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Contraction: When Hollywood Gets Smaller

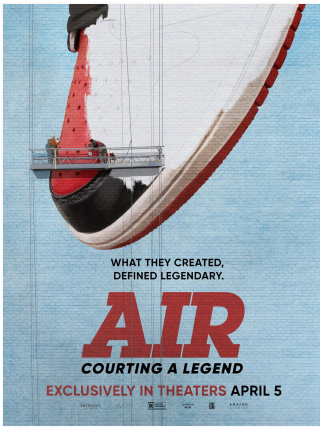
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BY NOW
HOLLYWOOD'S writers' strike has downshifted from its ebullient early moments into a mode designed for the

long haul. On the one hand, most studio picket lines now have themes: pickets for alumni groups, show reunions (*Frasier*, *One Day at a Time*, *Jane the Virgin*, *BoJack Horseman*/*Tuca & Bertie*), Latine writers, Beyoncé appreciation, and Disability Writes; takeovers by union strippers; pickets where joggers or cyclists go studio to studio; and Pride pickets all across town. The themes help boost morale. They give writers new reasons to come out and walk. That local morale is essential now that the directors have cut a deal, and the writers are waiting for the actors, who may join them on strike in July.

On the other hand, writers are also still inspired to mount pop-up mini-pickets on location and at odd hours. Just a few cadres are enough to set up an “actual picket line,” and teamsters don't cross picket lines. Production just stops. Unlike the nine-to-one and one-to-five shifts at the studio gates, these are pickets designed for maximum pressure, and they are working. If the actors strike, they won't be necessary.

When I went to Netflix in the strike's early days, I naturally ran into generations of past film studies students, some breaking in, some well established. We

monthly dispatches on the collisions between the art ... the industry ... and the experience of contemporary Hollywood. The art is often underestimated and demands closer analysis. The industry is undergoing profound and rapid changes that demand explanation. And our experiences of movies and TV and everything that has grown up around them demand more precise description. City of Industry will try to do all those things at once. Neither an insider's guide nor a view from nowhere, this column is about what it means to think inside the Hollywood slipstream.

LARB CONTRIBUTOR

caught up. These are chatty picket lines. There were hundreds of writers I didn't know, but there were recognizable hyphenates. There was Boots Riley—the Bay Area veteran of innumerable labor actions whose new show *I'm a Virgo* dropped on Amazon this month—and there was Steven Levitan—the network sitcom vet and *Modern Family* creator whose *Reboot* was canceled at Hulu earlier this spring. A month later at a comedy writers' theme day at Warner Bros. Discovery, CEO David Zaslav had solidified his position as the villain of the strike. A sign read, “David Zaslav listens to Nickelback [the Canadian rock band].” It was an insult from days gone by, perhaps most famously leveled at Ted Cruz in 2016. If the memes were showing their age, the writers were showing their frustration: “How's about I punch YOU up?”

The writers' demands range from simple pay rates to more complex changes to residuals to “existential” questions about the potential use of AI and staffing levels on TV series. From outside, I imagined that the fight for transparency around streaming ratings fell into the existential category. I thought that as the culture nudged its way over the apex of TV and into an era of contraction, it would be essential that writers know a great deal more about who is watching their work and how intently. The strike is the opening battle in a grinding set of skirmishes to come. I also believed that the fight for transparency was one where the writers would easily find themselves on the same side as actors and agents, since all these groups know less than they would prefer to know about the audiences that support their quotes.

But it appears that I was wrong, and wrong in a way that

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The Algorithmic Hustle: Surplus Comedy and Hollywood Specwork

J. D. Connor discusses Netflix's business model, specwork in comedy, and

points back to the imperatives of this dawning era of contraction. Listening to Writers Guild of America (WGA) reps make their case to the public—or to the subset of the public that listens to podcasts where WGA reps make their case—I discovered that the guild strategy appears to be to leave the fight for transparency to advertisers.

Even in an ad recession, advertising is where the action is at in streaming. The return of inflation and higher interest rates in 2022 led investors—both retail and private equity—to put the brakes on strategies that prioritized subscriber growth at any cost. The pivot to profitability—profitability *now*—has meant the renaissance of advertising. Netflix has partnered with Microsoft to deliver ads; Max, Disney+, and now Amazon have launched cheaper ad-supported tiers; Hulu’s value to Disney seems to have come into focus around its reliable ad-viewing audience; and everyone has leaned into their free ad-supported streaming channels (Roku, Pluto TV, Xumo Play, Tubi, Freevee, Plex, Crackle, Samsung TV Plus, Vizio WatchFree+, and on and on).

Advertisers have relatively simple demands: they want to know what they are advertising next to, and they want to know who sees their ads. They don’t want to advertise next to content that will damage the brand, a problem YouTube has long faced and that Twitter has seemingly made its new business plan. And they don’t want to take your word for it when you say that their ads appear before a large, desirable audience.

Because major advertisers want consistency, they tend to

the extraction of surplus value from Black labor...

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The Funnel and the Horn: On Reinventing James Cameron’s “Avatar”

J. D. Connor analyzes how cultural shifts in the relationship between movies and money made James Cameron’s initial record-breaking blockbuster “Avatar” somewhat forgettable while the Disney marketing machine is now going to try to reinvent the franchise...

want to buy up front and to buy what they already know is working for them. That means buying ads on shows that are already hits. Explaining to advertisers that you have, once again, canceled all the shows they advertised on last quarter but that you have a lot of brand new shows to replace them is much, much less attractive than promising that season five of *Stranger Things* is just around the corner.

If you do end up with new hits, those audiences will be sold to advertisers in instant auctions—what are called “programmatic” ads. This is the magic that Microsoft promises to deliver for Netflix through a platform called Xandr, which is supposed to revolutionize the programmatic ad auction business in a world where we have hypergranular real-time data about viewers. AT&T built Xandr out of some *other* adtech companies it bought, plus some in-house initiatives, and gave it that goofy name, which it came up with by putting Alexander Graham Bell through a Silicon Valley–style partial disemvoweling. Then AT&T sold the whole thing to Microsoft at about the same time it was selling Warner Bros. to Discovery.

From the WGA’s point of view, it appears, they no longer need to fight quite so hard to convince streamers to release their data. Technology is making it possible for companies such as Nielsen and Parrot Analytics to know a great deal about viewership. Beyond that, writers can let the ad agencies and their clients fight the ratings fight, and the guild can go back to fighting for writing jobs. This canny move may have cost the writers some interunion solidarity, but the studios’ absolute refusal to negotiate

Post-Shawarma: On Avengers: Infinity War

Aaron Bady wonders:
can you imagine how
exhausting it has been to
build the Marvel
Cinematic Universe?...

about AI likely makes that moot. “Chat GPT doesn’t have childhood trauma,” one of the better early picket signs proclaimed. Writers have plenty of trauma; they can be pretty sure that actors do too.

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It was weird to be alone on the couch and near tears. I was watching grainy footage of James Jordan Sr.’s stripped car while Sonny Vaccaro (Matt Damon) patiently explained to Michael how bad things were going to get for him. I was watching *Air*, the new Ben Affleck–directed movie about getting Michael Jordan to sign with Nike, and the scene hit hard enough that I can still bring myself to that point thinking about what a genuinely nice guy James seemed to be and how oddly close I felt to his murder in 1993.

That emotional proximity comes partly because *Air* is such a “dad movie,” partly because the speech was well written by Alex Convery, but, crucially, also because William Goldenberg’s editing is so sharp. As Damon goes through Vaccaro’s monologue, we don’t simply cut between him and the archives; we ping around the conference table, seemingly at random, taking in flashes of reaction from Michael’s parents, his agent, and the executives at Nike. James Sr.’s is the last reaction we see before the film cuts to archive shots where his car will appear. He is played by Julius Tennon, and he is not smiling in these moments, as if he can almost see what is coming. There is nothing random about that sequence, of course. It is an example of how solidly *Air* is put together.

We watch everyone react to the pitch—everyone *but* Michael. He is ostentatiously never seen from the front except during archive footage. Mostly, I found that deeply annoying. But when Vaccaro is addressing him, pushing to get him to understand this future-perfect nightmare, his absence pays off. The returned gaze that we have come to expect from an infinitude of shot and reverse-shot sequences is not going to appear and relieve the tension. Instead of getting a shot of Michael, a performance of Michael believing or doubting or denying or laughing it all off or *anything*, we have to look elsewhere for relief.

I knew my sentimentality about the pitch was problematic, but it still came as a crushing blow to see that [Donald Trump's campaign](#) had felt that same gap in the editing and responded by making the speech about Trump. They lifted the entire monologue and used it to backstop an amateurish montage of Trump's rise-fall-and-rise-again(?) political career. At first, one wonders if Damon has lost his crypto-shilling mind, but then it becomes clear that the Trump people have simply stolen the speech, and because they are inept craftspeople who despise their audience, they didn't even bother to change the lines about shoes. Affleck and Damon were suitably pissed and promised legal action, but they couldn't bring themselves to respond to Trump [as *Deadspin* had](#)—"Go fuck yourself."

(My larger point here is that one of the odder but nevertheless effective things about Affleck and Damon is their loving attention to men's professional lives within corporations. We find it in their work in *Air* and *The Informant!* [2009], in *The Company Men* [2010] and *The*

Accountant [2016], in *Syriana* [2005] and *Promised Land* [2012]. That fascination is a weakness of liberalism masquerading as hardheaded financialized realism. I share that fascination in spades. And while I like to think I can keep it separate from my politics, the Trump ad makes it much harder. I know how naive it is to feel that Michael Jordan's lucrative Nike deal is a blow against American racial capitalism, but I know in my bones that Trump jumping in to hijack Jordan's story is much, much worse.)

Damon's character has no idea what is coming for Michael Jordan, only that it will be awful. *We* know what is coming, and the archival clips remind us of the brutal and ludicrous gauntlet he will be put through. The point of the pitch is that horrible, horrible stuff is inevitably going to happen, even to Jordan, and that Nike understands that and will stick with him. This transcendent player, who seemingly knows only winning, will need to come to terms with irreparable loss.

This is the cinema of contraction, a place where the newly emerging culture of constraint finds a way to accept its limitations. It is explicit: the Jordans will agree to bind themselves to Nike, to accept these limits (however lucrative they are), and in exchange the company will be equally bound. Contract, constraint, and the limited utopia of belonging even as the world falls apart.

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With the nearly simultaneous 2023 releases of *Air*, *Tetris*, and *BlackBerry*, critics have noted a new form of "business biopic" this spring. These are not the older "lonely

crusade” business movies such as *Tucker: The Man and His Dream* (1988), *The Founder* (2016), *Joy* (the 2015 one about the mop), or *Flash of Genius* (the 2008 one about intermittent windshield wipers). The reason there is competition between Nike and Adidas is that *everyone* immediately knows that Michael Jordan is a tremendous player, and is worth it. The reason there is competition for *Tetris* between Henk Rogers (Taron Egerton) and others is that *everyone* immediately knows that *Tetris* is a great game, and is worth it. These are movies about convincing someone to sell you their valuable rights.

Air and *Tetris* both turn on that moment of contraction, when Jordan will be convinced to sign with Nike; when ELORG, the late-Soviet computer monopoly, will be convinced to sign away its rights to the video game.

BlackBerry is a rise-and-fall story, and its phases are marked by contracts: a deal with Bell Atlantic on the way up, a failed deal with them on the way down, and a bunch of illegally backdated talent contracts in between that will spawn the SEC investigation that all but wrecks the company.

This conjunction certainly *feels* like a moment, but these movies raise a larger question: How is it that cultural objects with long and differing lead times converge? Is it magic? Pareidolia? Is the basic move of cultural studies in its zeitgeisty forms just a hallucination? Surely we have a stronger sense of convergence than survey. Realizing that *Air* and *Tetris* and *BlackBerry* were released at the same time seems meaningful. Realizing that *Air* and *Jesus Revolution* and *Scream VI* were released at the same time seems merely coincidental. One is a trend; the other is

more likely to be the answer to the question of what's at the multiplex.

But perhaps we need to shift the scale of our attention to something more like, “No one making *Jesus Revolution* cared that *Scream VI* was coming out at the same time, but the folks making *Tetris* and *BlackBerry* should have, might have, would have been tracking each other and come to a decision that this convergence was worth risking.” And to the extent that the convergence was worth the risk, we have a culture operating with a degree of intensified intention.

Part of that intensity comes from the movies' own allegorical charge. Each of them tells fragments of its own backstory. *Tetris* was produced by MARV and AI Film—AI is Access Industries, Leonard Blavatnik's company. Blavatnik, one of the 50 wealthiest people on earth, got his start in that same post-Soviet privatization frenzy, making billions in aluminum and oil. Today, AI's portfolio includes much, much more, but is heavy on media: Warner Music Group, RatPac-Dune, DAZN Group, a piece of A24. Blavatnik, now knighted, pumps huge amounts of money through UK cultural institutions. *Tetris* was shot in Scotland. The guy gives back.

As for *Air*, [Scott Mendelson](#) noticed:

The film dramatizes boardroom pitches and frantic business phone calls into a tale of how capitalism was pretzeled into supplying fortune and glory to members of a demographic rarely on the receiving end.

So it makes sense that the Skydance and Mandalay-produced film is the first from Ben Affleck and Matt Damon's Artists Equity.

It also makes sense that *Air* is an Amazon movie, a story of retail transformation, with Ben Affleck playing Phil Knight as a nervous, Zen-like anti-Bezos. With his tight curls and his bare feet up on the desk, Knight comes across as the inverse of Jeff Bezos's shiny bald head and improbable traps.

When we say, "It makes sense," what we are recognizing is a logic of scale running from the micro to the macro and back, from the individual contract to the dispersal and availability of entertainment goods. The people who forge those relationships find ways of tailoring their pitches to the situation, and the mark of a good pitch is the free flow of relevance across those scales. In these moments, people want to know they aren't simply signing a deal; they are making a difference.

Amanda Lotz relentlessly tracks the contractual changes in the television system. Her early recognition was that, for workers, producers, and distributors, the revolution in television was realized through a set of contractual transformations at the intermediate or meso-level. We may live at the micro-level, but we're always making sense of our lives by thinking about these other orders, oscillating between the deal and the dispositive, and every three years, the guilds get a chance to attempt to force meso-scale adjustments across the industry. That's the

scale the writers are going for when they talk about making a living between shows or about the career-educational model where you start as an assistant and work your way up to running a show.

This time around, the writers have a stronger sense of their role in the macro-struggle that would ultimately raise labor's share of value. In the 15 years since the last WGA strike, US labor unions have become much more member-led, galvanized by the teachers unions and the fights at Amazon and Starbucks, by flight attendants and nurses, on campuses and in grocery stores. There have been education efforts by the Democratic Socialists of America, the Service Employees International Union, the NewsGuild-CWA, and more. Across the WGA, members are making sense of their role in the "hot labor summer" in new ways.

Eventually there will be a deal between the studios and the guilds, and for a moment their conflicts will condense to the size of a conference room. In *Air*, *Tetris*, and even *BlackBerry*, there are glimmers of utopia in those moments of contraction, a promise that the world is held together through such deals. But for striking writers (and actors), the agreements will come without the utopia at the other end, only the promise of more work and more dealmaking.

Such a moment of cultural sync is not an illusion. It is an artifact of interpretation, for sure, but of an interpretation that belongs to negotiating teams reading contracts in the room and belongs to the writers on the picket lines as much it does to the people who wrote, performed,

directed, produced, and greenlit the movies. This is what it means to have a sense of the occasion.

The deal that emerges will likely offer new forms of job security on individual series—I think the writers will get at least some of their staffing demands—but it won't stave off a significant reduction in the number of scripted series. The meso- and the macro- will uncouple. Indeed, producers are already road-testing arguments that bumps in writer compensation will only deepen the impending contraction.

It may seem forced to call all these things—the signing of a new minimum basic agreement, the narrowing of everyone's negotiating horizons, the shrinking of the number of scripted series overall—"contraction." But the production companies have forced those meanings to converge; they have turned a conceptual pun into writers' lived experience.

In response, the writers have done all they can to keep the field of conflict as broad as possible, to unlive the limits of the possible. So you will see pickets on *Sunset* and *Melrose* and *Culver* and *Radford* and wherever the studios try to sneak in some shooting, trying to get everyone to agree to lower their sights in advance. I used to think that the forces of contraction in Hollywood, like the powers arrayed against the US labor movement and like the systems of constraint and demoralization deployed against people across the globe, would always manage to shove everyone back to the table. But I was wrong about demands for algorithmic transparency, and I'm sentimental enough to wonder whether the

centripetal forces of capital can hold the thing together indefinitely.

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