

Television Labor: Historical Trajectories and Contemporary Concerns in Global Contexts

Scripting “Reality” and the Discursive Formation of Creative Labor

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During the 2007-2008 Writers Guild of America strike, actor/musician Jack Black stood before a crowd of Hollywood creative personnel at a rally protesting the substandard working conditions for writers in the reality TV genre. In his persona as front man of his band Tenacious D, Black declared, “All writers shall be created equally, be they from the *Price is Right* or *The Godfather*... All must be united with the WGA.” This statement is striking because most people would not consider *The Price is Right* to be a reality show, but rather a game show. *The Price is Right* (1956), is in fact, one of the longest running game shows on American television. For decades, *TPIR* workers who were responsible for writing host copy, the announcer’s description of products and prices, and the rules of contest play were protected under a collective bargaining contract between The Writers Guild of America and the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) known as the Minimum Basic Agreement. The MBA ensures that guild members receive standardized, fair wages, residual payments, health insurance, portable pension plans and proper screen credit for their work. The contract includes a list of all the various duties writers might perform in radio, TV and film. These duties are not limited to script writing.

The MBA explicitly states, writers are covered under the contract for any other aspects of crafting a narrative they might perform in radio, television and film such as writing any of the following: adaptations, treatments, scenarios, plot outlines, synopses, routines, and voice-over narrations. When a guild member crafts any of the aforementioned work on a project he or she is to receive credit as a writer. The initial MBA also delineated specific categories of programming that would be covered. The very long list of subgenres includes variety shows, non-fiction programs, quiz shows and audience participation shows. However, when global conglomerate FremantleMedia acquired the license rights to *TPIR* the program suddenly lost its guild status. Fremantle achieved this dramatic, cost cutting measure by simply deeming *TPIR* to belong to the reality show genre rather than the game show genre. This management maneuver was possible because the MBA does not specifically list “reality TV” as a covered program category. As a result, long work hours with low pay is the overwhelming norm for reality TV writers.

According to a 2007 WGA analysis of reality TV only nine percent of writers receive overtime pay, only fourteen percent are offered health insurance, and only one percent receives pension benefits. Writers’ time cards rarely reflect the actual number of hours they worked. And seventy three percent of reality TV writers who participated in the analysis state that they consistently work through meal times. In addition to often deplorable working conditions, writers are stripped of their writing credit (Writers Guild of America West, 2007). And yet, when the AMPTP and the WGA had reached an apparent stalemate during the 2007-2008 strike, the guild ultimately conceded its

demand to have reality TV recognized and included in the amended 2008 MBA (TV Week, 2007). Therefore, production companies such as FremantleMedia are still not compelled to offer guild contracts to creative laborers who write for reality TV shows.

The rise of reality TV offers an ideal case study for examining how industry's conceptualizations of genres, particularly denigrated genres, impact creative laborers. My ongoing research interrogates the ways in which industry uses genre not as a textual label but as a mechanism used to deny workers of basic rights and privileges that have long been commonly granted to members of the Hollywood creative community. The mere act of categorizing a television program within a given genre can have dire consequences for creative laborers who work therein. Reality TV's discursive construction as a "new genre" has enabled the AMPTP to reject creative laborers' request for placement within the minimum basic agreement. Furthermore, my research reveals that the discursive construction of reality TV as "trash" is directly linked to the WGA's inability to organize reality TV as a guild protected genre. Reality TV's position as low art or what John Fiske might call *formula art* is, therefore, connected to the manner in which many creative laborers are barred from access to guild contracts despite the genre's mass popularity and high profitability. I argue that regardless of where a genre is positioned within Hollywood's creative hierarchy the workers therein should be treated with the same dignity and respect as their peers.

Works Cited

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