

Book Review:

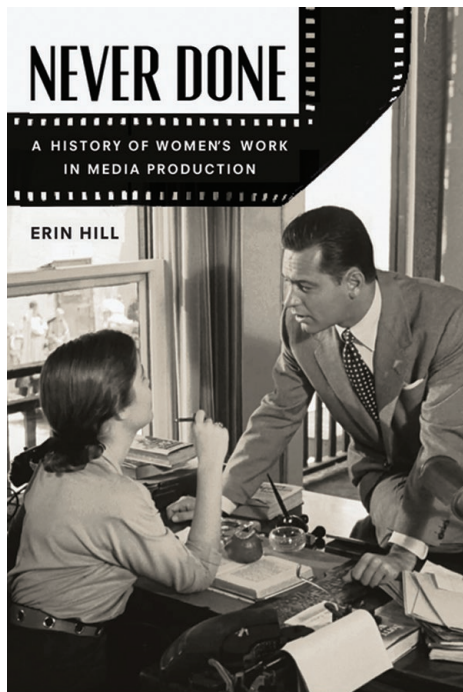
Never Done: A History of Women's Work in Media Production

Hill, Erin
New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016.

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In an essay on the work of film history, Vivian Sobchack comments on the “productive unreliability and partiality of lived and invested memories, murmurs, nostalgias, stories, myths, and dreams” that shade modern-day explorations of the past.² In an era defined by on-demand access and myriad viewing platforms—and suffused with fictional representations of historical events—our contemporary relationship to the past is defined by, as Sobchack notes, “multiple layers of unrelenting mediation.”³ From the studio era to the present day, the “dream factory” of Hollywood has always been uniquely active in generating such phenomena, especially regarding its own place in the cultural imagination. Yet the recent attention to the industry’s endemic problem with sexual harassment reveals that today Hollywood’s history is written in tweets, Facebook posts, and blogs—a testimonial discourse that allows the individual to speak for themselves and, simultaneously, identify with others (the #MeToo campaign, for instance).

In her illuminating book *Never Done: A History of Women's Work in Media Production*, Erin Hill engages with still other issues of solidarity, personal agency, and myth-making in studio-era Hollywood. Where feminist scholarship has tended to focus on more high-profile women in the industry, including stars, screenwriters, and directors, Hill traces the contributions of

female workers far behind the scenes. From secretaries to commissary workers, screenwriters to seamstresses, among many other roles, Hill revisits the complex hierarchies and everyday experiences of women often omitted from Hollywood's grander historical narratives. As she sets forth,

[F]emale workers, so often segregated and devalued under the studio system, should not suffer the same fate in media history by being considered only for what they *could not* do as casualties of unjust gender politics. Examining the types of work women *could* and *did* do [. . .] reveals their agency [. . .] and helps frame an understanding of contemporary gendered labor.⁴

Indeed, Hill crafts a lineage of female labor in the entertainment industry from its earliest days to the contemporary moment, taking readers from the 1890s (in which, for example, women hand-colored films for Edison's studios) to Hollywood in the 2000s (characterized in part by the "dues-paying mythology" surrounding the role of assistant).⁵ Grounding her commentary in a wealth of sources including studio archives, popular press coverage, memoirs, and her own experiences working in Hollywood, Hill crafts a compelling account that directly acknowledges, even as it draws from, the "multiple layers of unrelenting mediation" so characteristic of film (and) history.⁶

A key strength of the book is Hill's emphasis on the mapping out of women's places in the studio, which is effective in giving spatial/concrete representation to the various accounts of creative opportunities (or the lack thereof) open to women. Particularly striking is the inclusion of a map of the Lasky Studio from 1918, in which the sites of film production occupy the center of the lot with areas devoted to clerical work, associated with female employees, skirting along the edge.⁷ Through reference to such maps and footage from studio tour films, Hill highlights how "women in general had been rooted to a specific, peripheral place at studios, literally and figuratively."⁸ In chapter 1, for instance, she points to the "fluid, heterosocial work environment" that enabled early filmmakers such as Lois Weber and Margaret Booth to contribute to the burgeoning industry, and yet with the greater success of the studio system came an entrenchment of normative gender distinctions.⁹ As explored further in chapter 2, women were discouraged from more high-profile roles in production and direction and instead found themselves steered to jobs in screenwriting, reading, and research which were located, in the case of MGM, in a separate writers' building.¹⁰

Although these roles were themselves enormously valuable and creative, Hill notes that the "agency of female movie makers was now confined to *paper*, along with all of its pejorative association with clerical work."¹¹ Indeed, Hill does much throughout her study to highlight the significance of such ostensibly commonplace work in an industry preoccupied with the production of glamorous images. In chapters 3 and 4, the clerical worker emerges as a key player both in popular culture of the time and in the day-to-day running of the studio. Hill argues convincingly that the role of secretary was itself "creative service": a term meant to convey the complexities of a job that demanded both the efficient execution of clerical tasks to support the "creative vision" of studio personnel and a great deal of emotional labor.¹² The latter relates to the ability to project particular emotions to engage most effectively with others, a skill encapsulated in a telling quote from Mervyn LeRoy: "[A secretary's] real value is that she can make friends for me, or enemies, just by the ways she handles a phone call, a letter, a visitor to my office."¹³ Case studies of professionals including Ida Koverman, Louis B.

Mayer's executive secretary, and Peggy Robertson, Alfred Hitchcock's assistant, reveal the logistical and personal demands of these roles and offer still more unexpected insight into the ways these film legends worked.

The closing chapters explore women's evolving presence in fields such as casting, publicity, and script continuity, tracing both early-cinema and modern-day iterations of these jobs. Indeed, the Epilogue offers more personal commentary from Hill as she reflects on her own career in the film industry. Rather than read as overtly subjective, her remarks add another facet to the myriad perspectives chronicled throughout the work; so attentive is Hill to the voices of those women sidelined in film history that her own, when it appears, blends well into the overarching tone of the book.

At a time in which revelations about industry sexism and brutal power games emerge on a seemingly daily basis, Hill's book stands as a valuable chronicle of not just the struggles but also the successes of studio-era Hollywood women. Enhancing our understanding of the past while helping to place present-day crises in their historical context, Hill demonstrates that a woman's work in Hollywood is, indeed, never done.

¹ Ana Salzberg is Lecturer in Film Studies and Visual Culture at the University of Dundee. Her monograph *Beyond the Looking Glass: Narcissism and Female Stardom in Studio-Era Hollywood* was published by Berghahn Books in 2014.

² Vivian Sobchack. "What Is Film History?, or The Riddle of the Sphinxes," in *Reinventing Film Studies*, eds. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (London: Arnold, 2000), 300–15, 313.

³ *Ibid.*, 311.

⁴ Erin Hill, *Never Done: A History of Women's Work in Media Production* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 6.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 24; *Ibid.*, 217.

⁶ Sobchack, "What Is Film History?" 311.

⁷ Hill, *Never Done*, 42.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 56–57.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹² *Ibid.*, 130–33.

¹³ Quoted in *ibid.*, 131.

Bibliography

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