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Notes on Complicating Authorship and Cultural Labor

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This panel is charged with an intriguing task: “complicating.” It presumes that these concepts, “authorship” and “cultural labor” are not complicated enough, apparently. I’m taking this to mean that our usual conceptions of these terms are no longer, and perhaps have never been, adequate tools to understand either cultural production or cultural reception, and that, given the changes sweeping across media and media studies, it's time to reconsider what they mean and how we use them.

What's most interesting about the use of authorship in television studies is how much it's been avoided. This is especially significant given the longstanding use of the concept in film studies, where directors are still one of the primary critical categories in the field. While "authors" themselves are very present as cultural agents in scholarly work across television studies -- from network presidents to showrunners to fanfic writers -- television authorship, as a cultural category and subject position, has rarely been analyzed. "Production," yes, but "authorship," not really. Thus, the first task of "complicating" it is to query this structured absence, and start to pick apart the discourses that have constructed and reified television authorship in some places (e.g., in fandom, and in mainstream criticism), and those that have ignored it in other places. Foucault's exploration of the author-function remains a useful model from which to proceed, asking us to separate authorship from individual psychology and instead locate it in historical discourses.

I'm concerned with tracing these discourses as particular public iterations of the author-function. "Authorship" is more a result of attributive labor than creative labor; i.e., how that naming is produced, and how it has meaning(s) in the culture. Thus, we shouldn't take for granted the usual attribution of a particular creative laborer as a series' "showrunner," (i.e., its "author") but determine how particular discourses of authorship construct that figure. By doing so, we can begin to understand what authorship means and does as it relates specifically to television. For example, how is the labor of production represented in these iterations? How is the presence or absence of these figures registered discursively? How do these figures accumulate (or lose) social capital in their production, critical and fan communities? And why are we seeing and hearing so many of these discourses now?

In order to fully "complicate" authorship and cultural labor, and really push Foucault's model to its logical extent, we should also critique the discourses of authorship produced outside the usual conception of production-as-Hollywood (or London, or Tokyo, etc.). In this regard, I'm interested in "complicating" existing theories of reception to incorporate questions of authorship. Fans are not only readers, after all; they are writers and "authors" themselves, with similar attributive discourses and statures in their communities. Again, there are important histories of fan authorship to trace and account for here, not to reify or validate or reject fan authorship *per se*, but to acknowledge how discourses of authorship function in multiple fields of cultural activity, and critique the longstanding binary of production/reception in media studies.

Finally, it's worth considering as well that, despite the rhetoric of the collective suggested by Web 2.0 rhetoric, discourses of authorship are constantly increasing in these new media. Every YouTube upload, every LiveJournal post, every del.icio.us link, and every comment everywhere is attributed. Our cultures obviously still value attribution, and will for the foreseeable future. The big, and complicated, question: *what does that attribution mean?* We need to acknowledge authorship, not to embrace it or reject it, but to understand it, and better situate past, present, and future creative activity.