Exploring Creativity Under Platform Capitalism

Stuart Cunningham and David Craig (Eds.), **Creator Culture: An Introduction to Global Social Media Entertainment**, New York: New York University Press, 2021, 315 pp., $35.00 (paperback).

Michael L. Siciliano, **Creative Control: The Ambivalence of Work in the Cultural Industries**, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2021, 287 pp., $30.00 (paperback).

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These books, published in the same year, if differing in their approach, share a common focus on the organization and structuring of creative work in the era of platform capitalism. With their comprehensive coverage and contrasting approaches to the cultural and sociocultural dynamics of platform capitalism, they make an important contribution.

Considering *Creator Culture: An Introduction to Global Social Media Entertainment* first, the 14 essays—including two by the editors, who also provide an introduction—aim to extend the programmatic insights developed in their previous book, *Social Media Entertainment* (Craig & Cunningham, 2019). This earlier account tracked in impressive detail the emergence of a creator-centric regime of content production through social media. In this latest book, the authors observe that the early phase of amateur-produced online content is steadily being transformed into a professional, commercially driven practice based on platforms, multichannel networks, and streaming.

Cunningham and Craig define a creator as "a commercializing and professionalizing native social media user who generates and circulates original content to incubate, promote[s] and monetize[s] their own media brand on major social media platforms as well as offline" (p. 1). The authors justify adopting the industry-approved term because, they say, terms such as *influencer* or *micro-celebrity* are pejorative. Certainly, some influencers, such as Andrew Tate, give influencing a bad name, but others—say Cristiano Ronaldo—combine a massive number of followers with a prosocial orientation. Again, micro-celebrity is not necessarily pejorative, unless its small-scale, community-based existence outside of the tentacular embrace of platform capitalism is considered a failing.

The editors' rationale for taking an industry-centric approach is explained: "Our theoretical framework has sought to balance critiques of creative and algorithmic culture with a more agentive framework of entrepreneurialism and spreadable media" (p. 114). They also claim that in contrast to legacy media, the development of
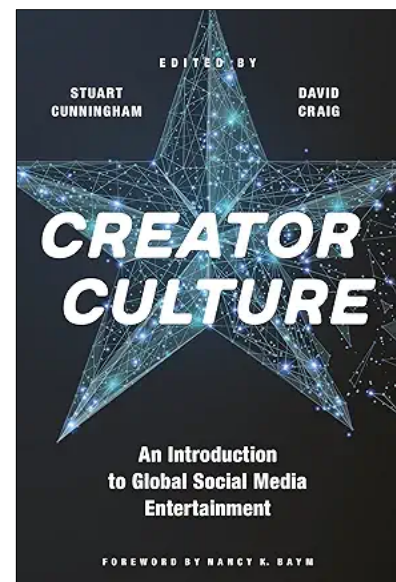
social media entertainment has expanded opportunities for content producers to work with different platforms. However, the widespread need for many creators to hold down several jobs to squeeze a bare living, or the many who do not manage to break through to platform marketability, does not readily equate with an increase in freedom. As Duffy and Sawey observe in their chapter on Instagram influencers, they are placed in the position of servant, not just of one but a conflicted plexus of "masters" (p. 138ff).

This raises a general point: Most the essays by invited scholars operate in tension with the editors' adoption of an industry-centric definition of creativity. For example, Glatt and Banet-Weiser conclude their examination of the challenges facing radical feminist creators in dealing with YouTube's preference for "brand safe" traditional gender identities:

> So while some content creators aspire to be transformational—to change social norms, to challenge discrimination, to disrupt systems of power—as long as this kind of transformation is also transactional there is a limit to its progressive potential. (p. 54)

Again, as Nancy K. Baym observes in her Foreword, the necessity of functioning as a brand means that Social Media Entertainment "is driven by capitalistic logics of accumulation rather than the logics of public good" (p. ix). An examination of Chinese Internet-famous creators (Wang Hong) provides parallel evidence of the contradictions between maintaining a market-attuned persona and the censorship of content by the Chinese Communist Party, which as the editors note, is actually more laissez-faire than in the United States (p. 107). Similar structural conflicts arise between young Arab creators and traditional values and, in Southeast Asia, the viability of concept of nationhood itself is challenged by the development of a global mediascape. Other chapters, deploying a political-economy perspective, examine the impact of sponsorship and advertising agencies as intermediaries, suggesting an intensification of the layers of constraint. Overall, these essays and others in the collection demonstrate the analytical limitations of adopting an industry-centric definition of creativity as linked to market performance.

By adopting the industry-preferred term *creator*, the editors miss the opportunity to consider the ideological and aesthetic diversity of creator forms of engagement. Their close analysis of policy initiatives is welcome, but their approach would benefit from a closer analysis of the ideological and aesthetic features of commodified versus noncommodified content creation. For example, in what way does maker culture or curator practices cultivate different perceptions of solidarity (Niemeyer & Gerber, 2015)? Rather than the object of enquiry being creator culture, it seems more effective to focus on *creator cultures*, distinguishing, for example, between those who recycle the memes and themes of popular commodity culture and those who produce original artefacts and images.

The editors acknowledge the gross asymmetry of power and wealth between platforms and creators. But in their view Foucault's "capillary" definition of power trumps domination, offering a more "nuanced" account than those focusing on platform or audience control (p. 15). At first sight, seeing power as immanent seems to fit a context where users have access to networks operating outside of national and international institutional control (Stadler, 2013). But if the objective is to reach large-scale audiences and monetize "free" labor, platforms make the final decision over what gets commodified, retroactively cherry-picking winners. What has emerged is a vertical chasm between a core of elite creators and a large majority

of would-be and wannabe creators locked in a hypercompetitive, winner-take-all struggle (Fraser, 2003, p. 168). This structuration process produces a neofeudal social order based on the harvesting of free labor for resale by digital landlords (Sadowski, 2020). Consequently, the most apt model for this situation is not the endless proliferation of power plays but a competition among individual users to avoid the institution-based practice of categorical exclusion, as found in *Madness and Civilization* (Foucault, 1988). To put this differently, the power involved is not between or over individuals but the power of capitalism to impose its logic on social life—in this case, the social life of creative workers (Mau, 2023).

Acknowledging the inequalities of agency, the authors propose a co-governance framework that mediates between top-down and bottom-up forms of regulation (pp. 274–284). In contrast to those who see formalization as a strategy of elite capture of vernacular content, the authors claim that formalization would protect the rights of creators. But as Cunningham and Craig observe, the fact that one of the most direct examples of creator activism, the Internet Creators Guild, failed through lack of subscriber support points to the uncertainty of survival in the Darwinian ecology imposed by platform capitalism (Giblin & Doctorow, 2022).

"Our theoretical framework has sought to balance critiques of creative and algorithmic culture with a more agentive framework of entrepreneurialism and spreadable media" (p. 114). Yet by adopting an industry-preferred term, *creator*, the editors miss the opportunity for a close consideration of the ideological and aesthetic diversity of online content and creator forms of engagement. Unqualified by a close analysis of the creative labor process, the adoption of the industry-sanitizing term *creator* tends to equate creativity with commodification and also remains freighted with connotations of genius and the American creed of expressive individualism (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 2007).

In contrast to those who see formalization as a strategy of elite capture, the authors argue that formalization would protect the rights of creators. This a useful contention, but the fact that one of their examples of creator activism, the Internet Creators Guild, failed after three years of operation through lack of subscriber support points to the uncertainty of survival in the Darwinian struggle imposed by platform capitalism (Giblin & Doctorow, 2022).

Finally, Cunningham and Craig claim that social media, compared to legacy media, have created expanded opportunities to work with different platforms. However, the widespread need for many employees to hold down several jobs to eke out a living does not equate with an increase in freedom.

In contrast to *Creator Culture*, the subjects of *Creative Control* are below-the-line creative workers, whose low pay and unstable conditions of employment create contradictions between the jobs they have and their hopes and aspirations. The situation of rank-and-file creative workers provides a metonym for labor in general in late capitalism where workers in routine jobs are enjoined to be creative (McRobbie, 2018). In contrast to the approach of *Creator Culture*, Michael L. Siciliano's **Creative Control: The Ambivalence of Work in the Cultural Industries** aims to correct the "severe lack" found in top-down views of cognitive capitalism (p. 19). Using a labor process approach, Siciliano focuses on the contemporary plight of craft labor, a category of workers that historically has been accorded a degree of autonomy in the workplace (Braverman, 1998; Friedman, 1977). In platform capitalism, a gamut of practices—the increased surveillance of the worker, the intense deployment of digital technologies to create efficiencies in the labor process, the potential for super-profits through the capture of "free" and underpaid labor—sustains a categorical separation between those who conceive and manage the work process and those who execute it. Having only an approximate or stochastic relationship to an employee's actual level of skill (whether overestimated or underestimated), creative jobs are implicitly categorized as (a) modular—permitting the worker a margin of flexibility and autonomy; (b) fractal—where workers are subject to direct control and expected to produce a fixed kind of performance; and (c) ergometric—labor that, if situated in the division of creative labor, is defined as noncreative (King, 2010). This schematic division of labor defines the level of autonomy exercised in particular roles. It also limits how the affordances of particular technologies are used in a particular setting. When driven by the imperative of marketability, the versatile modular worker employed in a "gig" economy may compromise his or her creative objectives for the sake of maintaining continuity of earnings and employment.

To make his case, Siciliano draws on two ethnographic case studies conducted as an employee in two (fictitiously named) companies. The first of these is SoniCo, a recording studio, which owns the means of production and employs sound engineers as independent contractors assisting musicians in creating and recording tracks. The second is The Future, a multichannel network producer of content for YouTube that employs content creators as subcontractors—the latter owning the means of production but is required to follow YouTube's prescriptions on marketable content. Both companies have positive features. The Future provides training that inducts aspirant creators into the aesthetic preferences of YouTube. SoniCo provides access to the latest recording technology and creates networking opportunities and the exchange of craft expertise with musicians and freelance engineers using SoniCo's studio facilities.

By focusing on the material and aesthetic dimensions of the management of the creative labor processes, Siciliano argues that capitalist control of creative labor rests on a process of aesthetic enrolment.
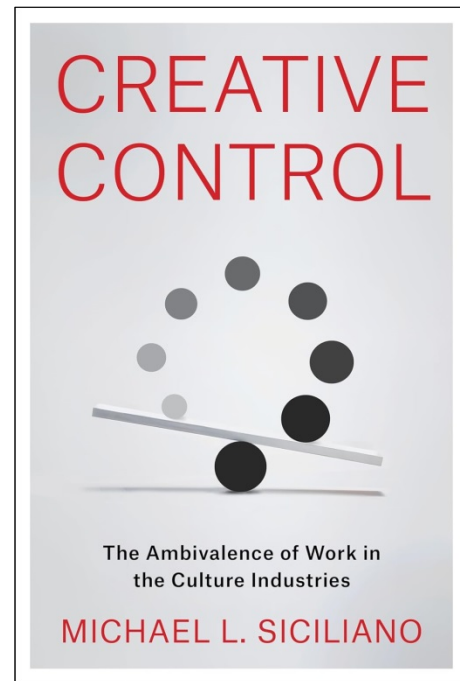
Aesthetic enrollment occurs when workers accept the managerial equation of creativity with profitability to pursue a craft-based engagement with the tools and techniques of production. This enrollment mitigates but does not resolve the effects of a precarious labor market, producing neither complete consent nor "eruptive" collective resistance (pp. 22–23).

Rather, Siciliano found that the employees he interviewed had opted to accept managements' overall direction of the labor process. The impetus toward acceptance of the definition of creativity as marketability is the prerequisite for sustaining an affective engagement with the means of production and the chance of developing their skills as entrepreneurs. The result is a tantalizing form of alienation with the satisfactions of craft work purchased at the loss of control over its ultimate purpose (p. 224):

> They may possess autonomy, they may be aesthetically enrolled, and, in some cases, they may even be well compensated, but they all lack control over their judgment—what used to be considered the most "human" of cognitive faculties. (p. 231)

As demonstrated by the recent Writers Guild and SAG-AFTRA strikes, aesthetic enrollment may no longer accommodate the ever-increasing inequality between those who create content and those who benefit from harvesting its value. The recognition that creative labor, like labor in general, is a collective endeavor that deserves a more equitable share of income and resources has also been emphasized in the cross-union support for the actors' and writers' strike action by the United Automobile Workers. This development promises a resurgence of class consciousness that may integrate the interests of symbolic and routine workers. This integration depends on the extent to which casual workers in the gig economy are open to unionization (Elrod, 2023). Cunningham and Craig are right to stress that the creator economy remains vulnerable to the collective power of those produce content (p. 275), but how vulnerable remains to be seen.

In sum, these two books, because of and despite their different approaches and conceptual orientation, provide a valuable service in the mapping the dynamics of ownership and control in platform capitalism.

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