UC Santa Barbara
UC Santa Barbara Previously Published Works

Title

Book Review: Creative Labour: Media Work in Three Cultural Industries

Permalink

Journal

ISSN

Author

Bielby, Denise D

Publication Date

DOI

Peer reviewed

Book Review

Hesmondhalgh, D., & Baker, S. (2011). *Creative Labour: Media Work in Three Cultural Industries*. London, England: Routledge. 276 pp. $44.95 (paper).

Reviewed by: Denise D. Bielby, University of California, Santa Barbara, CA, USA

In *Creative Labour*, Hesmondhalgh and Baker analyze the quality of workers' experience in culture industry occupations in the United Kingdom. Relying on interviews with employees and participant-observation of work at selected sites in television, magazine journalism, and music, the authors have targeted labor in the arts to address the analytical chasm between celebrants of creative jobs in the information technology–driven knowledge economy who emphasize their flexibility, safety, autonomy, intrinsic interest, recognition, and blending of conception and execution, and critics of such work who view knowledge economy jobs as ones marked by high levels of insecurity, casualization, and long working hours that result in self-exploitation. Aiming to capture what is sociologically relevant about labor in these jobs, the authors draw on Marxist theory, poststructuralism, and liberal political thought, and from scholarship in the fields of media, communication, and cultural studies, the sociology of work, organizational, business, and management studies, and social and political theory to clarify the specifics of labor in cultural production.

The findings focus on workers' subjective experience with their labor. Chapter 4 addresses distinctive properties of cultural industries, including the difference between aesthetic autonomy in product creation and professional autonomy from industry constraints, how product genres align audiences, shape workplace relationships with artists and delineate approaches to problem solving, and the effect of increased commercialization on worker autonomy. Workplace problems and solutions vary by industry, and within industry, by product genre. Chapter 5 addresses how creative workers perceive the quality, insecurity and risk, and pleasures and rewards of their work. Although their subjective investments are not entirely unique to cultural industries, the pleasure of working with ideas, the complexity and challenge of original

work, the opportunity for high commitment to quality products, and freedom from bureaucratic routines mitigates workers' feelings of discontent and of vulnerability to less than professional treatment. Chapter 6 reports how self-realization from creative labor overrides personal concerns about the fragility of contingent work, and how teamwork, socializing, and networking can counter the social isolation of freelance work and lack of job security. Chapter 7 directs criticism at recent Marxist notions of autonomist labor and turns to Hochschild's writings about emotional and affective labor for insight into this aspect of work in creative fields. Hesmondhalgh and Baker argue that because media industries now comprise core economic institutions, their distinct power dynamics must be recognized for meaningful political economic analysis of labor to occur. Chapter 8 addresses how creative workers identify product quality and value the satisfaction that comes from investing high levels of care and skill in work many regard as socially, culturally, and politically significant. The importance to creative workers of audience acceptance of their products is treated in chapter 9. Because culture industries keep consumers at arm's length, creative laborers experience considerable personal uncertainty about product acceptance that undermines their sense of creative autonomy and job satisfaction. The concluding chapter argues for unionization and greater attention to the work–life balance to improve the experience of working in creative fields.

Hesmondhalgh and Baker's goal is to keep the specificity of creative labor in focus while advancing scholarly understanding of the experience of doing creative work in the context of the experience of work as a whole. In that regard, this book offers scholars who are less familiar with cultural industries an in-depth view of the distinctive subjective experience of creative labor while offering culture industry specialists insight into the particulars of industries in the United Kingdom. Despite its theoretical breath, *Creative Labour* would have benefitted from deeper reliance on seminal middle-range theoretical scholarship such as Becker's (1982) on conventions in art worlds, Hirsch's (2000) on the function of culture industry gatekeepers, Scott's (2005) on industry synergies within geographic regions, Caves' (2000) on contracts in creative industries, Molotch's (2003) on the origin of creative ideas, and Harrington and Bielby's (1995) on producer–fan relationships. Such work would have provided rich insight into how strategies used by culture industries to organize and systematize production are also necessary for understanding the subjective experience of creative workers. Nevertheless, *Creative Labour* is an insightful contribution that effectively advances understanding of the experience of working in knowledge economy jobs.

References

Becker, H. (1982). *Art worlds*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Caves, R. (2000). *Creative industries*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Harrington, C. L., & Bielby, D. D. (1995). *Soap fans*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Hirsch, P. (2000). Cultural industries revisited. *Organization Science, 11*, 356-361.

Molotch, H. (2003). *Where stuff comes from*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Scott, A. J. (2005). *On Hollywood*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.