

Kate Fortmueller, **Below the Stars: How the Labor of Working Actors and Extras Shapes Media Production**. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2021, 216 pp., \$45.00 (hardcover).

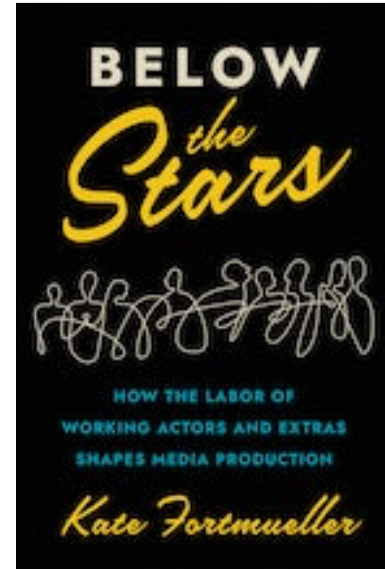
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Although constantly at the center of media frenzy, actors and their role in cultural production have received scant attention from media scholars. Breaking new ground in illuminating the labor of actors and extras, Kate Fortmueller's ***Below the Stars: How the Labor of Working Actors and Extras Shapes Media Production*** constitutes a key text that enriches our understanding of the realities of working in the media and entertainment industries, past and present.

Throughout the book's four chapters, Fortmueller traces Hollywood's industrial history through the lens of working actors, extras, and their unions elegantly performing the herculean task of weaving together the stories, experiences, and concerns of a group of historically highly dispersed workers who have struggled to form a coherent labor identity. Structured around four distinct moments of significant industrial and technological change, *Below the Stars* illuminates how Hollywood operates through labor. Examining actors as workers rather than purely passionate creatives is one of the book's key interventions, focusing attention on the labor realities of one of Hollywood's most glamorized professions and unveiling the highly precarious nature of most acting work. In this way, Fortmueller contributes to the growing scholarly conversation around unionized labor in Hollywood.

Relying on union documents, personal collections, and interviews with working actors and extras, Fortmueller tells the story of those Hollywood performers who have not achieved stardom but whose labor struggles have profoundly shaped the industry from its inception. Describing inter- and intraunion negotiations during major historical moments of technological shifts and subsequent industrial upheaval, *Below the Stars* lays out the adverse relationship between Hollywood's constant technological change and ever-shifting labor conditions. Positioning technology as not only a disruptor but a "source of anxiety" for actors and their unions (p. 14), Fortmueller highlights how the pressures of the quickly evolving industry put workers at a strategic disadvantage, with union leadership always scrambling to keep up, rather than being able to negotiate new compensation norms ahead of time. Often unable to present a united front, disagreements between differently tiered actors on most pressing issues as well as among various unions surrounding questions of representation and jurisdiction have characterized unions' efforts to ameliorate on-screen talent's working conditions throughout history.

Chapter one focuses on the beginnings of Hollywood and the centrality of labor insecurity to its profitable development. Fortmueller intervenes in the persistent myth of the studio system as "rational and efficient," arguing that "beneath this image of organization was a narrative of chaotic union



representation, unpredictable labor conditions, and hierarchical divisions within the large and unwieldy population of actors" (p. 49). Examining newspapers and publicity documents as well as communication between actors, employment companies, and union organizers, Fortmueller chronicles early attempts at unionization and bargaining from the short-lived Motion Picture Players Union to the emergence of Central Casting. With long-term contracts reserved for a small number of stars, historical accounts demonstrate that Hollywood as an industry was instead built on actors' and extras' aspirational and freelance labor. Once finally established in the 1930s, both the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) and the Screen Extras Guild (SEG) struggled to unite their diverse array of workers and their interests. Although both unions ultimately established contract minimums and safety standards, they mostly failed to address systemic inequality and insufficient opportunities for women and people of color. With supply far outnumbering demand for actors and extras, many accepted dangerous working conditions. As Fortmueller notes, "Those actors who found themselves with semi-regular employment were unable to advocate for themselves out of fear that they would be thrust into the realms of unemployment" (p. 28).

Chapter two covers the emergence of television and related debates about union jurisdiction. Instead of pushing for long-term stability, these conversations further cemented understandings of acting as mostly a freelance-based profession often spread across multiple different projects. Utilizing internal union documents, this chapter describes the beginnings of television acting as characterized by great confusion among actors about which union to join, as well as battles among union leadership over questions of medium specificity and related levels of prestige that ultimately hindered effective negotiations with television producers. In addition to the recurrent problem that "with any major technological development, the unions are positioned in a reactive stance, forced to figure out how to craft a strong contract for workers that does not drive networks and producers away from the negotiating table" (p. 69), these interunion disagreements weakened actors' bargaining power. For radio and television actors, these debates ultimately produced the merger of the Television Authority and the American Federation of Radio Artists into the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (AFTRA), while extras, whose work opportunities were even more limited on the small screen, were continuously sidelined and further marginalized.

Chapter three examines the 1960s–1980s, a time in which unions' responsibilities and roles in actors' lives expanded to include the administration of residuals, pensions, and health benefits. Homing in on the fight for residuals as a response to television's turn to reruns, Fortmueller describes the continuation of a shift within union concerns firmly away from physical labor conditions towards the long-term value of a program. Since "residuals are connected to above-the-line status within a film or television program and its continued reuse" (p. 90), the preoccupation with residuals exacerbated inequality among actors, with eligibility for residuals functioning as a key marker of success and status. Increasingly letting go of medium-based distinctions and working together on behalf of middle-tier actors, SAG and AFTRA moved toward a merger while rejecting joining forces with SEG as they both prioritized offsetting underemployment rather than increasing work opportunities. Concurrently, in 1972, committees to combat racism and sexism formed within both SAG and AFTRA to change Hollywood culture by improving casting and work opportunities for marginalized actors, with little success. Examining trade press from the time, Fortmueller finds that "issues of representation were written about separately from new technological developments, even though they worked symbiotically to produce disparities and

inequalities" (p. 109)—a crucial takeaway from *Below the Stars*, and certainly a productive avenue for further research.

Chapter four moves into the 21st century, illuminating how key historical conflicts and concerns reappear in today's convoluted media landscape. Based on interviews with working actors, this chapter focuses on voice actors and digital work. Drawing on McRobbie's (2016) work on creative labor, Fortmueller examines convergence through its effects on laborers. In addition to further fragmenting actors' work across media and industries—now also including Silicon Valley—the contemporary gig economy dramatically expands and diversifies the array of tasks expected from working and aspiring actors. They now produce, direct, and record their own audition materials in addition to maintaining a social media presence. According to Fortmueller, by offering courses and workshops on how to acquire the necessary skills, unions are normalizing rather than confronting another round of extensive industrial changes and their implications for actors. For voice actors specifically, the clash between unionized Hollywood and underregulated Silicon Valley within the video game industry has presented unique challenges in negotiating for adequate compensation and working conditions. Fortmueller suggests that further shifts within cultural production and labor conditions will certainly result from the intensified blending of tech companies and Hollywood talent.

Pointedly, Fortmueller concludes by stating that "labor practices always bear the marks of battles won or lost" (p. 157), emphasizing how the industrial and technological shifts and their effects on labor practices and modes of exploitation she traced throughout Hollywood history find continued expression in the present, as the #MeToo movement powerfully indicates. Fortmueller suspects that the aspirational nature of screen acting and actors' self-definition as passionate creatives rather than laborers will continue to undermine efforts to improve their position as workers. The book also includes a timely postscript on the COVID-19 pandemic and its global impact on cultural production. As the first-ever national strike threat from the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees has shown in 2021, the pandemic has helped to make "set conditions central to union conversations once again" (p. 159), although its larger consequences for Hollywood's workers remain to be seen.

Below the Stars is a valuable addition to existing media studies scholarship, filling crucial gaps regarding Hollywood labor and union history. At times hard to put down (chapter one was particularly captivating), the book is nonetheless extremely dense in information, as Fortmueller managed to uncover an impressive amount of new insights on a severely understudied group of Hollywood workers. Examinations of the particularly precarious situation of women and people of color are especially incisive and point to the fundamental interconnectedness of technological and industrial change and issues related to diversity and equity. Another strength of the book is its pedagogical utility: the four chapters logically build upon one another but are also self-contained and can productively be assigned individually, as each chapter coheres around a particular moment in Hollywood history. As such, *Below the Stars* makes an effective addition to syllabi in courses ranging from film history, television studies, and media industry studies to streaming media, video game studies, and creator culture—to name just a few.

Reference

McRobbie, A. (2016). *Be creative: Making a living in the new culture industries*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.