

Chapter Title: Leaving Los Angeles

Book Title: Mobile Hollywood

Book Subtitle: Labor and the Geography of Production

Book Author(s): Kevin Sanson

Published by: University of California Press. (2024)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/jj.9345423.4>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



This book is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License (CC BY-SA 4.0). To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>.



JSTOR

University of California Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Mobile Hollywood*

CHAPTER ONE

Leaving Los Angeles

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the relocation of production activity from Southern California to one of a number of emerging production hubs around the world was raising significant anxiety among labor leaders, industry observers, and local politicians in Los Angeles. Job losses in the city's "signature" industry topped their list of concerns. The departure of film and television production was indeed having a measurable impact on the entertainment business, but this migration was not new. For different reasons at different times, significant portions of production activity had previously "run away" from the region, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s but as early as the late 1940s. Each time the phenomenon manifested, it raised concerns about the consequences for Hollywood. But this most recent phase seemed to mark a more fundamental—and many feared, permanent—shift in the spatial dynamics of film and television production. An evolving confluence of economic and regulatory factors around the globe was refashioning production into a more mobile, geographically dispersed means of making films and television series. By 2014, the adjustments to Hollywood's production geography appeared more like a complete transformation, in both existential and structural terms. As the *Los Angeles*

Times lamented, “As Boeing is to Seattle, the entertainment industry is to Los Angeles. It was once unthinkable that most movies and TV shows would be made anywhere else. It’s not so unthinkable anymore.”¹

Attempts to explain the causes and effects of this historical juncture of runaway production—the term most commonly used to describe the relocation of production activity from Southern California—typically frame them as the inevitable results of cost-saving measures and local policy initiatives. According to this logic, it’s simply cheaper for studios to move the production process to places with highly skilled workers, a well-established physical infrastructure, and most important, a financial incentive that offsets the costs of doing business there. For these locations, from Vancouver to the Gold Coast in Australia, the motivation is primarily economic, in the form of additional jobs, higher wages, and more revenue. While there is much less consensus among scholars about the efficacy of these policies and their local economic and cultural impacts, the contours of debate have similarly never strayed far from treating runaway production as a matter of global political economy and local economic development. The former articulates a powerful vision of international coordination and control through which the major Hollywood studios organize distant production locations and labor into a factory-like assembly line, while the latter emphasizes public policy to enable integration into Hollywood’s operations and engender a self-sustaining satellite production industry.

Collectively, however, these explanations do little to illuminate the sheer scale and complexity of achieving what the *Los Angeles Times* found so unthinkable: transforming the mode of production into a more nimble and mobile apparatus. How does

a high-cost, creative endeavor that employs hundreds, sometimes thousands, of skilled professionals, and requires countless other resources, move so easily between Los Angeles, London, Vancouver, and Prague? Given the logistical complexity, what keeps the whole thing from imploding? Perhaps most striking given the focus on jobs lost and jobs gained in the debates about runaway production is that the experiences of media workers who are caught up in these shifting spatial dynamics remain conspicuously absent from the discussion. What can their tribulations reveal about the contemporary conditions of craft and technical labor within a more mobile regime of accumulation? How do their voices and experiences reconfigure mobile production not as a rational function of budget sheets and policy mechanisms, but as the cumulative effect of their labor power under the structures of capital expansion?

Mobile Hollywood aims to answer these questions by drawing attention to the spatial dynamics of contemporary film and television production and their impact on the visibility, nature, and perceived value of certain forms of labor that shape, sometimes quite literally, where Hollywood can or cannot travel. In so doing, it provides a detailed empirical investigation into the ways that screen media workers in different parts of the world engage with and are disrupted by the expanded geographic scale of Hollywood production. By focusing on the logistical ingenuity of service producers, location managers, and teamsters, it offers a frontline account of how the mobility of film and television production not only intensifies (often invisible) modes of labor we rarely associate with the entertainment industries, but also reconfigures the mode of production into a more exacting regime of accumulation. In this sense, *Mobile Hollywood* weaves an account of work functions *and* working

conditions—that is, what these workers do in the division of labor and the environments in which they do them—into its examination of the studio’s ability to extract “value” from a global workforce.

More than simply documenting the norms and nature of creative labor, however, *Mobile Hollywood* links the material dimensions of craft and technical work into a broader reassessment of capital operations in Hollywood. Accordingly, it troubles the abstraction of capital’s power by examining how its expansion actually “works,” seeking to give meaning to the workaday dynamics that coordinate geography in the financial and creative interests of Hollywood. Here, labor becomes a prism through which to understand the entertainment industry’s respatialization not as an inevitable outcome of its consolidation and concentration of power, though that certainly plays a part, but as a more fraught and contingent mode of production that subsumes disjuncture within and across its division of labor. At its most distilled, *Mobile Hollywood* argues that the global scale of blockbuster film and television production is an inherently heterogeneous spatial enterprise. It is constituted by a much more dynamic and diverse set of social relations that its workforce must manage and patch together—often but not always in ways that are invisible and unwaged—as a condition of their employment within a mobile mode of production.

LOCATIONS AND THE LIMITS OF COMPETITIVE LOGICS

Each quarter, the nonprofit organization FilmLA releases reports that track production activity within Los Angeles County, along with more detailed and comparative yearly analyses

on how California stacks up against other production hubs, both domestic and international. With each new report, industry commentators scrutinize data points in ways that suggest the competitive dynamics of the contemporary production landscape are a zero-sum game. A contest based on the number of productions hosted in a given location separates winners from losers. Georgia's rising prominence as a production hub over the past few years, for instance, comes at the expense of California's historic position at the top. A few years before Georgia's success, Louisiana had been championed as the "Movie-Making Capital of the World," but it was just following the successful tactics devised more than a decade earlier in Canada.² New York and the United Kingdom never trail far behind in these calculations, consistently ending up over the past several years in the world's top five filming destinations. Still more, Australia, France, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and China, as well as US states like Illinois, North Carolina, and New Mexico, have hosted their fair share of Hollywood film and television production. This says nothing about the offshoring of postproduction activities like music scoring and visual effects to cost-effective jurisdictions overseas.³

According to the logic of competition, however, the race is decidedly between California and rival destinations, with the entertainment industry's established home base in the paradoxical position of underdog. The state has been playing an anxious game of catch up ever since reports started documenting the staggering job losses upending the industry. In 2010, according to reports, California had "lost 10,600 entertainment industry jobs, more than 25,000 related jobs, and \$2.4 billion in wages, and \$4.2 billion in total economic output since 1997 as film and TV production has moved to other states and countries."⁴ By

2013, the state's production activity hit a crisis point, when its share of the top-grossing live-action features reached a meager 8 percent—a 60 percent drop in market share over the previous fifteen years.⁵ Today, California has made notable progress toward reclaiming its position, but stiff competition remains. FilmLA's more recent research reveals that only one in four of *all* US-produced, live-action, English-language narrative features released in 2018 were filmed in California; the other 75 percent were shot somewhere else.⁶ The number dwindles even more when the focus shifts to the top-grossing live-action features—those productions that make the biggest economic impact and create the most jobs for below-the-line workers. Only 14 percent of the biggest box-office earners filmed primarily in California, which put the Golden State behind both Georgia (first) and the United Kingdom (second), but tied with Canada for third place.⁷ Reports on television production make for rosier headlines, but it is similarly distributed across competing jurisdictions. While California attracted more television production than any other *single* location in 2018, it hosted fewer than half of the 465 American series filmed that year, with New York, Georgia, Illinois, and locations in Canada handling the majority.⁸

The competitive dynamics of contemporary film and television production are derived from the emergence of production incentives that policymakers have used to lure Hollywood producers away from the soundstages and backlots in Los Angeles. Production incentives are a type of economic enticement—a package of tax breaks and other concessions—that governments use to target specific firms or, in the case of film and television, entire sectors of industry, hoping they will relocate to their jurisdictions, create jobs, and diversify economic activity. Canada is widely credited with introducing the model for

contemporary production incentives in 1997. In less than a decade, the template took hold domestically, making the period between 2004 and 2012 one of lost jobs and decreased economic activity in California's entertainment sector. Today, more than thirty states and territories in the US, not to mention countless international jurisdictions around the world, offer a production incentive program. These incentives can take various forms, from government-issued grants and cash rebates to subsidized services, like local film commissions, waived rental fees for studios and equipment, discounted labor costs, or some combination thereof.

The most competitive form of production incentive, however, is the tax credit, a token of sorts that recipients can use to minimize their tax obligations in the locations where they film.⁹ Notably, tax is a relatively minor burden for productions. As limited liability corporations, they rarely have much, if any, state or federal taxes to pay. So tax credits—the most desirable ones—are commonly issued as transferable or refundable commodities. Productions can sell a “transferable” credit to a separate individual or business entity—such as a hedge-fund investor or insurance company—that can use it to offset their own financial obligations, or productions can exchange the unused value of a “refundable” tax credit for cash from the local government that issued it. Both options enable producers to use the returns to significantly offset production costs and leverage competitive pressures among locations to generate better deals.

Ever since they expanded in number and substance throughout the early 2000s, production incentives have been firmly established as the game pieces that nations, states, and some cities play against each other in competing for Hollywood's attention. At the time of writing, for example, the US state of Georgia

offers a 20 percent transferable tax credit (plus an additional 10 percent if the production includes the promotional logo for the state film commission in its ending credit sequence), while the United Kingdom offers a 25 percent refundable tax credit on qualified expenses. Some jurisdictions, like Massachusetts, allow productions to choose either option. Such cost reductions can reach upward of 70 percent when the various programs on offer in a particular location are combined (e.g., British Columbia and Fiji), but most hover somewhere between 25 and 35 percent in savings. For its part, California launched its own (rather modest) incentive program in 2009, offering between 20 and 25 percent in tax credits for qualified productions but capping total spending each year at \$100 million. The program has since been renewed and expanded twice to increase its competitiveness with some success, especially with respect to television, but not enough to best more lucrative programs elsewhere.

As a matter of political economy, the differences between competing schemes are less important than their steady normalization and overall impact since the late 2000s. In the US, only five states offered a production incentive in 2002, but that number had increased to forty-four before the end of the decade.¹⁰ (It now sits at thirty-three.) By 2012, a study by the *New York Times* estimated that Hollywood was receiving \$1.5 billion in state-based tax credits each year.¹¹ In 2017, an academic study valued the film industry's nationwide savings at \$1.7 billion, with nearly 80 percent coming from just five states: New York, Louisiana, Georgia, Connecticut, and Massachusetts.¹² Both studies excluded international territories. Nevertheless, such figures represent significant stakes for state or federal budgets, and accordingly attract intense scrutiny and little consensus with respect to their economic and cultural impact. For some

scholars, the results are highly dependent upon perfecting the right mix of public-private partnerships in the context of a proactive and responsive orientation to global development more broadly.¹³ Yet for every success story, failures to realize tangible benefits in places like Michigan and Louisiana, especially after the incentives are removed or decreased, provide plenty of evidence for critics to question whether such programs ever generate enough economic activity to cover their costs or if they simply constitute financial handouts to Hollywood. As Vicki Mayer and Tanya Goldman argue, “the system of tax credits is like every other bloated financial system in the U.S., moving capital between elites while workers live with exaggerated job insecurity, declining market value, and uncertain futures that make up the rest of the workforce.”¹⁴

Fortunes of individual locations clearly ebb and flow and have done so now for more than two decades. The details of existing schemes are subject to change each time lawmakers review budgets or reassess economic priorities. Sometimes proponents lose reelection or acquiesce to competing lobby interests. Sometimes incentives are increased to better compete with neighboring jurisdictions or abandoned altogether when the anticipated benefits fail to materialize. Some places, like Australia and Canada, offer combinable or “stackable” programs at the city, state or provincial, and federal levels. Further, bespoke deals between public authorities, private entities, and productions are common but rarely made available for public scrutiny. Indeed, accusations of corruption can plague schemes.¹⁵ Such challenges have given rise to third-party service providers that leverage the confusion to underscore their value proposition. Accounting firms sell studios on the premise that “production incentive legislation changes rapidly, and no two incentives programs

are alike. How can you possibly keep up? The fact is you don't have to because we do."¹⁶ Such firms consult with productions to ensure they are aware of the latest changes, understand all the fine print, and file the appropriate paperwork to "maximize savings," lest a missed deadline or obscure detail jeopardize eligibility. Meanwhile, facilities manager Pinewood Group has expanded its studio holdings beyond London to include spaces in Wales, Toronto, the Dominican Republic, and most recently Atlanta, the largest studio in the South. Such service providers—along with the very workers at the heart of this book—ensure that the fates of individual locations do little to upset the fully institutionalized mobility of film and television production.

Accordingly, *Mobile Hollywood* doesn't question the efficacy of particular production incentives and does not focus on the complicated economic-cultural dynamics that emerge in a single location. It accepts that the competitive dynamics of the contemporary production landscape are firmly established but rejects the impulse to assess who will win or lose in the race for Hollywood's affection—such a perspective risks confusing individual trees for the forest. As its name implies, *Mobile Hollywood* is interested in how mobility actually functions as a historically specific means of organizing production across an expanded geographic terrain, a distinct evolution of capital-labor relations that is more complex and contradictory than what the winner-take-all mentality of market competition suggests. In other words, *Mobile Hollywood* wants to tell a different narrative of capital operations that does not equate value with successfully besting one's rivals for Hollywood's symbolic and material capital.

Rather than conceive of Mobile Hollywood as a process that solely survives on competition and domination, this book renders visible the persistent friction that characterizes a more

mobile mode of production. This is not a story about capital's ability to annihilate global difference but about an always provisional arrangement of capital, territories, and resources into a nimbler and more tentative encounter. From angry residents and uncooperative politicians to translation issues and inadequate equipment, problems should be expected in an enterprise of this scale. Such risks make contingency planning and collaboration among disparate stakeholders essential to value creation, because the impression of seamlessness—how many of the media workers in this book evaluate and assess a job well done—is necessary to ensure repeat business. By acknowledging the inherent perils that either threaten or impede capital's presumably seamless mobility, this book troubles monolithic conceptions of Hollywood's power. Instead, it privileges the incongruent agendas, divergent interests, and temporary relationships that come together in making Hollywood mobile. It focuses on tracing the ways labor helps operationalize capital within and across an expanded production geography that is characterized by heterogeneity, unpredictability, and complication. In so doing, it emphasizes the actions of different and less visible figures of labor whose personal and professional livelihoods occupy a critical nexus within the spatial operations of a large-scale, commercial creative enterprise.

LIVING LABOR, OR THE PEOPLE
BEHIND THE NUMBERS

In August 2013, *Variety* ran a cover story on the “chronic, unresolved problem” of runaway production, focusing especially on the prominence given to the issue in the agenda of the newly elected mayor of Los Angeles, Eric Garcetti.¹⁷ According to the

trade publication, Garcetti was the first mayor to speak about the state's loss of film and television production in an inaugural address, following a bold campaign pledge to "[end] runaway film and television production for good."¹⁸ With the production landscape in a "state of emergency," he vowed to appoint the city's first film czar, a public official to advocate on behalf of the industry in, among other contexts, the highly politicized debates in Sacramento about increasing tax incentives for screen media production. For the most part, the story underscored the competitive logic that frames much of the runaway-production debate: other cities, states, and countries are luring Hollywood producers away from California with economic enticements, so the Golden State's legislature needs to ramp up the competitiveness of its own incentive program. Such maneuvers are framed in the article and elsewhere as necessary concessions to offset the rising costs of production and reverse job losses in one of the state's chief industries. Advocates, including Garcetti, also championed the economic impact screen media production facilitates across other sectors, especially service industries like catering and dry cleaning.

In a productive shift away from the more abstract discussions of multiplier effects and political discourse, however, the article included a sidebar featuring profiles of entertainment professionals, from a musician and set painter to a television director and line producer, each discussing how runaway production had altered the nature of his or her personal and professional life. These laborers shared that they were working less and traveling more. For some, this meant drawing unemployment or transitioning into new careers. Instead of buying a house in middle age, they were living with roommates. Others were spending long stretches away from family and friends while on location

in Nashville or New York. They were struggling in emerging production hubs like Atlanta to find the resources, both human and material, they needed to do their jobs in ways that they were accustomed to doing them. “Working in Atlanta is a logistical nightmare,” Millicent Shelton, who directs television, reported. “You have to wait for the wardrobe to come from Los Angeles; they don’t have cranes you need. It’s a real pain in the ass. The [under-trained] crews can be really infuriating.”¹⁹

Collectively, the half dozen profiles highlight the increasingly bleak reality screen media workers share as locations continue to battle for preferred status among Hollywood producers. They face emotional strain, personal sacrifices, creative compromise, and stunted professional mobility. Most important, the sidebar provides a compelling reminder of the quite tangible human toll, which is often obscured in the studios’ financial calculations, of outsourcing production work. At its best, the cover story offers an important corrective to the macro-level analyses that drive much of the runaway-production discourse, even while the Garcetti profile itself never strays far from those very talking points. Yet its attendant sidebar notwithstanding, the feature does little to shift the accepted terms of debate from economic logics of labor markets, production spend, and public subsidy and remains emblematic of some of the more troubling tropes therein: namely, an assumed autonomy in runaway production’s global spread, powered solely by financial imperatives and tax rebates, and an accepted parochialism in its Southern California bias. Runaway production, as the contemporary debate frames it, is about leaving, a unidirectional process that pits the point of origin against points of destination in a simplistic spatial framework. It further pits individual laborers against each other, as if the true culprits behind lost employment

opportunities in Hollywood are fellow screen media workers in Atlanta or Belfast rather than the cost-containment strategies of transnational media conglomerates.²⁰

Like the logics of competition, the runaway-production discourse operates at a level of abstraction when it comes to the experience of media workers. They simply serve as objects for value *capture* when their wages and working conditions are appropriated by Hollywood or offered up by governments looking to boost local economies. The only value *creation* they provide is symbolic in nature. They are either the happy faces of booming production hubs or the downtrodden victims of lost employment. In terms of scholarship, such obfuscation is compounded by the sparse (but growing) amount of research devoted to the experiences of below-the-line workers, especially when compared to the scholarly and popular interest in their above-the-line colleagues: writers, directors, producers, and of course, actors (who even have their own academic subfield in “celebrity studies”). Much of our investigations into creative labor, academic or otherwise, tend to privilege the distinctive, expressive, and symbolic dimensions of cultural production—however circumscribed by industry constraints and pressures—rather than the craft-like or technical work also required to transform creative ideas into cultural commodities. Indeed, the “creative” and the “symbol making” activities of film and television workers are commonly singled out as *the* element that distinguishes these industrial processes from other sectors. While this distinction is certainly true with respect to the production of screen commodities, the division of labor is such that not all workers contribute the same inputs into that creative process, and the work they perform does not receive the same recognition or perceived value within those hierarchies. Such attention is both

cause and effect, contributing to the normalization of the material and symbolic distinctions among different classes of workers as much as it draws from some of the same assumptions about “artistic” labor’s greater creative agency and authorial status.²¹

Still, the allure of Hollywood glamour and the lure of Hollywood capital continues to enrapture many of us, from aspiring students who long for their shot in the director’s chair to local governments that conjure red-carpet dreams of flashy jobs and thriving economies. And yet for those of us who have ever encountered a film or television production in a public space, the experience rarely conforms to the excitement and dynamism we most associate with creativity. Instead, it’s rather boring. You’ll find large trucks, wardrobe trailers, massive cables, signs and barriers, idle equipment, and just a few visible but unremarkable people standing around, most likely security or production assistants tasked with protecting the “true” ritual site from curious onlookers. Craft and creativity presumably flourish just beyond any public vantage point (figs. 1 and 2). It’s a bit of a paradox: mobile production has made chance encounters with Hollywood more possible in a greater number of places, but in so doing it potentially ruptures some of the fundamental assumptions about the nature of that work. But what happens if we stop to ask questions about the trucks, trailers, cables, and signs? How did they get there? Who is responsible for them? What sort of labor makes them possible, and how does that generate value for Mobile Hollywood? I start from the premise that these objects are trace elements of the more unsung, wearying, and less visible work screen media laborers perform—work, I argue, that the respatialization of production has intensified and extended, begetting newer, revised, or expanded work routines and rituals that deserve scrutiny in our attempts to wrangle with the operations of Mobile Hollywood.



Figure 1. Surprise encounters. Location for *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017). Brisbane. Photo by author.

Accordingly, this book, in part, joins an emergent effort to rebalance attention and reconfigure our understanding of craft or technical work's distinctive conditions in our broader accounts of film and television labor.²² At the same time, it also aims to push our inquiries beyond the accepted parameters of



Figure 2. Surprise encounters. Location for *The Rookies* (2019). Budapest. Photo by author.

just creativity or craftwork as the markers of work in Hollywood not by simply acknowledging that other labor inputs exist within the division of labor but by taking those labor processes as serious objects of study. Indeed, part of my aim with this book is to turn attention to some of the more invisible conditions of mobile production to illustrate how the accumulation of capital depends upon such practices to calibrate the spaces through which Mobile Hollywood moves. Most of these elements are neither within the purview of management oversight nor do they align with a rational (or even sustainable) division of labor. Instead, they constitute a series of work-related pleasures and obligations that screen media laborers accept as part of the job, a form of self-discipline and control that not only straddles the messy boundaries of capital relations but also converts imperfections in the mode of production into something more amenable to capital accumulation.

In short, the work that makes Hollywood mobile exceeds the explanatory purchase of craftwork and creativity. It is bureaucratic, logistical, relational, and service-oriented in nature, and absolutely critical, more so than ever before, in shaping a more mobile and responsive mode of production. Specifically, these work functions coalesce around what I argue are acts of “just-in-time” or “immediately responsive” (spatial) coordination. As the following chapters illustrate, these acts manifest in assorted ways. In the most literal sense, someone has to organize the movement of people, equipment, and things through space and into/out of the spatial and temporal confines of a production. Like most project-based endeavors, this coordination aims for efficiency, rationality, and cost-effectiveness. Such activities, in the context of mobile production, entail working with and alongside an ever-expanding number of individuals and organizations that are not normally considered sources of productive value: politicians, local residents and private businesses, transportation authorities, environmental agencies, police and security firms, and waste removers, among others. This list is iterative and always changing according to the needs of a given production. As the accounts in this book attest, hospitals, power plants, mines, historic sites, inner-city street corners, and environmentally sensitive locations, to name but a few, all require workers to accommodate competing and contradictory processes and protocols into the rhythm of film and television production.

Still, no amount of advanced planning or strategic cooperation can fully discipline the risks of internal or external disruption. While the reliance on project-management tools help rationalize the geography of production, these technologies are imperfect instruments when confronted by the unwieldiness of the people and places that constitute the variable socio-spatial

relations of mobile production. Thus, coordination also involves individual acts of suppression, working to contain the disruption, disjuncture, and sheer messiness of Mobile Hollywood by constantly putting out fires or squashing, often temporarily and tentatively, potential impediments to capital expansion. Notably, these acts of suppression occur across workers' professional *and* personal lives, a means of coordination that assembles (and reassembles) new configurations of work routines and practices, both pleasurable and precarious, into the spatial fabric of film and television production. Many of the workers employed on mobile productions are considered local hires, men and women who live and work in the distant hubs where production takes place. But the shifting spatial dynamics of production also have respatialized labor itself, creating a growing class of itinerant workers who move from location to location as a professional necessity.

For many workers who share their stories in this book, the allure of a jet-set career is strong and adds to the pleasures they continue to find in their craft. Mobile production has further resignified some forms of production work around notions of entrepreneurialism and project management that a certain class of workers has found professionally productive and rewarding. It also has generated opportunities in places where they previously did not exist. At the same time, hopscotching from one location to the next is not without its challenges. Production managers, line producers, location experts, and more generally, heads of technical departments must constantly negotiate different cultural understandings of film and television workflows, working hours, and divisions of labor; contend with shifting or nonexistent union regulations; and manage variations in job titles, roles, wages, and assumed training. Power dynamics between local hires and "more mobile" London- or Los Angeles-based crew

members, who occupy senior managing roles, shape everything from on-set social relations to professional mobility.

As such, mobility is not an equitable dynamic. For many workers (and as feminist scholars remind us about workers under capitalism more generally), the reproduction of their labor power requires them to satisfy certain preconditions for employment, a capacity for work that appears “natural” but is nevertheless necessary to accommodate the job. It tends to favor young, single, white men (often without children) who face less cultural pressure to perform domestic, place-bound duties associated with home and family than their female counterparts. While it was never explicitly acknowledged in my conversations with industry workers (who were predominately white), it’s also not hard to fathom how one’s racial or ethnic identity may exacerbate existing injustices in the context of international travel and border crossing. For a white man, relocating from Los Angeles to Prague or from London to Vancouver likely entails a different set of experiences than it does for his black or brown colleagues.²³

Mobile production is, at best, a mixed bag. The expanded geography of production has intensified demands for some workers and engendered entirely new job categories and professional opportunities for others, often in places that would not have access to them otherwise. Yet it exacerbates the existing system’s latent and not-so-latent inequalities as enduring sources of value for capital expansion. This book, then, provides a grounded investigation into the experiences, complexities, and evolving work functions that characterize a particular spatial expertise, acts of coordination that help stitch together a global assemblage of places, people, and resources into Mobile Hollywood. In so doing, it challenges received wisdom about

the nature of work in the entertainment industries and opens up for analysis some of the more unsung, wearying, and invisible conditions of creative labor that are essential to a mobile mode of production.

TYING IT TOGETHER: LOCATIONS, LABOR, CAPITAL

Locations have always factored into Hollywood narrative productions. From early actualities and scenic travelogues to post-war productions in Italy, France, and the United Kingdom, some form of location-based shooting has been common practice in Hollywood. While reasons to shoot on location might change over time, the practice has proffered a rich and illuminating history of debate. Largely focused on representational concerns, this literature considers the centrality of space and place to certain genre aesthetics, urban imaginaries, and issues of sociocultural authenticity.²⁴ Yet as a distinct object of study, the concept of mobility as part of the mode of production has received relatively scant attention from media industry scholars. As a consequence, a mobile mode of production risks being misunderstood as a fairly obvious and unremarkable practice of “shooting on location,” an isolated decision to simply shift the creative process from the bounded confines of a studio’s soundstage to a location’s natural exteriors.

Recent work by media industry historians have started to grapple with the centrality of locations at different points in time to Hollywood’s filmmaking activities.²⁵ These interventions effectively articulate location shooting as a historically contingent decision with implications for both creative practice and the actual locations where these productions took place. Most critically, this research productively complicates location

shooting as the negotiated outcome among economic, aesthetic, technological, and logistical variables. Still, as a historical practice, location shooting is understood in these assessments as a temporary deviation from normal practice rather than a product of capital relations. Studio shooting was the constant (and commonly preferred) alternative against which decision makers evaluated the risks of traveling beyond the soundstage: “Shooting on location always connotes a fundamental choice to accept the *unpredictability of actual places* over the hermetic environment of studio production facilities.”²⁶ Given the physical studio provided a central site to manage labor and related production processes, it was an incredibly effective tool to contain costs and improve the efficiency of large-scale film and television production before advances in technology, communications, and travel made it easier to do so from a distance.

This book is not about location shooting or the one-off decision to film outside a studio’s production facilities. Rather, its primary objective is to interrogate the normalization of mobility as a constitutive component to the mode of production and examine the implications for a particular community of screen media workers who operate at the intersection of capital interests and geography. In this context, shooting on location, going on location, and location shooting are somewhat anachronistic descriptors that rely on binaries between studio/location and interior/exterior, and are at odds with the fundamentally mobile and dispersed nature of contemporary large-scale film and television production. More critically, such binaries elide the global synchronization along an expansive international supply chain of people, places, and resources that help sustain mobility as a much more integrated, naturalized, and commonsense practice within the industry’s day-to-day operations. So much so, mobility is a powerful structuring force that forms the organizational

backbone to other creative, economic, and industrial dynamics across a range of scales, both large and small, that helps suture disparate links and relations around the world.

In this vein, a mobile mode of production and the socio-spatial relations that constitute it exemplify some of the core logics of “supply chain capitalism,” a concept first developed by the anthropologist Anna Tsing to describe the ways global processes link up across diverse economic, geographic, and cultural formations. She writes that supply chains not only bring commodities to market but also reconfigure workforces into patchy, awkward, and unstable relationships within and across geography.²⁷ Other social and political theorists, including Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, have extrapolated from Tsing’s ideas to more explicitly link questions of capital operations to a concern with logistical labor and the variable social and spatial formations of mobile processes. In one of their earlier writings, Mezzadra and Neilson argue, “Logistical coordination is central to the instances of bordering, connecting, and stretching of heterogeneous spaces [Logistical] operations calibrate and coordinate movements across different populations and borders, taking into account the varying conditions that shape their formation. The aim is not to eliminate differences but to work across them, to build passages and connections in an ever more fragmented world.”²⁸ The ability to work across “varying conditions” shapes mobile production’s elastic geography, enabling a more agile spatial enterprise that exceeds the specific dynamics of any individual location that encounters it.

For Tsing, supply chain capitalism extends key ideas developed elsewhere in her writing about the diversity, disjuncture, and inherent “friction” that make capital encounters possible, often in ways that are more productive than capital’s homogenizing tendencies; indeed, she concludes, “diversity forms a part

of the *structure* of capitalism rather than an inessential appendage. . . . [It] conditions the responses of both capital and labor to the problems of cutting labor costs and disciplining the workforce.”²⁹ On the one hand, these conditions speak to the persistence of subcontracting and outsourcing not just in the entertainment industries but world capitalism more broadly. On the other hand, these conditions point to a more complex process in which lead firms make strategic decisions about what to standardize and discipline within the chain (e.g., inventory tracking, audit procedures) and what responsibilities to abdicate entirely by delegating them further down the chain (e.g., labor practices, environmental protocols).³⁰ Mobile production adheres to these base logics of supply chain capitalism. As I argue in the following chapters, studios, producers, and others with capital interests are more concerned with the end result than the means of achieving it, a whatever-it-takes mentality that standardizes budget sheets and accounting procedures but delegates and disperses operational oversight of potential complications out of their purview (further and further down the chain). Acts of “just-in-time” and “immediately responsive” coordination are the products of the contingency and friction within capital relations and help tie together the production geography of Mobile Hollywood.

AN INDUSTRY STUDY OF FILM AND TELEVISION LABOR

The arguments in this book are oriented around a set of intellectual priorities that are closely associated with critical media industry studies, an interdisciplinary subfield that coheres around an effort to provide more grounded and contextualized accounts of how the political economy of the media industries operates within and across individual practices and

organizational dynamics. A central concern for media industry scholars is the ways in which rote industrial conventions at a variety of scales—from the actions of individual workers to international or national market regulations—are the negotiated outcomes of messy cultural dynamics and broader systems of power.³¹ Media industry scholars recognize the structuring force of macro-level political and economic factors but reject deterministic claims in favor of perspectives that identify complexity, contradiction, and ambivalence as key to industrial operations. These priorities underscore my intention to reassess the operations of economic power from the grounded experiences of a particular group of workers. In so doing, I emphasize the division of labor, the specificities of particular job functions, the changes to those functions over time, and the impact these dynamics have had on the capital imperatives of the entertainment industry—concerns that repeatedly avoid tidy explanations and rationales.

I also draw upon insights from the sociology of work and production studies to enrich the ideas in the chapters that follow, especially their interest in theorizing media work through the prism of the everyday experiences of labor. Both traditions have provided harrowing accounts of the tensions and transformations taking place in creative and cultural workplaces, offering rich and grounded accounts of work experiences and meaning making among professional communities. These studies are an important addendum to the more abstracted accounts of labor in critical political economy and economic development research. Sociologists have been especially adept at theorizing the politics of cultural work, drawing on empirical studies across a range of creative industries to intervene in debates about race and gender, immaterial labor, pedagogy, and neoliberal policymaking, among others, to reveal the celebrated characteristics of creative

labor often betray a darker or more contradictory reality.³² Few, if any, of these accounts tend to the specificities of film and television labor, however, often approaching cultural work through a shared framework to align with the creative industry policy contexts within which the research takes place. Space and place are considered primarily as matters of urban development and workplace cultures: creative clusters and the techno-bohemian ethos that define the Silicon Valley office complex.³³

Production studies, meanwhile, especially the work of John T. Caldwell, has provided more granular accounts of technological change, time pressures, and sociocultural norms that shape the way film and television workers understand the nature of their work.³⁴ More broadly, this strand of scholarship has helped substantiate the value in media workers' own interpretative activities as they negotiate issues of power and culture that permeate their workplaces. Yet such analyses remain most attuned to the constitution and contestation of the values and identities that shape a shared work world or community of practice among particular groups of film and television laborers. Production studies largely, though not entirely, avoids broader engagements with global political economy in favor of workers' identity-making and everyday theorizing. Vicki Mayer's monograph *Below the Line: Producers and Production Studies in the New Television Economy*, however, is a productive exception that not only focuses on the identities, values, and practices of a diverse range of media workers around the world but also links those insights to shifts in the global television economy. While her analysis remains more attuned to issues of identity work and notions of creativity and professionalism, I share her investment in disrupting received industrial and academic hierarchies about

what jobs and work functions are valuable, both to the industry's global economy and as objects of study.

My point here is not to erect false distinctions or unproductive hierarchies between intellectual traditions. Indeed, such distinctions are murky to uphold and often rely on different critical inflections rather than fundamental oppositions. Instead, I rehearse these scholarly contributions in a more inclusive spirit to acknowledge the broader conversations that shape the arguments in this book.

Mobile Hollywood relies heavily on interviews with below-the-line workers to tease out details otherwise obscured in more macro-scale research. I draw most explicitly from interviews with nearly two dozen service producers, location experts, and teamsters, alongside a wider array of production executives, film commissioners, and other below-the-line workers for additional background. These interviews included both local hires and more mobile workers who have worked "for Hollywood" in a range of film and television production hubs: Atlanta (US), Belfast (Northern Ireland), Budapest (Hungary), Dublin (Ireland), Glasgow (Scotland), the Gold Coast (Australia), London (England), Los Angeles (US), New Orleans (US), and Prague (Czech Republic). A secondary list of locales expands the geography of production to include Iceland, Romania, South Africa, Korea, Slovakia, and Thailand, among others. By focusing on the socio-spatial relations of production across a number of hubs rather than a single location, *Mobile Hollywood* maps the ongoing integration and convergence of what we might otherwise assume are distinct territories and work experiences, illustrating how a global supply chain of logistical labor enables a more agile and responsive mobile production apparatus.

I also rely to some extent on textual materials, such as industry reports, trade press coverage, union newsletters, and promotional texts, as well as my own observations at industry trade shows and location visits, as a way to triangulate information learned through my conversations with industry professionals. Still, my intention—in this project and others—is to listen most closely to the voices of labor, allowing workers the space to reflect critically on how their roles and responsibilities have changed over the past two decades and discuss openly the perceived challenges they face as basic matters of their workaday lives.³⁵ Given my interest in the granular detail of what these workers do and why it matters to Hollywood’s mobile operations, a core contribution to media industry studies underscores just how much we can still learn from taking seriously the humdrum tasks and routine drudgery of media labor in all its forms. Accordingly, *Mobile Hollywood* engenders a more multivalent and translocal perspective that weaves the macro-level complexities of flexible capitalism into the quotidian, even mundane, realities of how a vast global network of screen media labor actually works to mobilize production.

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

This chapter has been concerned with making explicit the core assumptions that shape the arguments in the rest of the book. The following chapters elaborate upon and extend these themes through grounded case studies of the work service producers, location experts, and teamsters do in the context of Mobile Hollywood. The book concludes with a consideration of mobile production’s adaptiveness to the travel restrictions and heightened safety protocols following the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic in early 2020.

Chapter 2, “Making Hollywood Mobile: Elastic Production Geographies and Irrational Labor,” establishes some of the core features of supply chain capitalism as they apply to the spatial operations of contemporary film and television production. In particular, it elaborates upon what this framework renders visible with respect to both geography and labor, focusing on the operational logics that help transform the mode of production into something more iterative and responsive. Accordingly, its primary objective is to reframe how media industry scholars theorize capital operations in Mobile Hollywood. Moving beyond the conceptual, the chapter then concludes with an assessment of how these capital abstractions actually play out in the context of labor, industry, and workaday realities.

Each of the next three chapters continues in this vein with a detailed examination of three different groups of workers whose experiences have been profoundly affected by a mobile mode of production. Chapter 3, “Here to Help: Service Producers and the Labor of Film Friendliness,” examines the labor that helps materialize a location’s economic and policy orientation to Mobile Hollywood. Film friendliness (also sometimes called a film services framework) is commonly associated with the mechanisms that make production hubs amendable to the demands of large-scale film and television production, not only by offering a wealth of economic enticements but also by uniting a range of public and private services under an agenda explicitly driven by the needs of Hollywood. Against this backdrop, this chapter charts the rise of service producers in places like Prague and Budapest, where mobile production has created an opportunity for (predominately) British and American expatriates to translate their creative aspirations and national identities into successful small business ventures that cater to Hollywood clientele. More broadly, it argues service producers perform

critical but largely invisible functions in film-friendly contexts around the world to ensure local complexities never interfere with foreign capital interests, a form of middle management that helps rationalize the production process and mediate the uneven socio-spatial connections that keep Hollywood mobile.

Chapter 4, “Crew Adjacent: Location Experts, Spatial Creativity, and Logistical Quagmires,” shifts the focus from the managerial work of service producers to the craft of location managers and scouts. It argues mobile production has diminished some of the professional authority and creative autonomy of location experts but increased the value of their logistical expertise, a form of work that takes place adjacent to the temporal demands and spatial boundaries that shape the daily regimes of their below-the-line colleagues. It further troubles the rhetoric around “local” labor by documenting the inherently mobile nature of location work that makes constant travel from one production hub to the next a defining feature (and central challenge) of the job.

Chapter 5, “Driving Hollywood Outside Hollywood: Transportation Teamsters, Industrial Relations, and Distant Locations,” provides the first sustained interrogation of how a class of workers “always already” marginalized from the discourses of craft and creativity are adjusting to realities of mobile work. It is perhaps no surprise this group has been the most politically vocal for a California incentive scheme, putting them in unlikely alliances with other labor unions and the studios. In so doing, this chapter highlights one union’s response to the spatial dynamics of mobile production, arguing the strategies and tactics of organized labor have had a key part to play in both the creation of an expanded production geography and the regulatory logics that govern the activities of individual

laborers across the spatial terrain of Mobile Hollywood. It further demonstrates that such scale-making endeavors often result from the collaboration and cooperation of misaligned stakeholders (in this case, management, government, and labor, among others) that help establish a common outcome, even while achieving quite divergent and contradictory claims in realizing those projects.

In the final chapter, “Risk Management for Mobile Hollywood,” I end with some reflections on one possible future for Mobile Hollywood. Drawing on a series of crises in the industry—the complete shutdown and return to work following the novel coronavirus pandemic in early 2020, the narrowly averted strike by the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) in 2021, and the on-set shooting death of cinematographer Halyna Hutchins that same year—I acknowledge the industry’s nascent engagement with discourses around risk and risk mitigation but query whether the investments are engendering a culture of compliance over safety. For the industry, its advocates, and scholars invested in the global conditions of screen media labor, I argue a critical turn to workplace health and safety regulation and the mental and physical well-being of individual workers is a fertile ground of inquiry as we continue to grapple with the impacts (both visible and less so) of a more mobile mode of production.