Alan McKinlay and Chris Smith (Eds)

**Creative Labour: Working in the Creative Industries**


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This latest volume in the Critical Perspectives on Work and Employment series may seem an unlikely addition. Its central focus on the fashionable world of the ‘creative industries’ might suggest a degree of kowtowing to adherents of the ‘cultural turn’ with their celebratory interest in symbolic, immaterial consumption of cultural artefacts. Mindful of this broader political context, McKinlay’s and Smith’s introductory chapter underlines the book’s labour process analysis (LPA) derived focus on the material “production of creative or artistic products, and the labour processes, employment relations and organisation of work” (p.4).

The collection of 12 essays is divided into three parts: ‘Theory and Overview’; ‘Creative Labour: Film, Theatre and Television; and ‘New [digital] Media’. In the introductory chapter, the editors wrestle with defining ‘creative industries’ from within LPA before settling on: “those traditional and new sectors that share features of innovation, risk, uncertainty, performativity and differentiation from repeat or mass production sectors” (p.4). Even more problematic for them is the notion of ‘creative labour’, as it is not possible to define labour power as either creative or non-creative, as all labour contains an element of creativity. To overcome this hurdle, they argue for a contingent conceptualisation, in which “creative industries are distinctive by seeking competitive advantage via the harnessing of individual and collective creativity” (p.29). Moreover, creative labour is “craft like” as “it requires working within a tradition or established form, which acts as an externalised and institutionalised set of normative rules that the individual is required to learn and follow” (p.33).

Smith and McKinlay then follow this with an analysis of creative labour’s content, contract (rules and regulation) and control (management and self-motivation), in which they chart the distinctive overlap and tensions between the aesthetic, commercial and technical aspects of creative industries. This structural tension between ‘them’ (the suits) and ‘us’ (the creatives) is further explored by Thompson, Jones and Warhurst via a study of the popular music industry. For them, the central focus of labour process analysis of creative labour should not be its content but “what is done with and to it” (p.54), within the broader market and industrial context. In contrast to the editors, they argue the concepts of creative labour and creative industries possess too little analytic purchase to be of substantive value and instead favour “specificity of analysis” (p.54).

A key theme throughout is the consequences of the growing job insecurity since the 1980s generated by fragmented, sub-contract and project-based labour markets. McKinlay traces the causes of this fractured labour market in UK commercial television production with his assessment of the defeat (and partial rebuilding) of trade union organisation as the result of ITV employers’ strategy to shift away from ‘in-house’ to cheaper ‘outsourced’ production. One consequence of this strategy in TV and film has been the collapse of formal training opportunities. In an illuminating study of the UK film and TV sectors, Grugulis and Stoyanova reveal how those hoping to acquire production skills rely on ‘learning on the job’ – frequently voluntarily or for little pay – where dogged determination and exploiting personal contacts are all important.

These structural pressures have exacerbated the reliance of an increasingly freelance workforce on personal social networks to build and maintain a career. However, Christopherson argues that in the US film industry, personal-ties networking has generated unintended structural consequences by
reinforcing corporate strategies of: lowering labour costs; dismantling craft-based working; and reliance on exclusionary ‘old boy’ networks. This theme of coping with uncertainty is explored in several other chapters. Randle and Culkin investigate the experience of working freelance in Hollywood where the uncertainty of securing the next temporary project assignment ensures that “leisure becomes work as ‘seeing friends’ means looking for job opportunities” (p.112). Workers’ networking responses to ‘structured uncertainty’ (p.112) are also explored in Haunschild’s and Eikhof’s study of the established German theatre where itinerant actors’ pursue their art, frequently at the expense of a stable and settled life.

The final three chapters comprise the third part of the collection on the so-called ‘New (digital) Media’, which is popularly held to embody the non-hierarchical and innovative culture of the ‘New Economy’. The three chapters offer studies of San Francisco, Germany and Sweden respectively with each dissecting the New Economy myths; revealing how the disciplining effects of increasing market competition result in ever-greater rationalised organisation at the expense of more informal creative-craft practices.

This is an illuminating, thought provoking and enjoyable collection of essays. However, I remain unconvinced creative labour and creative industries are viable concepts within LPA and feel more comfortable with Thompson et al preference for specificity of analysis, with their pointed focus on the material nature of immaterial labour. However, the lasting value of this collection will be the political importance of the LPA tradition confronting the populist hyperbole around the creative industries.