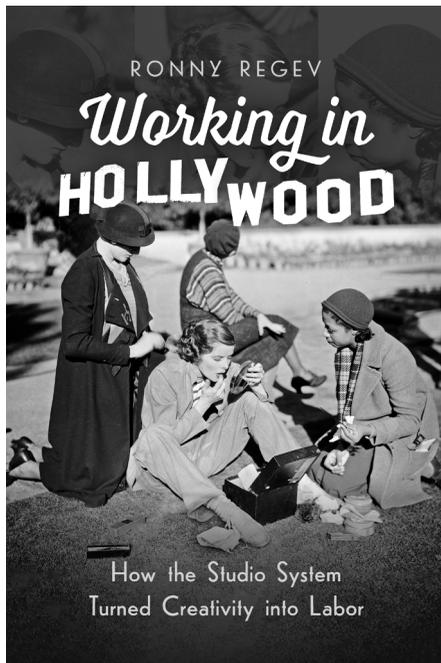


Julia Rose Camus

Review of Ronny Regev's *Working in Hollywood: How the Studio System Turned Creativity into Labor*



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In *Working in Hollywood*, Ronny Regev offers a look into the way that studio era Hollywood introduced the idea of creative labor, while becoming its own form of capitalist hegemony through a vertical integration model. Following in the tradition of American labor historians such as David Montgomery and Herbert Gutman while anchoring herself in historical testimonies and studio archival material, Regev lifts the curtain on the oligopolistic dream machine that is studio system Hollywood.¹ Her study delves into the mundane minutia of everyday tasks performed by workers

across studio stages during the early 20th century, while dissecting the role of studios by laying out the fragmented economic system that stills affects the world of production today. As a growing tradition in the field, Regev uses Hollywood to narrate a story labor and workers, creating a unique approach into the understanding of creative labor theory.

Working in Hollywood is divided into six sections that each tackle specific creative crafts of the industry. Firstly, Regev investigates the multifaceted role of producers in the studio era through the career trajectories of producing giants such as Darryl Zanuck, Irving Thalberg, and David O. Selznick. Their desire to establish a lucrative business model within a previously nebulous art form eventually led to the creation of the operative studio system. Regev breaks down the minutia of producer labor as the overarching management of all other studio laborers, thereby positing them as a creative ruling class. She then delves into a chapter on the function of directors, who spawned out of the producer ranks in a mitogenic fashion. Directors operated as intermediate managers with illusory power, constantly reporting back to the production ranks and abiding by the stringent constraints of studio regulations.

In her next chapters, Regev explores the realm of the cinematic middle class, which was made up of creative workers who provided the physical labor of production. Firstly, she examines the specific struggles of “below-the-line” craftspeople working on set in their search for greater recognition, especially because they held a specific market value in the sphere of production due to their tangible skills in engineering and technology. This leverage aided them in their quest for unionization, despite a strong opposition from their colleagues in higher

production ranks. In the following chapter, Regev discusses screenwriting as a new literary profession that was alienated from the labor that took place on studio stages, where early issues arose surrounding screen credit when it came to collaborative intellectual property. Screenwriters became disgruntled with being treated as “menial and replaceable” and demanded better pay for their creative work that served as the backbone of film production during the transition to sound.² Much like craftspeople, writers eventually unionized through the Screen Writer’s Guild, challenging the major cracks within the studio hegemony that are still echoed today.

In her chapter entitled “Acting,” Regev delineates the inner-workings of performance careers on studio stages and beyond. While often well compensated, actors were also denied any real creative agency and restrained by their studio contracts. This section provides the most poignant use of primary source archival material, using correspondences of screen icons such as Clarke Gable and Joan Crawford that reveal the genuine banality of and restrictions on their positions within a studio system that presented them as gods and goddesses. Regev discusses the way in which their celebrity operated economically, and how “they themselves, not only their labor, became an object of commerce.”³ She adapts Marxist labor theories to offer a criticism of stardom and demonstrate how the laborer and the identity of the actor become virtually indistinguishable. In the final chapter however, *Working in Hollywood* examines the result of dissatisfaction by stars and other studio workers. The combination of mass unionization, alongside mandated divestments of studio theater holdings ordered by the Supreme Court in 1948, would cause a downfall of the studio system at the hands of its myriad fragmented departments.

One of the notable shortcomings of this text is in its discussion of race and gender within these labor intricacies. Regev notes early on that “the absence of a meaningful discussion of racial inequality in this book echoes its upsetting absence in the industry itself.”⁴ But she does occasionally offer pertinent anecdotes regarding these disparities, notably in her discussion of actors having to take part in a feminized form of labor practice regardless of gender and in her brief critique of the artificial critical acclaim and wage gaps faced by African-American actors. These critiques feel simultaneously pertinent but perhaps curtailed. This leaves the reader with further questions about the subtleties of identity-based disparities among classes of studio laborers. Similarly, Regev in some ways flattens the studio structure; numerous scholars have recently demonstrated how business laborers fit into the greater scale of this cinematic capitalist hegemony and occasionally challenge it.⁵ While this might diverge from Regev’s focus on creative labor, the roles of agents, managers, publicists, and lawyers fundamentally shape the conventions and regulations of this industry. Their contextualization in this discussion of labor beyond specific footnotes would have been a welcome one.

Ultimately, *Working in Hollywood* is a unique approach to creative labor theory, and offers a historical account of studio era Hollywood through the labor of its working classes. The relevance of Regev’s piece is deeply ingrained in the current conversations at the center of 21st Century Hollywood, from recent strikes by the guilds all the way to the abuses of power linked to the “#MeToo” movement. By laying out the origins of a deeply exploitative and fragmented system within the framework of labor capitalism, this book illuminates many of the early failings of the entertainment industry that are still felt across Hollywood today.

Julia Rose Camus is a Masters candidate in the Division of Cinema and Media Studies at the University of Southern California. She holds a BA in Cinema/Media Studies and Anthropology from the University of Chicago, and recently spent time working in film and TV development. Her current research draws on gender studies, queer theory, and ethnographic methods in order to assess the ways in which modern masculinity is being shaped and redefined across various digital landscapes. In addition to her academic work, she is also a photographer and media artist, and more of her work can be found on her portfolio www.juliarosecamus.com.

BOOK REVIEW: *WORKING IN HOLLYWOOD*

Notes

- 1 David Montgomery, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), Herbert G. Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrialized America: Essays in American Working-Class and Social History* (New York: Knopf, 1976).
- 2 Ronny Regev, *Working in Hollywood: How the Studio System Turned Creativity into Labor* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 8.
- 3 Regev, *Working in Hollywood*, 110.
- 4 Regev, *Working in Hollywood*, 8.
- 5 See Tom Kemper, *Hidden Talent: The Emergence of Hollywood Agents* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009); Emily Carman, *Independent Stardom: Freelance Women in the Hollywood Studio System* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016); Erin Hill, *Never Done: A History of Women's Work in Media Production* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016).