academic labour (e.g. research, teaching, and writing) and media labour (e.g. production, circulation, and exhibition). We hope to contribute and foster a conversation around the contemporary struggles facing students, media workers, and the rest of the precariat. With this in mind, as we write, students and academic workers are striking across over 60 universities in the United Kingdom. We want to conclude by affirming our solidarity with their struggle, among all precarity struggles across the world.

We would like to express our gratitude and acknowledge the support of friends, comrades, and colleagues past and present. This has been a collective endeavour from the beginning, and it would not have been possible without their help and solidarity. Special thanks to the many copy-editors and the Editorial Collective of *Synoptique*; Lily Corne Klein and Kyla Smith for their diligence and attentive labour; and Natalie Greenberg who designed and formatted this issue.

The medialabour collective is Mark Barber, Patrick Brodie, Sima Kokotović, Corina MacDonald, Ylenia Olibet, Lola Rémy, and Egor Shmonin.

References

- Brown, Wendy. 2015. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. London and Cambridge, UK: Zone Books.
- Caldwell, John Thornton. 2008. *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Curtin, Michael. 2013. "Race to the Bottom of the Global Knowledge Economy." *Global E* 7 (1). <https://www.21global.ucsb.edu/global-e/july-2013/race-bottom-global-knowledge-economy>.
- Curtin, Michael and Kevin Sanson, eds. 2017. *Voices of Labor: Creativity, Craft, and Conflict in Global Hollywood*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Dardot, Pierre, and Christian Laval. 2013. *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society*. Translated by Gregory Elliott. New York: Verso.
- De Peuter, Greig. 2011. "Creative Economy and Labor Precarity: A Contested Convergence." *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 34 (5): 417-425.
- The Edu-Factory Collective. 2009. *Towards a Global Autonomous University: Cognitive Labor, the Production of Knowledge, and the Exodus from the Education Factory*. New York: Autonomedia.
- Federici, Silvia. 2019. *Re-Enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*. Oakland, CA: PM Press.
- Grande, Sandy. 2004. *Red Pedagogy: Native American Social and Political Thought*. New York: Rowman and Littlefields, Inc.
- Hall, Stuart. 1980. "Encoding/decoding." In *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79*, edited by Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe, and Paul Willis, 117-127. London,

- UK: Routledge.
- Harney, Stefano and Fred Moten. 2013. *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*. New York: Autonomedia.
- Hesmondhalgh, David. 2013. *The Cultural Industries*, 3rd edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Holt, Jennifer and Alisa Perren, eds. 2009. *Media Industries: History, Theory, Method*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell.
- hooks, bell. 1994. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. New York: Routledge.
- Horkeimer, Max and Theodor W. Adorno. 2002. "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception." In *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, edited by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, 94-136. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.
- Jaikumar, Priya and Kay Dickinson, eds. 2018. "Teaching Film and Media against the Global Right." *Teaching Media*. Online: <http://www.teachingmedia.org/teaching-film-and-media-against-the-global-right/>.
- Klinger, Barbara. 2006. *Beyond the Multiplex: Cinema, New Technologies, and the Home*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Lazzarato, Maurizio. 2012. *The Making of Indebted Man: An Essay on the Neoliberal Condition*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e).
- Mayer, Vicki. 2011. *Below the Line: Producers and Production Studies in the New Television Economy*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- McRobbie, Angela. 1997. "Bridging the Gap: Feminism, Fashion and Consumption." *Feminist Review* 55, no. 1 (March): 73-89.
- . 2010. "Reflections On Feminism, Immaterial Labour And The Post-Fordist Regime." *New Formations* 70 (Summer): 60-76.
- Miller, Toby. 2011. "The Contingency of (Some) Academic Labor: Communication Studies and the Cognitariat." *International Journal of Communication* 5: 1837-1842.
- Miller, Toby, Nitin Govil, John McMurria, and Richard Maxwell. 2002. *Global Hollywood*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Neilson, Brett and Ned Rossiter. 2008. "Precarity as Political Concept, or, Fordism as Exception." *Theory, Culture, and Society* 25 (7-8): 51-72.
- Nolan, Mary. 2008. "A Leadership University for the Twenty-First Century? Corporate Administration, Contingent Labor, and the Erosion of Faculty Rights." In *The University Against Itself: The NYU Strike and the Future of the Academic Workplace*, edited by Monika Krause, Mary Nolan, Michael Paim, and Andrew Ross, 43-56. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Stacey, Jackie. 1994. *Star Gazing: Female Spectators and Hollywood Cinema*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Staiger, Janet. 2000. *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception*. New York: New York University Press.