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Title	Specworld: Folds, Faults, and Fractures in Embedded Creator Industries, by John Thornton Caldwell
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Publication date	2026-09-04
Original Citation	Krahn, J. (2026) 'Specworld: Folds, Faults, and Fractures in Embedded Creator Industries, by John Thornton Caldwell', Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media, 31, pp. 151–154. https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.31.18
Type of publication	Article (non peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	10.33178/alpha.31.18
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Download date	2026-09-16 10:20:35
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/19164

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Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media
no. 31, 2026, pp. 151–154
DOI: https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.31.18

alphaville
JOURNAL OF FILM AND SCREEN MEDIA

Specworld: Folds, Faults, and Fractures in Embedded Creator Industries, by John Thornton Caldwell. University of California Press, 2023, 368 pp.

Jessie Krahn

"Imagine", John Thornton Caldwell entreats the reader, "that aspiration is instrumental, transactional, administrative" (xix). While this directive might impel the reader to abstract planes, Caldwell pulls the imaginary into contact with an urgent and concrete reality. We do not have to imagine it: aspiration is instrumentalised by media industries, which burn through creators like a steam engine burns through coal, as Caldwell details in *Specworld: Folds, Faults, and Fractures in Embedded Creator Industries*.

Specworld's modus operandi distinguishes itself from that of other cinema and media studies research in a number of ways. For one thing, Caldwell actively avoids approaching topics of authorship and creative production through the products of their labour, as a film studies scholar might with a film. Caldwell begins within creative producers' ecosystems, asking what nascent forces, mores, and norms affect creative producers in different socioeconomic positions, and how those positionalities influence makers' end products. Caldwell explains he was motivated by curiosity about how "self-evident categories in film studies (director, genre, scene, style, fans)" might be expanded upon (x). From this vantage point, *Specworld* uses systems as the threshold for approaching questions about labour and its influence on aesthetics. Creative producers are currently ensnared in the dark architecture of media industries, subject to exploitation and the "bad behaviour" of higher-ups in media industries (1). Authorship studies, aesthetic philosophy, and industry studies may be "shortsighted or lazy" for distinguishing between "artistry and domination" in that regard (1), according to Caldwell.

Approaching the concept of the filmmaker, artist, etc. from the axiomatic belief that none of these roles are monolithic and, rather, are each iterative in their own regard, Caldwell sets out in *Specworld* to determine how creators' dreams are exploited by media industries. Why this axiom? The day-to-day pragmatics of an aspiring or fledgling YouTuber hoping to achieve a level of fame that might sustain their practice will look entirely different from that of the platform's mega-stars who earn millions. Caldwell's interest is not so much in developing universalisable schema which we can use to identify the essential characteristics of an actor, screenwriter, or online influencer as it is in sketching out the implicit rules and unwritten expectations baked into the logistics of creative production. Preponderant in the industry are "paying-your-dues rationales" (10), which promise aspirants that all successful makers must work for free in order to progress on

their career paths. Handshake deals, truisms that emerging YouTubers must upload every day in order to appease YouTube's algorithm, and other psychological seeds that the industry uses to "culturally normalize theft" apply asymmetrically to poor, unknown filmmakers and makers (14). Aspiring artists are persuaded into working on spec (for example, by supplying scripts for screenwriting contests or by creating free videos to upload to YouTube), all in the hope that one day they will see remuneration for their efforts. That asymmetry renders the status of being a maker so distinct and variable across class lines that unappended labels like "filmmaker" or "author" ultimately elide makers' realities.

Caldwell's target reader is clear from the outset, and this elevates his project from one of specialised, discursive winnowing to one that exposes lines of inquiry within the hearts of media industries and the university system itself. His book is aimed at conscientious objectors in industry studies with a deep familiarity of industry research in the university context. While this might otherwise seem like a restrictive scope, Caldwell, early on, makes an observation that exposes a deep and risk-inducing gap in the university system's approach to research ethics. Most often, university ethics reviews centre on potential harms a project might inflict on the research subject as a result of power imbalances between them and the researcher. For a researcher in industry studies, Caldwell points out, "the power imbalance between the researcher and the research is flipped; the tables are turned so that the researcher is more legally at risk than the research subject (the corporation)" (2). If researchers are ever to have a hope of scrutinising industries with exorbitant largesses, the university must develop some sort of ethical protocol that protects its personnel.

In beginning to articulate what is otherwise unspoken in the mechanisms of creative industries, Caldwell draws a perimeter around and names a few phenomena in film and media industries where these labour-based issues have taken root: folding and fracturing. Folding, in Caldwell's words, "describes the industrial efforts and interactions needed to form working serial production partnerships […] [s]ince flexibility via outsourcing now largely defines production, folding refers to the difficult work of turning small-scale individual spec workers into a profitable larger scale collective enterprise" (32). Different types of media production are then rarely separated from one another making them harder to place in the union model of labour organising (34). Meanwhile, fractures are "folds that have snapped or failed" (42), with strikes representing the quintessential fracture. Fracturing occurs when a fold that hinges on spreading unpaid and speculative labour across multiple dimensions of creative production is stressed. Conditions which specworkers might have consented to are rendered unacceptable by the introduction of a new variable that either amplifies the contradictions in the previous work agreement or which make the work altogether impossible. The prime example Caldwell provides is the rise in popularity of reality TV, which drastically increased shooting ratios, and a simultaneous switch to digital cameras (39). Suddenly, editors were faced with mountainous volumes of footage which they could not feasibly sift through.

Caldwell's methods range from auto-ethnography to interviews to textual analysis, all of which lead the researcher to roadblocks. Deep-tissue analyses are thwarted by the amount of censorious control industries can exercise over researchers' access to insider spaces. A researcher cannot always know the extent to which a production company depends on exploitation built on specwork. Interviewees may not disclose all the necessary details, or even agree to be interviewed, for fear of reprisal. Companies may not share internal memoranda or other official ordinances that

would cast a poor light on their higher-ups. But limited access or "arm's length interactions" amount to their own instructive spaces (123), or "loaded cultural contact zones" even if they were not the places Caldwell aimed to investigate (123). In this way, Caldwell manages to mine insights on the intrinsic character of the industry's "cultural caste system" from publicly available information (71). One example that stands out was Caldwell's analysis of a virtual workshop for emerging filmmakers that was ostensibly led by Werner Herzog. Rather than appear in-person, Herzog used an AI avatar in absentia because he was purportedly too busy to appear personally (82). This particular example illuminates the ways some of the individuals resting in the upper-caste of cultural production industries are surrounded by a mythos of self-made success when their work is, in actuality, buttressed by personal assistants, half-cocked mentorship, and other means of outsourcing tasks to less renowned labourers. While an explicit interview with Herzog may ostensibly be the best possible source for a researcher, Herzog's absence communicates information in its own right.

Despite *Specworld*'s length, I was left a little adrift when searching for ways to blend traditional CMS methods with Caldwell's auto-ethnographic ones. Caldwell writes that one of his hopes with his project is to blend film studies methods with production studies, platform studies, and others. In practice, though, the book does very little modelling for any future studies that would blend, for example, film-studies style close reading with production studies. *Specworld* is all but devoid of direct engagement with primary, aesthetic objects. As a student of film, literary, and media studies, I have personal stake in trying to recover the methods I have been schooled in even while following Caldwell's intervention. Although I risk appearing defensive of my educational background, I do believe Caldwell's sweeping gestures to CMS's shortcomings requires, at the very least, some direct citation. For the conscientious scholar of film who hopes to account for the material conditions surrounding creative producers, the only clear path forward seems to be to abandon close reading and aesthetic studies in favour of systems analysis. But scholars and audiences alike will be unlikely to entirely abandon monographs about single makers shrouded in a mist of prestige. How, then, should we infuse film studies methods with systems analysis, besides the bare acknowledgment that a work was produced by preying on poor dreamers?

Specworld is a heavy-hitter, striking pressure points in media industries and dispelling the glamour around what are, at their core, deeply exploitative systems that leverage broken promises to dreamers. Caldwell's observations carry weight far beyond the specialised territory he works within. What his work has prompted me to reflect on, as a writer, editor and emerging academic, is just how much DNA writing, publishing, and academic worlds share with those charted in *Specworld*. Time-consuming submissions to journals, magazines, conferences, grad programs, and more, many of which charge a fee up-front, choreograph aspirants in ways that are eerily similar to those Caldwell describes in his book. *Specworld* prompts consideration into what the infrastructure for disseminating creative works could look like in a world without spec—one which recognises the cost of creative labour when one has not been anointed by the system as worthy of remuneration.

Suggested Citation

Krahn, Jessie. "*Specworld: Folds, Faults, and Fractures in Embedded Creator Industries*, by John Thornton Caldwell." *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, no. 31, 2026, pp. 151–154. DOI: https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.31.18.

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