

Flow Statement

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PRODUCTIVE THEORIZING FROM PRODUCTION FAILURES?

Alienation seems to be a continuing feature of modern production, whether in the refurbished industrial space of a daycare or in the post-industrial practices of the reality caster waiting for the next contract. Production studies offer the opportunity not just to confirm the ongoing presence of this social phenomenon locally, but theorize, from the ground, how it “works”: making producers into productive subjects. Television programs, the result of hundreds of micro-processes from script-writing to distribution, rely on thousands of collaborative efforts, but without some form of fieldwork, it’s hard to know how these collaborations manifest to make workers accept the fact that the arrangements result in uncompensated labors. While single case studies cannot illuminate the range of possible experiences of alienation, they can become one of the building blocks for a theory that shows the variations among workers, based on their role in a collaborative project, their career trajectory, and their future opportunities. This is an opportunity not to repackaging the insights of past production studies, but to replace it in light of a new economy of film and television production.

Over the course of the past two years, I went to many casting calls for reality programs that “failed,” that is, they failed to attract anyone suitable for the program cast. These cases have helped me think about a grounded theory of alienation, not just through the ways casters talked about the devaluation, usurpation, or erasure, but also in the ways they managed alienated feelings by deferring them onto the next call. For this reason, production studies might also focus more on failures in the production process, what did not work or go well according to industrial standards. Not only are the failures simply necessary for defining success, they can be productive in themselves as a critique of capitalism. Failures, as Judith Halberstam has noted, open the potential for re-imagining resistance as a queer space, not quite submissive but not quite revolutionary either.ⁱ In this sense, casting calls that fail to attract attention were precisely the moments that revealed the real work of casters: to justify the failure, create an alternative narrative of the event, and move on. Despite his enthusiasm for the job and the optimism for the future, one caster complained after a “failed” call that at times his job seemed “thankless” to him, “I’ve cast shows where I don’t even get invited to the final wrap party.” If alienation operates to disconnect workers from their labors, we see in his comment a recognition and a rejection of any starry-eyed admiration for the industry, but perhaps sowing a seed for future resistance.

ⁱ Judith Halberstam, “Notes on Failure,” (lecture, University of Illinois, Champaign Urbana, IL, April 14, 2006).