

Review

Dan Hassler-Forest, *Science Fiction, Fantasy and Politics: Transmedia World-building Beyond Capitalism*, London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016. ISBN 97817834849, 224pp.

In the opening pages of *Science Fiction, Fantasy and Politics: Transmedia World-building Beyond Capitalism*, Hassler-Forest uses *The LEGO Movie* to highlight the fundamental contradictions that exist between 'straightforward assembly' and 'creative production', and canonical storyworlds, particularly in relation to fantastic fiction, and creative fan culture. This premise is central to what Hassler-Forest defines as transmedia world-building, and sets this work apart from other studies which have mostly 'chosen one perspective, either focusing on the construction of complex, coherent storyworlds, or on fan cultures' creative appropriation of popular culture'. Hassler-Forest instead sees 'this internal contradiction as an expression of the two faces of global capitalism' and draws on Hardt and Negri's work, in particular the concept of Empire, to examine the political potential of transmedia world-building in science fiction and fantasy, and the fan cultures surrounding them.

In defining transmedia world-building, Hassler-Forest moves away from definitions of the term transmedia storytelling introduced by Henry Jenkins and developed and contested by scholars such as Christy Dena, and Derek Johnson. For Hassler-Forest, transmedia world-building 'foregrounds the fact that our immersion in imaginary storyworlds takes place not within, but *across* media' and the following points are emphasised:

1. Transmedia world-building takes place across media;
2. Transmedia world-building involves audience participation;
3. Transmedia world-building is a process that defers narrative closure.

The inclusion of audience participation (examined more specifically in the book as fan activity) as a key element of transmedia world-building works to open up the concept of transmedia storytelling. Rather than fan production being an 'unauthorized expansion of these media franchises into new directions which reflect the reader's desire to 'fill in the gaps' they have discovered in the commercially produced material' (Jenkins 2007, http://henryjenkins.org/2007/03/transmedia_storytelling_101.html) fan activity becomes a

fundamental aspect of transmedia world-building especially as it relates to politics and global capitalism. Hassler-Forest also suggests that ‘audiences involved in participatory cultures of transmedia world-building should also no longer be viewed primarily as textual poachers [...] or fans’ practices as the resurrection of a romanticized pre-industrial folk culture’. Fan activity is rather examined as a form of immaterial and affective labour that ‘operates both in opposition to and in collaboration with new forms of corporate power’.

This dual analysis of transmedia storyworlds and audience participation runs through each of the book’s four main chapters. Hassler-Forest examines both the ways in which the storyworlds are organised politically and ideologically, as well as the ways in which audience participation is re-appropriated as a form of immaterial labour. Hassler-Forest starts with *Lord of The Rings* and *Star Trek* – two storyworlds which developed ‘the conceptual vocabulary and tools for transmedia world-building’ in the fantasy and science fiction genres respectively (*Star Wars*, as a ‘science fantasy’ genre is not examined). He suggests that *Lord of the Rings* presents a pre-capitalist vision of static pseudo-medievalism while *Star Trek* presents a postcapitalist technological utopia, yet countercultural activists in both fandoms have appropriated the storyworlds and the radical currents they encapsulate.

In chapter two, *Game of Thrones* and *Battlestar Galactica* are positioned as ‘direct responses’ to *Lord of The Rings* and *Star Trek*, albeit with a more ‘gritty’ aesthetic and cynical politics. Hassler-Forest discusses the role that brand culture and authenticity plays in relation to HBO in particular, arguing that ‘In the case of *Game of Thrones*, the construction of this crucial authenticity relied heavily on fans’ immaterial labor, and their willingness to contribute actively to the selling of an unfamiliar narrative franchise to a wider audience.’ Of particular interest in this chapter is the notion of ‘fantastical capitalism’, which is used to describe ‘fantastical storyworlds that give narrative and aesthetic expression to Empire’s spirit of capitalist realism’: both *Game of Thrones* and *Battlestar Galactica* present the audience with storyworlds unlike our own, yet the alternatives they suggest to capitalism are rejected as unrealistic. Hassler-Forest ties this notion of fantastic capitalism into the political economy inscribed in the brand culture that surrounds *Game of Thrones* in particular, and suggests that each of these overshadow the structural contradictions of the storyworld which resonate with capital realism.

The third chapter shifts to storyworlds that explicitly foreground class conflict and revolutionary political action: *Spartacus* and *The Hunger Games*. Hassler-Forest argues that these show ‘the transformative potential that is contained within the biopolitical organization of Empire’, and the importance of this chapter for me lies in the discussion of fan activism. *Spartacus*, despite its potential revolutionary reading, fails to inspire radical fan activity. Although Hassler-Forest notes that fan activity has grown since the series finale, this activity has taken the form of cosplay, conventions and workshops. *The Hunger Games*, however, has engendered a fandom aware of and engaged with multiple forms of activism. Hassler-Forest notes the tension between the transmedia advertising campaign’s ‘Capital Couture’ adverts and fans such as the Harry Potter Alliance, who argued that Lionsgate’s ‘collusion with global fashion brands endorsed capitalist values that the franchise as a whole

attacked'. *The Hunger Games* inspired a range of political activism on a global scale, which Hassler-Forest ascribes the franchise's storyworld and cultural ubiquity. Here, I question whether he misses an important point about the target audience for each storyworld and the effect this has on political mobilisation. *Spartacus* is positioned as a programme aimed at adults on the Starz network, where 'Scenes of sex and violence are depicted in close-up and slow-motion'; *The Hunger Games* is a Young Adult novel adapted to film bearing an age-appropriate certificate. Rather than the storyworld and cultural ubiquity of each franchise affecting how it is used by audiences, I would suggest the age of the audience plays a more important role. Hassler-Forest does note that Katniss has been seen as 'a figurehead for a generation that has been robbed of its future' but fails to engage further with this line of inquiry. Given the age of many members of the Harry Potter Alliance as well as other texts inspiring political activism, like *Avatar*, I would have liked to have seen more analysis of this.

The final chapter introduces the idea of posthumanism as a way to think beyond capitalism through the case studies of *The Walking Dead* and Janelle Monáe's *Metropolis* saga. Hassler-Forest tracks the rise and role of the zombie through popular culture to its current status as a postmodern horror trope, 'fundamentally uncontainable, allowing its own colonialist legacy to contaminate and destabilize everything it infects' and suggest that *The Walking Dead* offers a radical potential when approached from the perspective of critical posthumanism. More interesting to me in this chapter, however, is the analysis of the *Metropolis* storyworld. Each of the transmedia texts examined thus far focus on books, films and television shows. Examining music as a form of transmedia storytelling provides a fascinating analysis of a currently understudied aspect of transmedia. In addition, by including a specifically Afrofuturistic storyworld Hassler-Forest makes an effort to move away from white, Eurocentric notions of world-building – something which he critiques throughout the book in relation to the key texts examined.

Science Fiction, Fantasy and Politics: Transmedia World-building Beyond Capitalism offers a wide ranging analysis of transmedia storyworlds and fan culture, covering branding, 'Quality TV', the HBO effect, political revolution, race and gender. The contradiction between how the political and ideological organisation of the storyworlds contain anticapitalist elements, and how user practices that are essential to the construction of these worlds can be re-appropriated as forms of immaterial labour provides an interesting examination of fan culture and industry processes, as well as complicating some of the more celebratory aspects of fan activity seen in some academic accounts of fan studies. Hassler-Forest's attempt to 'explore productive ways of thinking about the contradictory nature of fantastic world-building' by combining 'critical theory and the Marxist tradition's radical perspective with the more utopian and celebratory approach often found within fan studies' is certainly an interesting and worthwhile read.

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Biographical note:

Bethan Jones is a PhD candidate at Aberystwyth University, examining cult TV, fandom and nostalgia in relation to the X-Files and Twin Peaks revivals. Her work has been published in *Transformative Works and Cultures*, *Sexualities* and *Participations*, and her co-edited collection on crowdfunding was published by Peter Lang in 2015. Bethan is board member of the Fan Studies Network and a member of the World Star Wars Project primary research group. Contact: bethanvjones@hotmail.com.