

2015

Work and Popular Music: The Politics of Cultural Labor and Creative Property

Matt Stahl

University of Western Ontario, mstahl@uwo.ca

Follow this and additional works at: <http://pubs.lib.umn.edu/tmq>

Recommended Citation

Stahl, Matt. "Work and Popular Music: The Politics of Cultural Labor and Creative Property." *Teaching Media Quarterly* 3, no. 1 (2015). <http://pubs.lib.umn.edu/tmq/vol3/iss1/3>

Teaching Media Quarterly is published by the University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing.

Work and Popular Music: The Politics of Cultural Labor and Creative Property

Overview and Rationale

Many, if not most, North American students have worked or are working, if not for a living then to supplement funds from families, financial aid, or student loans. The following unit asks students to develop their critical understandings of work as a basic institution of liberal market society through an integrated set of critical course readings, a feature-length documentary film about behind-the-scenes musicians in the recording industry, and a short, highly focused writing assignment.

Often in the course of their waged work, students (like most other workers in our society) submit to relations of exploitation, domination, and expropriation. That is, (1) they are being turned to account by others who profit from their labor, (2) they are being commanded and expected to obey without the right to participate in workplace decision-making, and (3) they have no rights to a share in the value they create while on the job, only to a wage. In Kathi Weeks' words, "the work site is where we often experience the most immediate, unambiguous, and tangible relations of power that most of us will encounter on a daily basis" (2011: 2). And as Carole Pateman argues, "wage slavery is not a consequence of exploitation—exploitation is a consequence of the fact that the sale of labor power entails the worker's subordination" (1988: 149). Thanks to our political socialization, these do not appear as self-evident or intuitive facts, and the politics of work typically appear to students as natural and non-controversial; students are often startled and excited by the analyses explored in this unit.

A primary premise of this unit is that highly mediated creative work in the cultural industries, such as that of professional musicians, constitutes a limit case of work in general, a case that highlights work's otherwise largely normalized non-democratic politics. Whereas few people (including professional musicians) have substantive rights as workers, much of the representation and self-representation of popular music performers in contemporary media suggests that that norm is not fair, and that it falls short of our society's lofty values of individual liberty and responsibility. Popular music performance takes place in the same political-economic conditions that shape work in our society, and evinces the same general forces and tensions that suffuse routine work, but it does so in ways that put these forces and tensions into high relief, rendering them controversial and question-provoking. This unit focuses on how creative work in the cultural industries is both distinct from and alike to work in general, and invites and supports students in both relating their own work experiences to those portrayed in the 2002 film *Standing in the Shadows of Motown*, and developing empathy toward working people in the cultural industries as well as in other sectors.

Most students will continue to work for others for most of their lives; many will come to occupy positions in which they are in charge of other workers. Using these readings and this film to concentrate students' minds on foundational dynamics and contradictions of work in capitalism will help them be more attentive to the politics of their workplaces and sectors.

General timeline

The class is most appropriate for undergraduates in their third or fourth year of study. The course in which this unit is offered meets once a week for three hours. This class size has ranged from 16 to 35 and I have found lively discussion in these meetings, whatever the enrolment. The unit described below occurs early in the semester, helping to set the stage for later readings and coursework. Each week's reading totals around fifty pages.

Lesson Plan and Assignment Instructions

Class meetings

Format for focused classroom discussion:

- (1) Survey of students about the readings (around 5-10 minutes). What stood out from their reading? What concepts/themes were particularly challenging or difficult? Were any parts especially illuminating with respect to students' own experiences?
- (2) Mini-lecture or guided discussion (around 30-40 minutes) about salient concepts and themes from readings. The aim here is to sensitize students to issues that will be dramatized or otherwise touched on in the film to come, so that they will be primed for discussion afterward. Each week's reading includes one full-length (or nearly full-length) chapter from an academic monograph, and two shorter pieces that are complementary in conceptual terms. These mini-lectures or guided discussions usually focus primarily on these longer readings, with occasional sidebars bringing the complementary readings into relief.
- (3) Classroom viewing of portion of film (usually 50-60 minutes).
- (4) Longer, more freewheeling discussion of ways in which film implicitly or explicitly presents issues focused on in readings (40-50 minutes).
- (5) Discuss assignment (5 minutes or so):
 - a) In the first meeting of the two-meeting unit, hand out assignment sheet, take questions about assignment, and discuss useful approaches.
 - b) In the second meeting, remind students of the requirements of the assignment, invite them to propose ideas for how to approach the assignment.

Meeting 1: Labor and Cultural Labor

Read:

Pateman, "Wives, Slaves, and Wage Slaves" (from *The Sexual Contract*, 1988), pp. 144-153.

Ryan, "The Contradictions of the Art-Capital Relation" (from *Making Capital from Culture*, 1992), pp. 33-50.

Stahl, "Privilege and Distinction in Production Worlds" (from *Production Studies*, 2009), pp. 54-66.

View:

Standing in the Shadows of Motown (2002), first half.

Standing in the Shadows of Motown is a documentary that explores the occupational experiences of the surviving Funk Brothers, a largely unheralded group of a dozen or so performers who comprised Motown Records' house band from approximately 1959 to 1971. Often working with only the barest suggestion of musical arrangements, sometimes only with melodies and approximate rhythms and harmonies, these musicians created the accompaniment to tunes sung by Marvin Gaye, Smokey Robinson, Martha Reeves and scores of other Motown headliners. A principal theme of the film is this group's deep friendship and trust, developed in the course of

their long hours of on-the-spot creative collaboration. Central turning points in the film include the relatively early deaths of two prominent members who were “desperately needing recognition,” and the company’s move from Detroit to Los Angeles, which left most of the group out in the cold.

These first readings set the stage for the unit by outlining major concepts to frame the viewing and discussion of the film. Pateman emphasizes the ways that employment contracts fundamentally disempower employees. Ryan distinguishes creative work in the cultural industries from routine work. My own piece bridges the two, outlining a broad continuum of cultural industry working conditions, from authorial proprietorship to abject precarity. The first half of *Standing in the Shadows of Motown* offers a great deal of grist for discussion of these framing concepts.

Carole Pateman’s *The Sexual Contract* offers a feminist critique of the idea of the social contract as well as contract as a modern sociopolitical instrument. In the section of the chapter assigned for this meeting, Pateman critiques employment and the employment contract by showing how the boundary between employment and slavery is “eminently permeable.” The primary insight to emphasize for students in this section is the fact that the employment contract is not a simple contract for the exchange of labor for a wage, equivalent to the exchange of a dollar for a candy bar. The point that Pateman makes with disarming clarity here is that, far from formalizing a simple exchange of work and wages between worker and boss, the employment contract creates a situation of subordination. The employment contract “in which the worker allegedly sells his labor power is a contract in which, since he cannot be separated from his capacities, he sells command over the use of his body and himself” (151). Seen from this perspective, employment appears not only non-democratic, but also illiberal, in that the liberty that “free labor” is held to provide amounts to the freedom to subject yourself to the command of another. I have found that, in comprehending Pateman’s argument, students readily apply it to their own working situations and find themselves in possession of a powerful analytical tool.

Ryan’s *Making Capital from Culture* makes a very compelling argument for the specificity of creative labor in the cultural industries, for seeing these kinds of work as distinct from routine forms of work. In the selection for this meeting, Ryan focuses on the dependence of cultural industry employers on their creative employees’ abilities to generate new material. This dependence requires granting these employees a great deal of autonomy relative to employees in other industries. Ryan offers a theoretical Marxist approach, which puts the issue in terms of deskilling and employee replaceability. Because of the premium placed on their unique, recognizable abilities, these workers, he argues, are not easily replaced and thus have comparatively greater freedom. Their monopolies over their particular skills, and the often valuable names associated with those skills, have enabled novelists, recording artists, film directors, and so on—as well as lower-profile creative workers in many sectors—to resist the forms of deskilling that have devastated other industries in the past century. He also puts the issue in terms of bargaining power; students are readily able to see the connections between replaceability, reputational monopolies, and bargaining power.

In my own “Privilege and Distinction in Production Worlds,” I emphasize that the specificity Ryan outlines is a matter of degree rather than kind, and that creative work takes place on a

hierarchical spectrum the arrangement of which is the result of historical struggles. The piece offers a schematic view of cultural industry working conditions in which the primary distinctions involve the workings of copyright and collective bargaining. Copyright law, in this view, creates authors and endows authors with certain rights. Central to copyright's role in the cultural industries is its doctrine of "work for hire" which constitutes television and film studios, magazine publishers, and record companies as corporate authors, able, through the employment relationship, to dispossess creative employees of authorial rights and to concentrate ownership in the corporation. Collective bargaining enables creative employees—by definition without authorial rights—to enjoy other forms of extra-salary compensation (such as residuals and health and pension benefits) as well as meaningful degrees of job protection. And of course there are creative employees who are neither authors nor protected by collectively bargained rights. This brief chapter introduces students to some of the structural factors that shape creative workers' experiences of autonomy and proprietorship.

Meeting 2: Employment, Contract and (Intellectual) Property

Read:

Marx, "Estranged Labor" (from *The Marx- Engels Reader*, 1978 [1844]), pp. 70-81.

Blauner, "Alienation and Modern Industry" (from *Alienation and Freedom*, 1964), pp. 15-34.

Burawoy, "Toward a Theory of the Capitalist Labor Process" (from *Manufacturing Consent*, 1979), pp. 20-30.

View:

Standing in the Shadows of Motown, second half.

Paper due the following week.

This second set of readings acquaints students with Marx's extraordinarily pithy and provocative analysis of alienation, and provides them with two very useful analytical frameworks for evaluating the politics of cultural production in particular workplaces. Blauner's and Burawoy's selections offer what amount to scales for the comparative analysis of alienation and coercion along several different measures. The Funk Brothers—the Motown house band examined in *Standing in the Shadows of Motown*—then appears as a rich case for students to dissect using these tools. While decisively alienated on some of Blauner's measures, they are exceptionally un-alienated on others; while subject to forms of coercion by some of Burawoy's measures, they were able to maintain significant degrees of autonomy by others.

Marx's pages on estranged labor outline the ways in which the capitalist political economy alienates workers—from each other, from their labor processes, from the products of their labor, and from what he calls their "species being." Blauner's early 1960s comparative research on workers' experiences in four different industrial settings—craft (printers), machine-tending (textiles), assembly-line (automotive) and "continuous process" (oil and chemicals)—finds that alienation is "unevenly distributed" among mid-twentieth century workers. Blauner explains and updates Marx's four categories of alienation, showing in detail how workers who were the exact Fordist contemporaries of the Funk Brothers (union members all) experienced employer power and requirements, as well as the technologically-shaped aspects of their work. The Funk Brothers tell of problems of speed-up, for example, and of their solidarity and varying ability to influence the pace and character of their work through subtle collective action.

Yet *Standing in the Shadows of Motown* shows how these workers—highly valued by their employer, even highly paid by standards of their time—experienced alienation in pointed terms. Marx wrote that “the object which labor produces—labor’s product—confronts it as something alien; as a *power independent* of the producer” (1978 [1844]: 71, original emphasis). The film tells of one moment when the guitarist who created and contributed the memorable opening guitar part of the Temptations’ “My Girl” experienced shame and embarrassment when he could not bring himself, thirty years later, to tell a stranger that he composed and performed that part. “This old man? He would never believe me.” Yet these musicians’ experiences of what Blauner calls “industrial community”—their love and respect for one another as persons and as musicians—is palpable, and suggests that Blauner’s comparative approach is quite useful. Alienation is an ongoing phenomenon experienced by different people in different forms and measures.

The brief selection from Burawoy’s *Manufacturing Consent* argues that “the defining essence of the capitalist labor process is the simultaneous obscuring and securing of surplus value” (30). “Obscuring” here refers to the employer’s need to gain workers’ consent to the specific organization of the workplace and its routines; “securing” here refers to types of force that underwrite and back up those arrangements. This short selection offers an extremely useful theoretical complement to Blauner’s schematic analysis of alienation. Burawoy explains the significance of surplus by invoking “classical feudalism”—a form “based on labor services”—as a comparative/conceptual tool. He outlines features of this political-economic structure that distinguish it from capitalism in a way that directly illuminates the obscurity of surplus in capitalism. In this form of feudalism, the serf spends a certain amount of the week working on the lord’s land (as a form of rent) and may spend the rest of the time working on his rented plot. That is, the work it takes to reproduce himself and his family is utterly distinguishable from that which he delivers to benefit his landlord: the surplus is an explicitly lived reality. By contrast, under capitalism, the surplus is hidden: the “wage appears as compensation for the entire period” spent at work, when, “[i]n reality, [workers] are paid only the equivalent, in monetary terms, of the value they produce in part of the working day, say five out of eight hours” (23). Creative cultural workers like the Funk Brothers pose a striking exception: they are able to hear the songs to which they contributed on the radio, see them climb the Billboard charts, and know that their work is paying directly for their boss’ new Cadillac. The surplus, in other words, is mass mediated.

Assignment

Drawing on Blauner’s analyses of Marx’s theory of alienation, explain the situation of the back-up musicians who worked in the Motown Records recording studio in the 1960s (the Funk Brothers) as framed and narrated in the film *Standing in the Shadows of Motown*. Be specific: cite at least one particular incident in the film to support your analysis.

Be sure to explain the categories of alienation discussed by Blauner clearly, and explain some of the ways in which the musicians at the hearts of these stories are more or less alienated in the Blauner’s terms. What are the specific conditions that you see operating in these different music-making contexts that determine the different degrees and kinds of alienation experienced by each of these (groups of) musicians?

Finally, engage briefly with either Pateman or Burawoy in your explanation. Reflect either on themes from Burawoy's discussion of the "obscuring and securing of surplus value" that are useful in explaining the Funk Brothers' situation, or on ways in which Pateman's analysis of employment helps explain their situation.

Write no fewer than two and no more than three pages, double-spaced, 12 point font, standard margins. The essays is due next week.

Teaching materials

There are two primary measures: quality of discussion and quality of written work.

1. Discussion

The important thing is that students are able to grapple with and animate concepts and categories from the readings through engagement and analysis of the film and, if and where possible, through discussion of their own experiences as working people.

- Discussion prompts:
 - As noted above, the first prompt typically seeks out students' raw experiences of aspects of the readings. What stuck out to you? What was most challenging? What sparked reflection about your own experience?
 - The next round of prompts asks students about their own experiences in relation to key concepts. For example, students can be asked about the types and degrees of autonomy they experience at work. In which parts of their jobs are they given license to direct themselves? In much of the service work undertaken by students these parts of their jobs often involve forms of self-expressive conviviality.
 - (Here follows a mini-lecture or more closely guided discussion of core concepts.)
 - Following classroom viewing of the first or second half of that week's film, students can be asked about parts of the film that struck them, or parts of the film that spoke implicitly or explicitly to the day's key concepts.
 - Finally, a brief discussion of approaches to the assignment may follow. How might they approach the assignment based on our day's discussion of readings and film?

2. Written work

The assignment is very specific in what it asks students to do analytically, but it allows students reasonable flexibility in their choice of example or emphasis with respect to the film and readings.

- Blauner's reframing of Marx' categories of alienation, and his careful discussion of how workers in different contexts have very different experiences of alienation, gives students a very useful tool with which they may dissect the complex experiences of the Funk Brothers. These musicians positively glow when they talk about how they worked together in the studio, their mutual love and respect for each other as musicians and colleagues, their remarkable creative achievements, and so on. But the film offers striking evidence of a politics of routine and attempted domination, alienation, and exploitation. One of the Funk Brothers reports being recruited by management to spy on his colleagues, who the management worried were moonlighting in other studios in violation of their exclusive contracts. This musician took the money he was offered but did no spying. In this assignment students should be able to analyze aspects of the Funk Brothers work, demonstrating facility

with Blauner's categories, and an understanding that, in Blauner's view, alienation is not an all-or-nothing problem.

- The questions about Burawoy's and Pateman's contributions to the explanation of the Funk Brothers' experiences are not complicated. Alienation is not an all-or-nothing proposition, neither is the labor process in capitalism; students viewing the film with Burawoy's categories in mind will see that, as Ryan argues, certain patterns in cultural labor impede coercion and complicate consent. The labor process of the Funk Brothers is not fully capitalist and this is part of what makes their story so poignant. Pateman shows how employment strips people of rights to which they are accustomed in public life, i.e., the right to participate in decision making. Her work shows how employers maintain the upper hand, even in situations where autonomy and consent flourish. Thus, even though the Funk Brothers had a great deal of interpretive freedom and camaraderie, they were powerless to do anything about their company's decision to relocate to Los Angeles.

Bibliography (Reading List for class)

Blauner, Robert. *Alienation and Freedom: The Factory Worker and His Industry*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964.

Burawoy, Michael. *Manufacturing Consent: Changes in the Labor Process under Monopoly Capitalism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979.

Marx, Karl. "Estranged Labor." In Tucker (ed.) *The Marx-Engels Reader* (2nd ed.). New York: Norton, 1978, 70-81.

Pateman, Carole. *The Sexual Contract*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988.

Ryan, Bill. *Making Capital from Culture: The Corporate Form of Capitalist Cultural Production*. New York: de Gruyter, 1992.

Stahl, Matt. "Privilege and Distinction in Production Worlds" in Mayer, Banks, and Caldwell (eds.), *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries*. New York and London: Routledge, 2009 (pp. 54-67).

Other sources

Weeks, Kathi. *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.

Standing in the Shadows of Motown. Directed by Paul Justman. Artisan Entertainment, 2002.

Biography

Matt Stahl

University of Western Ontario

Matt Stahl (Ph.D. in Communication, University of California, San Diego, 2006) is Associate Professor of Information and Media Studies at the University of Western Ontario, where he is also a member of the Digital Labor Research Group and participant in that group's SSHRC-supported research collaboration with Canadian entertainment and media guilds. Stahl's monograph, *Unfree Masters: Recording Artists and the Politics of Work* (Duke University Press, 2013) examines the representation and regulation of recording artists' labor, professionalization, employment contracts, and intellectual property.