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Story Work: Non-proprietary Autonomy and Contemporary Television Writing

Catherine Fisk[1] and Michael Szalay[1]

Abstract

Based on interviews with three dozen working writers in American television, this paper argues that TV writers assert their status as labor to guarantee their shared craft identity with novelists, dramatists, and authors of other conventional literary material. The tension between writers' desire for literary prestige on one hand, and their recognition that they create at the behest of company executives, on the other, emerges, alternately, in the imagined difference between writers and producers and, most basically, between autonomous creators and corporate hacks. Our novel observation is that writers' identification with labor, including their commitment to their union, the Writers Guild of America, plays a central role in resolving these tensions. Union membership solves a problem at the heart of contemporary TV writing insofar as it transforms a necessity into a virtue; opposing management as labor, the writer registers her opposition to creative input that might otherwise compromise her sense of artistic integrity. That opposition allows writers to imagine themselves at odds with the studios and networks that employ them, and at the same time to commit to artistic over and against corporate values.

Keywords

showrunner, TV writer, labor, authorship, WGA, literary prestige

Television writers are quick to object to editorial suggestions, or "notes," offered by network and studio executives. "It's micromanagement," said Eric Overmyer (*Bosch, The Wire*). "You really think this is adding one iota, one atom of value to this

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project? It's just getting in the way," he said. "There are a lot of people at the executive level who get in the way. They feel they have something to contribute, and—not true. They don't." Writers frequently insist that they are the true authors of television and that they rather than executives endow television with whatever "quality" it might have. But when Overmyer claims that management adds not "one atom of value" to a project, he combines two different accounts of value. One insists that while management generates profits from the hard work of its employees, it adds no real economic value. The second insists that writers alone create a project's aesthetic value; they produce *better* work, as Overmyer claims, when left alone to do what they do best. We argue in what follows that television writers identify with labor to conjoin both accounts of value. Writers often affiliate with labor, as the source of all economic value, to render more secure their claim to the aesthetic approbation, or prestige, attached to television. However much writers support the efforts of the Writers Guild of America (WGA) to fight for better pay, in other words, their persistent identification with labor also pays a different kind of dividend: in asserting their antagonism toward studio and network creative control, writers assert their autonomy and, therefore, their standing as the true authors of a creative medium worthy of respect. The writer's identification with labor guarantees the writer's standing as the definitive source of aesthetic as well as economic value, even though writers neither own the copyrights in their work nor control the uses made of their writing. Identifying with labor, in short, allows writers to set themselves against corporate interference in the name of art.

Writers identify with labor in different ways, as we explain below, depending on whether they are staff writers or showrunners, and their claims to artistic autonomy vary correspondingly. The beliefs about labor invoked by the working television writers whom we interviewed for this article therefore possess a significant plasticity. But we perceive a clear pattern, nevertheless: as a group, writers identify with labor and insist on artistic autonomy in a way that distances themselves both from studio and network executives and from below-the-line craft and technical workers who have nowhere near the status, power, or wealth that TV writers enjoy. They are labor in a way that sets them apart from management, even as they acknowledge their difference from others within the industry who have stronger claims to being labor. As Caldwell (2008, 2013) and Mayer (2011) have shown, the television industry is organized around a very distinct hierarchy between those who claim the status as authors of TV and those whose craft and technical work is essential but who will never enjoy the writers' level of pay or recognition. We explore the contradictory identification with labor with which television writers reproduce this hierarchy.

Writers' self-conception as labor, we maintain, is essential to their shared access to artistic prestige. Writers are labor, in legal terms, because their employers possess the contractual right to demand revisions of their work. Although that right signals writers' subservience to network and studio and their lack of autonomy as employees, it also makes available a longstanding and venerable antagonism between labor and management, which serves as the basis of the writer's literary autonomy. As David Milch (*Deadwood*) told us, "writers typically as outsiders are so ambivalent toward .

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. . the bosses. The presumption is that it's a hostile and pernicious relationship." That hostility, we argue, guarantees prestige, insofar as it signals both writers' unwillingness to cater to management and their commitment to artistic integrity. Consequently, where Stahl (2005) defines a "non-proprietary authorship" that takes shape under the sign of and as compensation for workers' alienation from their work, we define a non-proprietary authorship—or, better, a "non-proprietary autonomy"—that accentuates alienation and dispossession precisely to confirm labor's aesthetic independence from management.

Throughout, we build on recent works by Perren and Schatz (2015), Stahl (2005), Banks (2015), Caldwell (2008), and Conor (2014). In their readings of industrial authorship in the television industry, these scholars bring much needed attention to the struggle of writers to wrest control, credit, authority, or recognition from those who determine the conditions of their work. They also show that writers' quest for control often rests on distancing themselves from below-the-line labor. Our emphasis, by contrast, is on the strategic importance to writers, and showrunners especially, of insisting that they are labor and not management. Although that insistence no doubt springs from a very real sense of alienation from their work, it stretches to the limit traditional understandings of the difference between labor and management.

This article is based on semi-structured in-person interviews with thirty-two writers currently working in U.S. film and scripted TV. Our sample was not intended to be representative of everyone working as a writer in Hollywood, and it was not randomly selected. We used a snowball sample, beginning with a few referrals and then asking those interviewed for further referrals. Most worked in drama, though a few worked in comedy. The vast majority worked primarily in TV (and disproportionately on so-called quality shows). Only two worked primarily in film, and most have worked both in cable and broadcast TV, though two have made webisodes for Internet-only distribution platforms. Twelve have been writing showrunners (none were non-writing producers). Nine of the 32 were women. All but two were white. They ranged in career stage, from a few with about five years' experience, to a few with experiences dating to the late 1960s; most have been working in TV for ten to twenty years. All but two were Writers Guild members, and a few were or have been Writers Guild officers; one other was a novelist and one was an Animation Guild member. Each interview lasted between 60 and 140 minutes, and all occurred in Los Angeles between August 2013 and April 2014.

We begin with the recent attention showered on the showrunner before turning to a more longstanding conversation surrounding the status of writers and producers within the television industry. We then place that conversation within the context of longer histories involving labor relations in Hollywood, on one hand, and literary prestige, on the other. These different histories converge in our account of the 2007/2008 writers' strike, during which the majority of our subjects understood showrunners, above all, as labor even though they performed some functions of management. Our final section turns in greater depth to the particular postures adopted by specific writers and showrunners when negotiating the relationship between their employment status, on one hand, and their craft ambitions on the other.

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Enter the Showrunner: The Status of Writers and Producers in the Television Industry

In a recent essay on TV authorship, Perren and Schatz (2015, 3) call for a renewed engagement with Newcomb and Alley's (1983) *The Producer's Medium: Conversations with Creators of American TV*, which, as they say, explores what it means that the "central creative and administrative role in the commercial American television workplace was and remains that of the producer." Focus on the creative power of the television producer goes back as least as far as Barnouw's (1962) *The Television Writer* and Cantor's (1971) *The Hollywood TV Producer*. These works accentuate the fundamental divide that has characterized Hollywood labor relations since the 1920s: writers work as employees of producers. But what the industry means by "producer," and who lays claim to that title, has changed substantially from one context to the next (Mayer 2011). Although it remains true that writers are always labor to someone's management, the divide between the writer role and the producer role, and between labor and management, has become over time ever murkier. Today, writers work as producers and writers simultaneously. They are often management, while remaining loyal and active members of the WGA, thus benefiting from the contracts the WGA negotiates with production companies.

Perren and Schatz correctly note that Newcomb and Alley's *The Producer's Medium* stresses how "the U.S. network 'system'" makes "producers out of writers." They add that by the middle of *The Producer's Medium*, "the book's central argument" becomes clear: "television is not simply a producer's medium but a writer–producer's medium" (Perren and Schatz (2015, 4). Yet neither Perren and Schatz nor Newcomb and Alley clarify the difference between a "writer-producer's medium" and "a producer's medium." There is good reason for this. Like Cantor before them, and Barnouw before her, they observe that in television, many writers are producers, and vice versa. But it is therefore unclear what they mean when they repeat the claim in *The Producer's Medium* that "Television is a producer's medium. Feature movies are a director's medium, and the theater is a writer's medium" (Perren and Schatz (2015). Newcomb and Alley (1983, 231) quote Garry Marshall (*Happy Days, Mork & Mindy*), who says, "the key to a television show is the 'writer-producer.'" But Newcomb and Alley also note that writer-producers during the 1980s grew exhausted by the demands of writing and managing and asked networks to bring in "businessmen" to work as producers (Newcomb and Alley (1983, 239). As undeniably important as "writer-producers" have been and now are within television production, the designation has always presumed a different class of producers, whose imagined greater intimacy with management throws into relief the creative autonomy of "writer-producers."

Complaints about "businessmen" making crucial creative decisions are as old as the medium of television; in the early days of television, advertising agencies were the producers and employers of writers and, as Barnouw (1962, 27) puts it, agencies tended to discuss scripts as if they "were copy for an advertisement." Those complaints have played an essential role in the contemporary television writer's self-understanding. Most showrunners now working in television started as writers, and

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staff writers tend to assume responsibilities for producing as their careers progress. Since Barnouw, commentary on the role of the television producer has noted, in Cantor's (1971, 95) words, that "most producers are members of the Writers Guild." In addition, producers who play creative roles in television write as well as produce, and most producers start their careers as writers or story editors (Cantor's (1971, 92).

But even as writers have assumed producer responsibilities, they have identified themselves as writers first and foremost, which is to say they imagine enjoying wide-ranging managerial responsibilities not available to writers of feature films, for instance, *as writers*. Even in cases when those responsibilities take up more time than writing per se, as is the case for some showrunners, writers tend to insist that their job requires them to be WGA members before it requires them to be producers. And, of course, most start out wanting to be writers, and not producers. As Terence Winter (*Boardwalk Empire*) explained, "to actually join the Guild was a huge thing," because it meant "I could legitimately say I was a writer for a living." Even so, sentiments like these beg the question of what kind of a living writing is. Putting aside the question of who the true author of television is (or whose medium it is), we wish to explore how writers conceive of themselves as the most significant authors of the medium and yet still more like labor than management. Doing this requires an explanation of how the WGA is like a labor union in mediating between writers and their employers.

The WGA as a Union: Labor Relations in Hollywood

Being a TV writer today requires identifying with labor over and against "businessmen" from either studio or network. There are reasons why this should be the case, beginning first with the writer's membership in the WGA and not the Producer's Guild, which is an association for management. TV writers do not own the product of their labor; the studios own those products. Furthermore, there is little job security for producers. Moreover, and for all these reasons, writer-producers benefit from the contractual protections negotiated by the WGA in the Guild Minimum Basic Agreement (MBA).

These protections are inscribed in the legal labor relationships between writers and studios dating to the beginning of Hollywood as an industry. Studios then insisted that writers must be "employees" because under copyright law, the employer is deemed the author and therefore the legal owner of any "work made for hire," which includes work created by employees within the scope of their employment (17 U.S.C. § 201(a)). When writers are not "employees," that is, are not subject to the direction and control of the employer in the creation of the work (*Community for Creative Non-Violence v. Reid*, 490 U.S. 730 (1990)), the employer can acquire the copyright in the work only if the writer chooses to assign it or has specially commissioned it. Writers in film, and later radio, and still later television, insisted that they were not employees, both as a matter of professional dignity and to keep intellectual property rights in their work. The studios and networks resisted and writers decided to seek a larger share of the profits by unionizing.

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To defeat that legal strategy, film studios argued in an about-face during the 1930s that writers were not employees. They then claimed writers performed services that were "creative and professional in character" because they were not required "to observe regular office hours or to maintain office discipline [. . . or] to produce any fixed amount of work." Instead, writers were "free to develop screen material in accordance with their own ideas." The studios insisted the right to unionize belonged only "to the more standardized and mechanical employments" and "wage earners in the lower income brackets" (*Metro Goldwyn Mayer Studios*, 7 NLRB 662, 687-89 (1938)). The studios' legal strategy failed, however, because producers had the ultimate power to dictate the content of writers' work, to assign parts of stories, and to stipulate where writers were to write (*Metro Goldwyn Mayer Studios*, 7 NLRB 662, 687-89 1938).

Although radio and early television relied far more on freelance writers than the movie studios had in the 1930s, the networks and production companies refused to relinquish the one power that was legally decisive: the right to demand revisions. An active participant in the struggle to unionize radio writers and president of the Radio Writers Guild before it merged into the WGA in the 1950s, Barnouw (1962, 19) explained, "the right to demand revisions became by definition, and logically so, the essence of an employer-employee relationship." The right to demand revisions remains today the legal definition of a writer who is an employee covered by the WGA Basic Agreement (WGA 2014 Theatrical and Television Basic Agreement, Art. 1.B (theatrical), Art. 1.C (television)).

The writers we interviewed were vague about the exact terms of their employment. They may have not known that their status as labor has been legally essential to the control over credits, to the payment of the contractually stipulated minimum fees and residuals, to separated rights, and to the operation of their pension and health benefits plans. Nevertheless, they, including showrunners who acknowledge they are both labor and management, felt strongly that they were in fact labor in part due to their status as WGA members. The WGA allows them to identify with a class to which they might not seem otherwise to belong. Many TV writers enjoy a degree of affluence that makes it difficult to think of them as labor in any traditional sense of that word. As Caldwell (2008), Mayer (2011), and Banks (2015) have noted, and as our interview subjects readily acknowledged, there is a wide gulf in pay, status, and power between writers and the below-the-line workers who are, in an important sense, the creators of TV. Writers are more akin to professional athletes, for instance, than to the Teamsters who supported their labor action in 2007. But above all, we maintain, writers identified with labor because they felt that their disavowal of the network or studio heads as management safeguarded the prestige that TV writers as a group have successfully accrued over the last twenty years.

Writers as Labor with Literary Prestige

As Hortense Powdermaker (1950, 85) observed in her early ethnography of Hollywood: "Writers in Hollywood do not have works but are workers." Some writers we interviewed were unabashed in talking about writing only as a job. As one said, "You don't

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have to be Jonathan Franzen to write this stuff. You just have to be relatively smart and a good mimic and you could do it." More surprisingly, there were writers who described their work—sometimes in the same breath—as a source of creative pride and as simply a job.[1] At moments like these, writers chose sides in longstanding industry conflicts between studios and labor. They did so less out of a kinship with the working classes than as part of a contradictory effort to affiliate with ostensibly literary authors traditionally imagined to be outside the labor/management divide.

Professedly literary writers have often understood themselves as labor. During the first decades of the twentieth century, novelists like Henry James, James Agee, Jack London, and William Dean Howells wrote about what it might mean to write for a salary. As James (1975, 12) had it, "a writer must have schooled himself, from the first, to work but for a 'living wage.'" Anything that the writer receives beyond that wage, he reasoned, is "an occasional charming tip," a "gratuity thrown in." James thought that writers could not earn the approbation of their readership, and so should concentrate on their work as if it were an hourly labor.

Although James offered this advice only as mental discipline, the WPA Writers Project and the Hollywood studio institutionalized salaried employment for writers during the 1930s. By and large, radical writers then embraced the salary both because it was needed for sustenance and because of the membership it was imagined to confer in the working class. But many satirized the regimented factory-style writing of early twentieth-century popular media. As a Paramount Pictures writer quipped, producers ran an "assembly line" and

> doled out dramatis personae, one each to a team of five writers—the writer was then instructed to supply "his" character with lines of dialogue but to avoid consultation with other members of the team: the idea, so far as anybody understood it, was that the producer would "assemble" the five contributions, jigsaw style, into a final script. (Hamilton 1990, 184)

Seen from this point of view, serious literary writing was antithetical to the assembly-line productions of the culture industry.

The lack of creative autonomy and control that has long galled film and television writers, and that has often defined their difference from playwrights, poets, and novelists, became the crucial legal weapon that secured their rights as writers (if not legal authors) in every respect other than creative control. For showrunners in particular, that same lack of creative autonomy and control, however infrequently used against them by studios and networks, alone justified their widespread tendency to identify with labor over and against management.

Drawing on the long history of antagonism between Hollywood studios and the WGA, writers insisted on their difference from management precisely so they could later reject—or at least claim no knowledge of—the needs and desires of their studio and network employers. Resistance to management for them begins when writers develop projects. Showrunner Jeff Melvoin (*Army Wives, Northern Exposure*) bemoaned the "mob mentality and psychology that influences what gets on [TV]" and

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insisted, "My job is to write something that matters to me" even if studios would not buy it. This resistance extended to how they processed feedback from studio and network while working on established projects. Milch and Steven Bochco emphatically insisted that the studio and network knew better than to try to give them notes. Making a virtue of necessity, TV writers found a measure of autonomy in their very alienation from the product of their labors.

At the same time, these writers did not possess the autonomy that has been in different degrees essential since the nineteenth century to the self-understanding of writers of fiction, poetry, and even drama. Echoing James, but with a crucial difference, Pierre Bourdieu describes an economy of autonomous cultural production in which "investments are recompensed only if they are in a sense thrown away, like a gift, which can only achieve the most precious return gift, recognition, so long as it is experienced as a one-way transaction" (Bourdieu 1994, 101). The writers we interviewed knew all too well that such one-way transactions are unavailable to them. They knew their work to be more instrumental than those writers with whom they affiliated beyond the TV industry. They knew, for instance, that they wrote for ratings, and to capture demographics that a given studio or network targeted for their brand identity.

It was not surprising that junior writers saw themselves as labor, then, given the control exercised by others over almost every aspect of their work. It was more surprising that showrunners described themselves as labor, even as they acknowledged that the line between labor and management was for them very hard to grasp. Showrunners readily confessed that they were both labor and management, and recognized that it was sometimes "a hard line to walk because you also are responsible for [. . .] any number of things that have nothing to do with writing" (Edward Bernero, *Criminal Minds, Third Watch*). You have "to manage for a studio or network this project while you're also trying to be labor," said Jon Steinberg (*Black Sails, Jericho*), though being labor could make one a better producer, because you "know both sides of the equation when figuring out a show or a budget or how to work with people" (Jonathan Stern, *Childrens' Hospital*). This contradiction was highlighted during the WGA strike when showrunners were called on to side with labor over management, while still maintaining this special managerial status.

The 2007/2008 WGA Strike: Showrunners as Labor and Management

The decision to strike in 2007 placed showrunners in a compromised position. As Matt Nix (*Burn Notice*) put it, "I got a call during the strike from a lawyer friend of mine who was like, 'What the fuck are you guys doing? You're management. Who pulled you into behaving like labor?'" Similarly, "It was a lot of really rich people striking basically for future writers," said Bernero, adding the showrunners' decision was particularly difficult "because none of the issues of the strike had anything to do with most of us." The strikers' demands for minimum compensation and Internet residuals did not apply to showrunners. "The amount of money that it actually meant to [showrunners] was a

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rounding error, like they would never even notice in the difference in their salary," declared Nix. These royalties were, in any event, things that showrunners had the market power as individuals to negotiate for themselves without needing a union. "If I want two more pennies on a DVD, I can negotiate that for myself," Bernero said.

Showrunners like Nix insisted their participation in the strike "was not just noblesse oblige." They joined the strike, Nix believed, because "everybody is aware that they benefitted from those protections when they were coming up, and in most cases, truly in most cases, they are aware that they probably wouldn't be writers without that." But a given showrunner's decision to honor the writers' strike put cast and crew members out of work. Such a decision caused "a hardship for many people" who were not as well paid as showrunners and writers, explained Nicole Yorkin (*The Killing*). What is more, showrunners were keenly aware that while they placed themselves on the labor side of the law's labor–management divide, their pay and social status made the iconic act of labor protest—picketing—an embarrassment that the studios were all too happy to exploit. The studios derided the acts of protest, Rod Lurie (*Straw Dogs*, 2001) said, as "millionaires holding picket signs." Showrunners describing the 2007/2008 strike were at pains to note writers are not "coal miners," "not truckers," "not farm workers" (Lurie; Neal Baer, *Under the Dome*). In an era in which picket lines are so unusual, and in which organized protest over pay and working conditions is a strategy of last resort by the most downtrodden of all workers, the networks and studios managed to portray the strike as selfishness by the privileged few, rather than as a determined and principled stand.

Nevertheless, showrunners accepted their legal status as "employees" who could unionize and bargain collectively rather than as "management" who could not (*NLRB v. Yeshiva University*, 411 U.S. 672 (1980)) in part because it made it harder for studios and networks to divide writers by setting the showrunners' interests against those of other writers in WGA negotiations.[2] The showrunners lent their economic and cultural clout to protect the economic position of all writers, from those in the writers room, to those who were retired and living on a pension and residuals, and to those waiting tables and working on a screenplay.

The showrunners' decision to strike reflected a complicated labor history in two ways. First, showrunners' identifications reflected their sense of having been dispossessed of the copyrights in their work as labor. Glen Mazzara (*The Walking Dead*) said, when they "sign a contract to work for a studio" and a certificate of authorship:

> I'm signing that my work is owned by the studio. [. . .] [Y]ou are spending an incredible amount of time to create material that then you don't get that ownership . . . I had no ownership in *The Walking Dead* and that was the number one show. I was paid a fee and, you know, and these companies just make gazillions of dollars.

Matthew Weiner similarly positioned himself as labor to the studio's and network's management with respect to copyright ownership: "[*Mad Men*] has made a billion dollars. What should I be getting? I can't get caught [as a millionaire] complaining about

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it, but it is not a just distribution." After all, he said, "I am a human being and [the studio] is a corporation."

Second, and more importantly, showrunners thought of themselves as labor when the studio or network threatened their creative control as writers. Showrunners most consistently objected, not to the legal fact of a corporation's ownership of their work, nor to their compensation or working conditions, but to those who demanded revisions to that work. Bochco (*LA Law, Hill Street Blues*) articulated a complaint from the earliest days of television: that it is nearly unbearable to be told how to write by someone who doesn't write.[3] He despised "getting nitpicked on every script" by young network executives who had "no idea what's going on in the world." Bochco said he wanted to tell the executives to "leave me alone, stop with these silly notes, and let me do my work." Among those we interviewed, showrunners' distaste at ceding creative control to network and/or studio executives ran far in excess of their distaste at ceding their copyrights to those who employed them.

By and large, staff writers and showrunners united over their shared alienation from the studio: they were together labor because they agreed to resist creative input from the studio and network. Staff writers and showrunners said they shared a craft identity that required a united front against creative input that was not their own. In this respect, to be a writer was to resist being too responsive to, or even aware of, the desires of employers. At the same time, both showrunners and staff writers described creative control in distinctly legal terms when discussing ownership, their contracts, and what it meant to be an employee. As *Walking Dead* showrunner Glen Mazzara explained, when writers feel that "the showrunner's just going in a, a direction that the rest of the staff doesn't feel is the right direction," he advises them, "it's the showrunner's show," but of course " the showrunner has to then turn around and say, 'It's the studio's show.'" Staff writer Linda Burstyn (*NCIS*) described the additional layer of obligation: "when you're hired as a TV writer, your job is to execute the showrunner's vision. Your job is not to write the best show that you want to write." Ultimately, Mazzara explained, the resolution of issues of creative control is a matter of the contract of hire: "What am I actually being paid for? What is my contract for?"

The Buyer's Business: Postures on Employment Status and Craft Ambitions

Writers were almost unanimous when singling out certain television shows—such as *The Sopranos, The Wire, Deadwood, Mad Men*, and *Breaking Bad*—that embodied excellence, but were consistently unsure about how to balance their own commitment to achieving a similar excellence with their obligation to be responsive to the needs of their employers. All the writers we interviewed represented themselves as struggling to balance artistic and corporate imperatives, though the nature of the struggle varied from the most lauded to the most obscure among the writers we interviewed.

The closer writers are to studio and network management, which is to say the more likely to experience studio or network control firsthand, the more opportunities they have to distinguish themselves as auteurs. And not surprisingly, the more they deal

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with studio and network, the more they deny management's influence on them. Staff writers hope to distinguish themselves as they please their showrunner bosses. For their part, showrunners—already distinguished, and thus exemplars of industry success—repeatedly stress their refusal to please their bosses. Although they know their continued employment is predicated on satisfying those who fund and distribute their work, they emphatically declare their ability to carve out forms of autonomy that are antithetical to the industry as a whole.

Take the case of David Milch, the creator and showrunner of the lauded HBO drama *Deadwood*. Other writers praised Milch as having one of the most distinctive and literary voices in contemporary television. "[N]o one can replicate David Milch's writing, we know that. . . . *Deadwood* had the language . . . it was like Shakespeare," said Will Scheffer (*Getting On, Big Love*). Trained by Robert Penn Warren, one of the foremost poets, novelists, and critics of the twentieth century, Milch himself echoed a critical commonplace when he told us that television at its best "is the novel; the work that we do is a chance to write the way I think 19th-century writing was done." Milch insisted HBO rarely interfered with him and that he won whatever battles were waged over the control of *Deadwood*. Just like the literary greats, he brooked no compromise of vision.

Yet Milch acknowledged that the most basic premise of his show changed at the hands of HBO executives. He said he brought them a show about Ancient Rome, and they convinced him instead to write a Western. Indeed, the magnitude of executive influence seemed itself to require his dismissive attitude toward those above him. "They don't know much but they know better than . . . [to] give me notes," he said, before adding, "To the extent that the institution tries to interfere, you can't let that happen." In contrast, he professed "a selflessness which is the privilege of art" in relation to the writers who worked for him on the show. The staff writers, he said, merited screen credits because "Whose name got on it was really a distortion anyway . . . and not something that I thought very much about."

When Milch advocated selflessness toward staff writers but intolerance of executives, he invoked a refrain fundamental to contemporary TV writing. Again and again, showrunners acknowledged the contributions of the staff writers in their room. Just as frequently, staff writers derided those few showrunners who tended to put their name on scripts written with their staff. Not a single writer, however, acknowledged the contributions of those studio or network executives responsible for giving notes to the writer's room. Milch claimed he refused to think too much about where, other than the writer's room, his ideas came from. "You couldn't think too much about it," he said. "That was doom. You know, that would stop you every time. You just had to sort of keep doing it." A version of that refusal to think, he said, found its way into a storyline involving saloon proprietor Al Swearengen, who hides his gold, Milch suggested, even from himself:

> I always wanted to do the story of the way he would mystify the process and confuse [those who hid his gold] so that no one, even the people who deposited it physically, would have final access to it. It's not dissimilar to when people would ask about where I

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> was getting the story material from or how I was using it, I was reluctant to put a name on it. You know you want to keep it a secret even from yourself.

Writers are like Milch's Swearengen, because, in the words of Tom Smuts, a staff writer on *Mad Men*, "Writers definitely enjoy sublimating." Smuts said though agents and executives are never "particularly articulate" about a given network's "brand," they do expect writers to write to those brands. He recounted a story in which a network executive berated a writer for not knowing "the DNA of our network."

Knowing that DNA, Smuts and others said, was difficult but essential, because studios and networks control and manage their brands as never before. Marti Noxon (*Girlfriends' Guide to Divorce, Buffy the Vampire Slayer*) recalled with disgust numerous conversations with Disney executives about developing a project involving an iconic *Peter Pan* character. She recounted dealing with brand managers who had intricate plans for "company-wide synergy" and for what that character would be at each stage of her life. "ABC was a dumb animal," she said, with "an extreme sort of institutionalized disrespect for the writer." But she had no choice but to "take those notes from the studios, which are just exhausting. . . . an absolute waste of time and resources." Stories like these notwithstanding, Smuts stressed the dangers they presented. "Do writers think about the audience who watches networks?" he asked, answering,

> I think yes, better writers are sophisticated about that [. . . But] you don't want to get too much . . . in the buyer's business. You might think about it, and then you want to hide your thought about it, so, I just happen to have something that perfectly matches. So yes, but I do think that writers and then the people who buy shows at networks think about the ideological agenda.

Showrunning a "quality" show especially requires repudiating the interests of those who foot the bills, no doubt in large part because quality can easily seem an effect of corporate largesse, rather than writerly talent. As Bochco told us, "money translates to quality: I give you HBO."

Sublimating is in some sense essential to everyone in the TV writing business. The closer they were to the studio or the network, the more interviewees disclaimed their employers' influence on their craft. But concerns over studio and network input, and feelings that literary television writing demands refusing that input, were neither unique to showrunners nor exclusive to those working on prestige shows. Mazzara offered an opinion common to our interviewees when he said, "writers end up internalizing the notes process so they end up censoring themselves before they write the material. So they say, 'well, the network's not gonna like that, or the network's gonna think this.'" This internalization complicated any sense of what it meant to develop a distinctive voice. A writer on *Haven*, Speed Weed explained, "I'm a particular widget maker—I make, you know, my scripts don't look like the other peoples' scripts on those shows because there is a little bit of personality in them, but not a lot." Weed did not simply note his subordination to the showrunner; he also pointed out that television is an industrial product that offers relatively little opportunity for originality no matter who you

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are. "All of these executives," Mazzara added, want "more and more brand recognition," and "you need to be a surrogate writer for them." Mazzara likewise suggested that the showrunner wrote for studio and network executives in a way that was analogous to how staff writers wrote for the showrunner. "Studios send me pages and pages of notes," he complained, "in which they use the term 'we' as, as a united front—I don't know who's sending these notes . . . it's very much a corporate stance and it's isolating to the artist." Writers overcome that isolation, and at the same time secure their literary prestige, we have argued, by identifying themselves with labor.

The potential isolation of the writer-as-artist has found its way into a surprising amount of contemporary television content. Like Milch, Mazzara claimed to have written the problem of the showrunner's autonomy into the storyline of his show. The extended drama surrounding Rick Grimes's leadership during the second season of *The Walking Dead*, Mazzara explained, allegorizes the trials he faced as the series showrunner tapped by AMC to replace the fired creator.[4] Weiner claimed too to have written the showrunner's note-taking process into *Mad Men*. The experiences of ad man Don Draper came from Weiner's own experience in the TV industry. The show asks a simple question, said Weiner, "What are the humiliations in pleasing a client?" Those humiliations were intrinsic to the TV writing process; "Entertainment is a whorehouse," he said.

Showrunners tend to resist this language, just as the stories that they oversee tend to stress a more heroic resistance to power. Jonathan Steinberg used the same language as Weed and yet reached the opposite conclusion to describe his work as the creator and showrunner of *Black Sails*: "You're not making widgets." He disowned any appearance of standardization and insisted repeatedly on the literary nature of his show, by making reference to a familiar stable of quality television programs: *The Wire, Deadwood*, and *The Sopranos*. When asked what made TV good, he replied, "This is going to [make me] sound like such an asshole: that it has enough literary integrity to it." Thus his pitch to former HBO executive Chris Albrecht for *Black Sail* was, "We wanna do *The Wire* and pirates." He said this with no irony, and was quite humble about his ambitions: "We're not good enough to make that show, but I think the intent" is what matters.

The intent does indeed matter a very great deal, precisely because much of Steinberg's job might otherwise make him akin to those whom Gary Marshall dismissed as businessmen. Having announced his desire to be literary, Steinberg elaborated the manner in which stories might instead be considered formulas. "I spend half my day . . . completely focused on story and the math behind the story."[5] "There's a certain math to the way a story works," he said:

> If you can define a story as the manipulation of emotion [then] there are mechanics to how they work and where it hits you. . . . It's like all of those things following rules. . . . It's like watching an engine work.

Steinberg is part engineer and, he hopes, part David Chase or David Simon, each of whom paid careful attention in their stories to large-scale structures, as well to those

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who did and did not follow rules. This suggested to him that he is most like Chase and Simon when detailing work conditions like his own. "Every show I have ever loved is about office politics," Steinberg said. And it should be no surprise, finally, that he would be attuned when watching those shows to the central importance of the particular class of workers with whom he identifies. Doing *The Wire* with pirates meant showing "a gang in which the middle managers within the gang were frustrated with the people who worked for them, and also frustrated with people they work for." But of course, as he was quick to confess at another moment in our interview, middle management can very readily seem more like upper or lower management, especially "when it comes to trying to manage for a studio or a network this project, while you're also trying to be labor."

Conclusion: The Master's Voice?

The writers we interviewed and the popular and academic literature about television that we reviewed all agreed on one thing at least. The period since *The Sopranos* has been a good one for television writers notwithstanding the vulnerability of labor in the so-called "gig economy" in general, and in Hollywood in particular. Television has enjoyed a prestige as a literary medium, which has allowed many writers plausibly to claim affinity with the poets, novelists, and essayists with whom Hollywood writers have long wished to ally themselves. The proliferation of networks, along with the decision of new entrants (including Netflix and Amazon) to produce high-quality scripted dramas under WGA rules, has generated good jobs for writers.

The growth in the demand for quality TV nevertheless has not produced job security for any except the most celebrated of writers, and even showrunners on successful shows can be fired. The firings first of Frank Darabont and then of Glen Mazzara of *The Walking Dead* were in this respect a shock to many in the industry. Many thought, here was a series garnering critical acclaim and, under Mazzara, attracting record-setting numbers of viewers. If the showrunners were not safe, who was?

The only available answer contained an unavoidable irony. As the MBA states, writers are employees covered by the collective agreement because they write subject to the power of the network or studio "to direct the performance of personal services in writing . . . or in making revisions, modifications, or changes" to what they write (MBA Art. 1.C.1.a.(a)). As we have seen, showrunners registered their distance from the power of their employer to demand revisions precisely by doubling down on their commitment to labor. They were at deep odds with management, because they were opposed to fulfilling a corporate mission. If that seems, given longstanding inherited notions about the antagonism between labor and management, to place showrunners in a more tenuous position with respect to their employers, from the perspective of the curious labor relations detailed above, it does just the opposite. No matter how aggressively writers generally, and showrunners in particular, affiliate with labor, the aesthetic and political postures adopted by showrunners to declare their independence are the very ones that most successfully guarantee their future job security. To be independent, singular, and, finally, inimitable, is to be safe in one's writing job. Ergo, in today's

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television industry, one can be sure of corporate employment as a writer only by attaining the voice of an auteur.

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Notes

1. Writers Guild of America (WGA)-West President Howard A. Rodman, Jr., offered us a representative justification for doing so:

   There's a sentence of Karl Marx which I really love which is, "No matter the fluctuations in the price of beef, the sacrifice remains constant for the ox." . . . I think of writing in that way in that sort of, you know, the work is the same whether we're well compensated or badly compensated.

2. If showrunners were management (not National Labor Relations Act "employees") and could be fired if they refused to cross the WGA picket line, the studios would have a legal device tailor-made to break a strike. Indeed, the WGA worked to persuade showrunners to honor the 2007/2008 strike precisely because some writer-producers had not honored previous strikes (Banks 2015).
3. Barnouw (1962, 27) made the same complaints on behalf of writers in the 1950s, excoriating the decision to remove all mention of gas chambers from the TV production of *The Nuremburg Trials* at the behest of the ad agency for the sponsoring public utility company.
4. AMC would later fire Mazzara as well, in a widely publicized move that drew attention to the tenuous position of industry showrunners.
5. Matt Nix spoke at length of "story math" as well, though he understood that to mean something slightly different. He stressed that, when writing, you have to know that when you shoot at a guy, if he falls to the ground, if he's a stuntman, that just cost you $5,000. And if he's an extra, if you shoot him, he better just go like this [demonstrates], because if you can go like this, then it's free." Writers must know, he insisted, "how to massage the script to get it to a budget number."

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