

Auto/Ethnography and Tinsel Town: Nathaniel Kohn's Pursuing Hollywood and How it Relates to My Own Experiences Chasing the Dream of Creating Culture Through Cinema

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Review Essay:

Nathaniel Kohn (2006). Pursuing Hollywood: Seduction, Obsession, Dread. Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press (Crossroads in Qualitative Inquiry Series), 179 pages, ISBN 978-0-7391-0925-4, Price \$22.95

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Abstract: In Nathaniel KOHN's *Pursuing Hollywood*, auto/ethnography and interpretive interaction are discussed alongside postmodern sign theory and the machinations of making films in the Hollywood system. Interwoven into this review-essay of KOHN's book are auto/ethnographical elements of the reviewer's personal experiences making an independent film and doing business in what the reviewer refers to as "La La Land." While KOHN's book is meant to be an insider's gaze onto a world few know first-hand, the reviewer has had similar experiences and reads the book as an identifying text and a launch point for his own experiential accounts.

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1. Introduction

I spent the summer of 2007 on set for my independent film, *The Watermelon*, produced by LightSong Films and Jordan River Productions.¹ It had been a two year process, from writing the script, finding someone to option it, then the process of securing financing, casting actors, hiring a crew, finding locations, paying (or not paying) permits, dealing with unions, and experiencing the overall atmosphere of the competitive world of independent filmmaking in Los Angeles (herein "La La Land"). Throughout the process, I took notes, with the idea of someday writing a personal account, or auto/ethnography, of what it takes to make a low-budget movie (the budget was under half a million for my film, which is "nothing" in Hollywood money). I wanted to incorporate traditional methods of ethnography along with experimental methods in qualitative research;

1 See <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0945521/>.

independent filmmaking is, after all, a subculture with its own set of rules, rituals, and social scripts. Of all the how-to books and memoirs published, I did not find one that took a sociological approach, although there were plenty of books labeled sociology and anthropology regarding the interpretation of films as culture texts and representations of society, politics, and the personal. [1]

Pursuing Hollywood by Nathaniel KOHN, however, fit the criterion I was seeking. It is a memoir about working in the Hollywood and independent film systems, interacting with lawyers, agents, studio moguls, and "name" actors; the book describes the wheeling-and-dealing and hustling-and-lying it takes to make a movie, something most film schools outside Los Angeles never seem to grasp or teach students who dream about creating culture on the big screen. Reading KOHN's account, I found myself identifying, for I had gone through similar experiences trying to get my screenplays made into something real, with both positive and negative experiences. Furthermore, KOHN, much to my delight, uses qualitative methods in his lifewriting, mixing critical theory, cultural studies, and minimalist fiction techniques. [2]

2. Critical Methodology

KOHN explains that *Pursuing Hollywood* is "an autobiographical regaling of my life in the movie business [...] that slowly turns into an autoethnographical examination of a particular time and place [...] I take Stuart HALL's detour through theory and have trouble finding my way out (p.ix). [3]

Indeed, it is easy to get lost in the murk and mire of the cultural critical thinking of Hollywood movies when taking on HALL's (1990) method of detour from social science to cultural studies. KOHN admits that he struggles with "hegemonic formations" (p.ix). What he actually struggles with is finding his place, role and identity in the strange big business of creating culture through visual images. First, he is not an American, but a New Zealander, attempting to pave his way through a system that has never been receptive to outsiders unless they come in with a successful, profitable foreign or independent film and possess the promise of continued success and the knack for bringing in a decent (or better yet, fantastic) return on investment.² He finds himself to be a stranger in a strange land, having to start from square one and get the attention of those with the power to make movies happen (i.e., financing). [4]

KOHN uses the method of the layered account (RONAI, 1992, 1996) and sociological introspection (ELLIS, 1991) to tell his story. He does not cite RONAI and ELLIS; this is my view of his method. He cites the minimalist fiction of Raymond CARVER (1976, 1981) as an example of the type of narrative structure he is employing, noting that his auto/ethnography is "written as a linked series of minimalist short stories with continuing characters and omnipresent communication technologies" (p.x). KOHN does not go into a lengthy discussion of method, nor does he provide too much of a literature review, which is

2 Examples of recent outsider films becoming insider babes are *The Blair Witch Project*, *Swingers*, *Open Water*, and *Napolean Dynamite*.

disappointing; I would like to know if there are other works that take the same approach as *Pursuing Hollywood*?³ Perhaps there is no existing literature and KOHN is wandering around in new textual territory. His chapters move back and forth through time, without linear contrivances, from first person narrative to critical analysis of his inner and outer experience, resembling RONAL's (1992, 1996) method of the layered account for which she is quite known in the qualitative research field. The "layered text" as SPEEDY (2008) labels it "is presented as a series of fragments and traces and as a conscious effort at writing against the grain of overviews, manuals and handbooks" (p.xv). The effect creates a frantic, nervous energy in the text, showing a fast-paced life of hustling in a world that KOHN becomes obsessed by, and many are seduced with: the idea of fame, the road to dread. [5]

KOHN has another obsession, one not found too often at movie industry parties and on the red carpet: theory, which is

"a warping factor that is a dizzying labyrinth from which I can no longer find escape nor even reprieve. An emerging self-reflexivity generates this obsession that turns me into a willful accomplice in Baudrillard's perfect crime (the murder of reality) [...] Theory tickles me in the beginning, then seduces me, then corrupts me, then intertwines with my spine like a hungry vine" (p.x). [6]

When I read this, I knew I had stumbled upon someone who had gone through the same thing I did in 2006-07: running around La La Land, going to pitch meetings, sitting down in Starbucks with my manager to strategize the next game plan, the next option, the next project; dealing with all the ups and downs of the production on my film (Screen Actors Guild bonds, location permits, difficult producers); and occasionally hanging out with a celebrity or two, all the while carrying, in my backpack, and reading volumes of theory by RONELL (2002), MILLS (1959), and, of course, BAUDRILLARD (1983, 1988). Several production assistants and actors on the set picked up one book I was in the middle of, RONELL's *Stupidity* (2002), leafed through the pages, and asked, "What is this? How can you read this? It makes no sense." The title was perfect for a La La Land setting. On the set, I often sat in a corner somewhere, between shots, working on my laptop, writing an ethnography based on fifteen months of research in Tijuana, Mexico (see HEMMINGSON, 2009); when people asked me if I was working on a new screenplay, I said, "Yes," not wanting to explain what I was really doing, and that was going from one obsession to the next: from the screenplay to qualitative research. And why was this? After years of writing journalism, screenplays, and novels for paychecks to pay the rent and buy cat food for my two cats, why was I suddenly obsessed with academic matters and writing essays and a book that would not bring in money? Certainly, my agent in New York and my manager in Burbank wanted to know what the hell I was doing with my writing time. [7]

3 Some possibilities could be *Poker Faces* by David HAYANO (1982) and *Karaoke Nights* by Rob DREW (2001), both works of auto/ethnography and popular culture.

The answer was easy: "I need a break—an intellectual sabbatical, an interlude where I can *actually think* about things." [8]

The next answer, which I didn't verbalize: "The rat race and games are wearing me down." The money was decent, could have been a lot better, and I never shy away from competition and the desire to succeed, but I needed a change of pace for a while. I had always been interested in theory—postmodernist, poststructuralist, postfeminist, and now post-Hollywood. In *Pursuing Hollywood*, I felt I had discovered a kindred soul trapped between two obsessions, a movie producer who went back to the academy, earned a Ph.D., was still connected to the business but from a far (KOHN is director of Roger Ebert's *Overlooked Film Festival*). While I have no intention of leaving the business—and there are several more films in various forms of pre-production, options renewed, hedge funds and investors being wooed for cash—I find myself desiring a secondary existence, a shadow life if you will: a life in words and thought and semiotic rhetoric. [9]

3. Cultural Study

Most people, who do not live in Los Angeles, have no idea what goes on behind the scenes—what it takes—to get a visual narrative on the screen; in fact, many people *in Los Angeles* do not know, these struggling actors and writers and dreamers; it is not until the door is open and one works within the system that the truth is revealed, and it is a truth that is not very pretty. The nature of making films is surrounded by myth, lies and misconceptions. It is a maze to amaze. KOHN came to Hollywood, with his Kiwi accent, bright-eyed, bushy-tailed, and naïve; he walked away inevitably jaded and just a tad bitter (a tad, mind you). Well, okay, more than a tad. Author Harlan ELLISON used to have an analogy about being a writer in Tinsel Town: "You spend months, years, climbing that mountain of shit to reach that rose that sits on top, and by the time you get there, you're covered in shit and the rose has wilted and smells like shit."⁴ [10]

KOHN gives readers "an insider's tale that confronts how movies get made, who gets chosen to make them, who is seduced into thinking she or he can make them, and who becomes obsessed with trying to make them" (p.ix). There is little glamor or fairy tale elements—it is a *business*; it is about *money*; it is about the need to *win* and the *fear* of losing. There are no rules set in stone; methods of making films change weekly. It is a people business, this makes it ripe as a study in social interaction and social game theory. The fact is, in the film business, everyone lies to one another and you have to go into each business meeting and deal knowing the person sitting across from you is a bullshitter, while most likely you too are lying to or deceiving them (in the role of hustler)—and *they* know it just as *you* know it; and so the interaction becomes a method of the symbolic, a

4 I am paraphrasing this, it is not an exact quote. I heard him say this twice in speeches at conventions. ELLISON, by the way, has won the Writer's Guild of America's Best Teleplay Award three times, the only TV writer who has. He is best known for his Star Trek episode "The City on the Edge Forever" and dozens of classic short stories and story collections in the speculative fiction (never "sci-fi," which he hates) field. A cult SF film, starring a young Don JOHNSON, *A Boy and His Dog*, is based on his award-winning novella of the same name.

ritual of the subculture. It also leaves you emotionally and spiritually exhausted (physically is a given). This game-playing is both exasperating and seductive; some can never get enough of it, and get caught up in the mindset and atmosphere to the point they cannot escape; some are disgusted by what they have to go through, as if forced to perform a vile act of debauchery in front of a live audience that mocks and snickers. [11]

While producing the epic *Zulu Dawn* (1979), KOHN describes—using the method of lived experience that DENZIN (2001) calls for in effective writing of interpretive interaction (thus the reader can have a vicarious experience)—playing such games and being less than truthful while dealing with currency exchange, bank wires, and paying the thousands of local extras in South Africa needed for the battle scenes between the British Army and the Zulu tribesmen. All the while, KOHN knows that at any minute the production could be shut down, the extras could walk off the set if they aren't taken care of, people could get pissed off and he could wind up in physical danger. The situations are as shady as a drug transaction:

"On the table are two new cardboard suitcases lined with pastel-colored tissue papers, a pastiche of muted pinks and purples swaddling piles of South African rand notes that overflow onto the table [...] I say that I'd better count it, the proper business procedure requires that I count it. The money is in ten-rand notes, the largest denomination in circulation. The faded and worn bills are fastened together with rusty paper clips, ten to a bunch, 4,250 bunches by my calculation" (p.xxi). [12]

The first chapter is aptly titled "Word Games" and has KOHN on the roof of the Le Bel Age Hotel in La La Land with his entertainment lawyer/manager⁵, waiting for an important phone call, making calls, trying to get pre-production and above-the-line financing, talking trash about the William Morris Agency and various players in town. Celebrity names pop up now and then in the text, such as Rutger HAUER; they want someone like Mel GIBSON for the lead (they can get funding with his bankable name attached) but Rutger HAUER has the right "look." One of the producers says:

"I'm stringing [HAUER] along. Actors love that. A phone call a day. A drink or two. Asking him what he thinks. Telling him how good he looks, how smart he is. Knowing what he wants to hear and then dangling it in front of him, just out of reach. You know, stringing him along."

"It all sounds,' I say, 'depressingly familiar'"(p.10). [13]

5 The roles of representatives are now blurred in La La Land. The "manager" is a fairly new moniker. An executive producer at Universal Studios, while in a meeting about one of my scripts, once told me, "I remember when a 'manager' was basically a friend, a fellow actor or writer or director, who would advise talent on what projects to attach to or pass on; what person to date; what gala event to seen at and with whom. Now, a manager is your lawyer, your producer, your pimp or your whore." But never an agent. California law now prohibits agents, who take 15%, from becoming producers on the projects they represent—they were making too much money and were not always operating for a client's best interest (or so the rationale of the law indicates). Managers, on the other hand, who take 10% or a cut of the film, do a lot of the same things an agent does, they simply have a different title. This is not unlike a television show staff writer to change his title to "co-executive producer" to they won't have to pay the Writer's Guild more dues as their pay rate increases. As with everything in La La Land (or anywhere, really) it all comes down to money.

Indeed. I know how KOHN felt, that awareness of being shined on—knowing that this producer is playing Rutger HAUER, he must wonder how much he is being played, how many lies he is being told. La La Land is the land of players, real ones and wannabes⁶ and games folk who talk big and promise you the universe, but when crunch time comes, when they are called upon to deliver, those calls to action are neither acknowledged nor returned,⁷ they vanish like a line of cocaine in the women's bathroom at the Viper Room on Sunset. Later, an executive producer exhibits his authority and power by stating, in a loud booming voice that lets KOHN know he is God,⁸ HAUER will not be in the film because he is not bankable, his movies are drawing people in to buy tickets—although HAUER is a close personal friend (Burt LANCASTER and Peter O'TOOLE are eventually cast.) [14]

La La Land players will often say that 90 percent of the business is spent chasing down financing; true to this truth, KOHN shows what he has to go through to get money for his culture-making dream, doing the fast-talking game of the hustle with potential investors. One of them cannot because his assets are tied up, but he has gold coins from a Portuguese galleon he salvaged on a dive.

"A couple of the coins roll onto the floor.

'See what you can get for 'em,' says John. 'If you can sell 'em for a million, I'll put the money into the movie. Nobody'll know, except us. These aren't listed assets, if you know what I'm saying'" (p.18). [15]

While many novels or scripts are optioned and re-optioned every year, and a billion ideas are in a constant flux of "development," very few (realistically, I would say one percent) actually become a tangible, real thing and make it on the screen, big or small. Within his chapters, KOHN shows the process of people talking about ideas, talking about doing films, working on scripts that never get finished, projects that never escape from the hell that is called "development." But some projects are murdered while passing the development process and in the middle of being filmed. KOHN relates the story of a movie he was producing in Fayetteville, Arkansas, starring Hal HOLBROOK, shut down mid-filming because funding ran out (many movies start without all funding in place, with producers

6 I recall an interview Gyweneth PALTROW gave, after getting married, about the dating scene in La La Land; she said she was tired of dating the guys in the business that (I paraphrase) "all want to be players and act like players, but have nothing going on, so they try to latch onto someone who has things going on." That is, if you are a man seen with a famous actress about town, going to restaurants and dinner (or a woman with a famous male actor) and having the paparazzi photographing you, people will see you as a player, and maybe you can get something going with a studio or production company just because you have been "seen" in the social structure.

7 I have had several "producers" who said they could secure financing or get a script to a certain A-list star, telling me over drinks and lunch, "Hey, it's no problem, I'm connected," disappear on me when it was time to deliver. Everyone has, it's part of the game.

8 Executive Producers (aka "EPs") love to shout when they speak. One at Paramount used such a tone to reveal how powerful he was, by making one of his staff members, who had an MBA and wore a two thousand dollar suit, go get him a ham sandwich and get his car out of the garage. "That's what I pay this guy a six-figure salary for!" he yelled. Another one, at Sony TV, after reading my pilot script for a cop show, stood up, pointed at me, and screamed: "It's just like any other show, like *Law and Order!* Listen, doing what everyone else is doing, where does it get you ... it's like fucking the same wife for ten years – the pussy may be filet mignon, but every now and then you want lobster or a vegetarian meal."

scrambling about for completion funds while things are underway). The actors and crew are shocked. HOLBROOK tries to be soothing, telling people he has been through this before: "These things happen [...] If you want to be in this business, you have to understand that sometimes pictures collapse. It's a risky business, fed by dreams. Dreams are not always the strongest foundation" (p.22). [16]

One of the production crew does not take this well. "This was my chance," she says, "my chance to make it, and it's gone now [...] You robbed me, you robbed me of my one chance" (p.22). [17]

This person was seduced by the obsession of the dreaded notion of "making it." It is the desire for fame that engulfs many people with Hollywood dreams. Everywhere in La La land, you will hear people feverishly talking about "making it." But this was some small town in Arkansas ... what "chance" did this person think they almost had and lost? [18]

4. BAUDRILLARD & Hollywood

"We live everywhere already in an 'aesthetic' hallucination of reality (Baudrillard 1983b)" (p.43). Throughout *Pursuing Hollywood*, there are quotes and references to BAUDRILLARD (and bell hooks, Trinh MINH-HA, Walter BENJAMIN). Citing BAUDRILLARD for Hollywood is too easy; BAUDRILLARD has written reams of words about the processed image and the hackneyed *simulacra*. "Disneyland is the perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulation" (BAUDRILLARD1983, p.23). And where is Disneyland located? Yes, just south of La La Land. "What could be more seductive than the secret?" asks BAUDRILLARD (1988, p.64), noting "everywhere one seeks to produce meaning" (p.63). The seductive secret is the mystery and charm of La La Land; the production of meaning is the game every La La Land player wishes to master. In this snippet of dialogue, KOHN reflects on these BAUDRILLARDian sentiments:

"So there I was, standing with Ally McBeal and Michelle Pfeiffer ..."

"Ally McBeal is a character. You were standing with the actress—"

"Real names don't matter in television. In television, actors become their characters. Disappear into their characters, for good and without desperation. Frasier is Frasier for God's sake, and not some actor" (p.114). [19]

Thus: "The media have not only filtered our experience of external realities, they have also entered our very experience of ourselves" (MILLS, 1956, p.67). [20]

5. The Screenplay(ed) Life

In the introduction, I stated my desire to write a study on the social interactions necessary to make movies, the ethnography of the filmmaking subculture. KOHN has touched on this; he is somewhere in the middle of big budget studio moviemaking and low budget independent endeavors—each has its own set of rules, rituals, and social scripts. Speaking of the script, in the final chapter, "Messings," KOHN goes into screenplay format, courier font, and second person; instead of car chase scenes, romantic comedy banter, or cute space aliens running around suburbia, KOHN falls into the rabbit hole of theory: [21]

TANYA

Virillo?

YOU

A French philosopher. He writes mostly about speed, the speed of information and what it's doing to us, how the faster we go, the more it seems like we're standing still.

TANYA

You said you're a producer? Feature films? Do you have a movie in competition? An art film, maybe? You didn't do *Trainspotting*, did you, or another one of those pointless depressing downer films? You don't look like a producer to me. You look more like a lawyer or philosopher or something.

YOU

My life's a picnoleptic moment...

TANYA

You wish (p.143).

It happens to all of us sooner or later. [22]

6. Summary

KOHN, as both *La La Land* player and sociological interpretive interactionist, has written an insider's layered account for the outsider to understand. He shows the ups and downs of the process of producing a film, sometimes with positive results, sometimes ending in disaster. He shows the lies and games insider's play in order to make dreams become real. The book could be recommended for any student and scholar of film studies, cultural anthropology or social psychology; it tackles the issue of the obsessive desire for fame, the seduction of the image of being successful and loved, and the dread of finding out the truth of a fantasy business. It is recommended for any actor, writer, director, or producer from mid-America, the East Coast, or anywhere (even southern California) who heads out west in pursuit of the dream of creating cinema culture. Finally, it is recommended for qualitative researchers interested in auto/ethnography, the effect of cinema has on culture and the personal, and how the desire to make movies is a motivation for hundreds of thousands of people who have lofty dreams of fame and fortune. [23]

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