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Doris Baltruschat
*Global Media Ecologies: Networked Production in Film and Television.*

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*Global Media Ecologies: Networked Production in Film and Television* is an in-depth, critical study of exactly what the title suggests: how networking among film and television industries in different countries, and everything involved in this process, is changing cultural industries. This includes the emergence of global production technologies, which include international treaty coproductions and ventures, formats, and multiplatform interactive media that connect and inform how the global production network does business today. It also brings up legitimate concerns about what might be getting lost in the economic challenges and changes facing coproductions now. In the end, the basic case is made that the evolving human factor as well as changing global market objectives and finances are just as important to consider in coproductions of film and television programs.

Baltruschat presents a strong case for this theory by balancing the human verses the economic factor and the ever changing, extremely complicated logistics of networked production processes. This is done through numerous methodologies, including field studies and analysis of several joint productions of the Canadian and British television industries, interviews with producers and broadcasters around the globe, and an audience study that investigates the localization of the reality television format through staging auditions and media events. The end goal, of course, is to use all this information to illustrate how all these elements combine to create a global media economy and ecology that must change and grow with society and culture. It is an ambitious goal but one that is accomplished for the most part in this work.

Chapter 1 focuses on defining a media ecology—the “relational dynamics and processes between agents, in particular their lived professional realities marked by collaboration as well as competition in an evolving media economy” (p. 188). This is done through a well-researched and organized set of facts and figures involving international coproductions of films and TV shows but especially takes care to detail the legalities and contracts that lay out who exactly does what and in what country. The chapter also addresses one of the major recurring themes throughout the book—growing concerns over shifting economic priorities in the media production business where coproductions...
seek to gratify the more prosaic needs of the general consumer at the expense of “preserving unfettered cultural memory, documenting the history of peoples and challenging falsities embedded in the myth of capitalistic ideology” (p. 48). Thus, Baltruschat believes (and rightly so) that the overall global media ecology that should be striven for is one that is flexible and takes into account pressures from all sides to create a culturally meaningful, relevant, profitable production for everyone involved.

Chapter 2 takes the discussion into more detail by presenting case studies of the coproduced Canadian and British 2004 docudramas Sex Traffic (a program about human trafficking) and The Hamburg Cell (deconstructing the motivations of the 9/11 hijackers who met in Germany as students). Each film is examined on all levels, from money put into production to what specifically Canada and Britain contributed and to the content itself. Most significantly analyzed, however, is the way these stories are told through the effects of the production costs and influences each country brings to the production, as reflected in the creative compromise evidenced between actors, locations, and other cultural complications that help make these docudramas appeal to a global audience.

The ever-growing popularity of reality TV gets its own chapter, simply for the fact that this popular, economically beneficial genre is changing how all programs are produced and distributed. Baltruschat suggests that many of the techniques used in these coproductions of reality programming are global in scope and play a huge part in defining the new roles that advertisers and sponsors play in the creation and development processes. Specifically analyzed is the importance of the interactive multimedia platforms that are becoming more necessary to help audiences interact and engage with the program. This genre analysis gives credence to the fact that the audience expects certain things from productions and producers, regardless of the country of production, and these things need to be taken into consideration to some extent. There will, as Baltruschat suggests, always be the need for these coproduced programs to provide critical and cultural looks at communities and cultures—but how they do so in the reality of today’s economic “money rules all” mentality is going to be key.

To more specifically illustrate this, the following chapters focus on the Canadian and American versions of the popular Idol franchise. Baltruschat analyzes what each production is doing—the similarities and differences—and how the audience reacts to it. Everything from the staging of media events (the programs themselves) to the conflict they create over the changing meaning of the so-called representation of the “American Dream” of making it big and to the manufacturing of celebrities is addressed.

In addition, audience engagement also gets the full-chapter treatment—including the interactive tendencies of fans of the Idols to the marketing and product-promotions issues that inform every reality-based program today. Specifically, the author examines what consumer control is doing for the production business (narrowing and eliminating some important elements) and how reformatting productions to include the new media trends (product placement, franchising, etc.) as well as addressing changing economic attitudes, views, and processes will affect the global media economy and ecology. One thing that emerges as clear as a bell in this discussion is that interactivity and its appeal and usefulness to audiences is here to stay and it does indeed influence all aspects of coproductions, no matter what countries are involved.
Overall, the entire book attempted to prove that no matter how resistant to change film and television production companies might be, media and cultural agents have to negotiate new terrain and cultural policies to meet global market demands that “are shifting focus to creative labor of audiences and interactive media users” (p. 155). This creative labor is going to play a huge role in the future shape of global media economies and ecologies and the people that produce for them.

There is a large amount of information packed into 236 pages that cover a huge range of issues. At times, the reader can become lost on a tangent, albeit one related to the subject at hand, but it can be distracting. One also could argue that while the examples presented are very convincing and well analyzed, a broader look at programs coproduced by other countries, ones perhaps less developed but still prolific in production, might strengthen the overall argument. Baltruschat does discuss this and does reference other countries, but it seems there are places here and there where this can be expanded upon to help more clearly illustrate the global nature of media production and coproduction process and the cultural relevance.

A strength of this book is that it is written to appeal to a wide range of readers. The industry faction can glean much knowledge about what these productions do, and must do, and find many interesting venues for thought and discussion. Broadcasters and producers can learn what sells and what is involved in the production process; marketers and promoters can see specifically how the “event mentality” is used and is working in one of the most popular reality television programs out there; and the average person who simply wants to understand more about the programming content he or she receives on a television or movie screen will find some relevant answers. In addition, the many who worry that today’s media programs are failing to deliver culturally relevant material, no matter in what continent or by whom that content is produced, might find some potential solutions or at least spark some relevant and timely discussions.

*Global Media Ecologies* is a book deserving of a place in the realm of global media studies. Its appeal lies in that it does what it sets out to—create a compelling, intricate, yet well-researched and presented argument that the global media economy is changing and producers in every country must change with it.

Elizabeth Abel

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Photographs of the 20th-century South can be striking: Grainy shots of lynching, protests outside of schools and bus stations, worship at open-casket funerals, images of grieving