An excerpt from:

RETERRITORIALIZING FANDOM: FAN CULTURE AND IMMATERIAL LABOR

[40] Organized sf and fantasy fandom emerged visibly in the American landscape in the wake of the countercultural movements of the 1960s. The first San Diego Comic-Con, now the most influential fan convention in the Western world, was founded in 1970 in the context of a developing grassroots fan culture. As fan conventions dedicated to comic books and fantastic genres grew and developed throughout the 1970s, fans self-identified as members of a subcultural group that existed outside of the mainstream. The pleasure of congregating at conventions like Comic-Con, WonderCon, FedCon, and many others is all too often described as a celebration of this shared outsider status: fans of imaginary storyworlds engage in cosplay by crafting staggering elaborate costumes to resemble their favorite characters and indulge publicly in other forms of “excessive” enthusiasm in ways that are remarkably different from the kind of aggressive tribalism associated with sports fandom. Instead, communities of genre fandom have traditionally been marked by their radically inclusive spirit: an enclave of nerds, geeks, and others who saw themselves as social outcasts excluded from hegemonic mainstream culture.

This makes such fantastic fandom a very specific type of community that goes against at least one basic understanding of the term. As political philosopher Iris Marion Young has argued, communities are typically constructed on the basis of the violent exclusion of otherness. The kind of “natural” balance that is so clearly visible, for instance, in Tolkien’s representation of the Shire is commonly perceived as authentic, organic, and pure. But the hobbits’ “pure and authentic” community can obviously exist only through exclusionary processes of racism, homophobia, and sexism. The model she proposes as a more productive alternative is what she calls a politics of difference: a set of social relations that fully embrace radical diversity, starting with the acknowledgment that the individual subject is itself multiple and uncontainable. Therefore, only by rejecting the Cartesian notion that the subject is singular, rational, and knowable can one arrive at a set of social relations based on solidarity, inclusiveness, and social justice.

Young’s ideal strongly resembles Hardt and Negri’s definition of the multitude as a fundamentally and irreducibly heterogeneous category that embodies this very politics of difference. The creative and self-organizing world of fan culture does indeed resonate with their description of the multitude’s political mobilization: a sense of community that isn’t based on a single common trait but on a solidarity that emerges partly through the shared sense of exclusion from a hegemonic mass culture, and partly from the creative energy of participatory culture and collective intelligence. Several arguments along these

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73 Tolkien’s ambivalence toward hobbits is evident in the way he combines a pastoral fantasy of “unspoiled” rural Britain with his patronizing and often hostile sensibility toward the “simple life” he both romanticizes and ridicules. This precisely mirrors Raymond Williams’s dialectical treatment of the relationship between the country and the city, in which “the distinction between built environments of cities and the humbly modified environments of rural and even remote regions appears arbitrary except as a particular manifestation of a rather long-standing ideological distinction between the country and the city.” Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Nottingham: Spokesman Books, 2011 [1973]), 119.


An excerpt from:


lines have of course been made by Henry Jenkins many times over, and they have by now even come to dominate in many ways the growing academic field of fan studies.

But, at the same time, the hyperconsumerism and general lack of radical political activity in these groups has become more problematic as fan culture has been increasingly absorbed by the mainstream. The many grassroots forms of organized fandom that emerged in the 1970s as a provocative alternative to mass culture can now no longer be approached with the same naiveté. Visiting a fan convention or watching a documentary such as Comic-Con Episode IV: A Fan’s Hope, one is struck by the overwhelming reproduction of an intense market logic, with fans desperately attempting to achieve the kind of fame and fortune associated with celebrity culture, competing fiercely in one of the many cosplay shows, or else embracing consumerism to the fullest by paying extortionate fees for celebrity photos and autographs, and by the never-ending quest to seek out the most valuable collectables and “limited collector’s editions.”

This transformation of the fan from marginalized outsider to collaborative hyperconsumer is illustrated vividly by the production and reception of Peter Jackson’s first series of Tolkien adaptations. Before the LOTR film trilogy’s production, fans had mainly been perceived by Hollywood film studios as irritants: niche groups of excessively invested consumers whose limited numbers rendered their voices insignificant in terms of desired audiences. The 1989 blockbuster Batman is a clear example of this kind of perception, as director Tim Burton and film studio Warner Brothers explicitly tailored their film for the largest possible audience, while the character’s most devoted fans were “fated to watch helplessly as ‘their’ treasured possession [was] given over to the whims of the majority.”

But less than a decade later, when Jackson’s film trilogy went into production, the fan’s status in the media industry was about to change. The clearest illustration of this transformation is the fan-driven website The One Ring. The site was established in 1998 with the explicit goal of reporting on the films’ production. Individual LOTR fans from New Zealand, known online by their Tolkienian aliases, sought to develop a network of spies that could report exclusive news related to Jackson’s massive production. Webmaster “Tehanu” first attempted to infiltrate the closed set where the town of Hobbiton was being constructed and was unsurprisingly escorted off the site by security guards as soon as her presence was noticed. But shortly thereafter, she received an invitation to return to the set the next day, where she was given a guided tour by Peter Jackson himself. “Tehanu” was told that she was free to take photographs and post them on her website, and, before long, The One Ring had become one of the key resources for publicity and breaking news surrounding the highly anticipated film trilogy.

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80 See http://www.theonering.net.


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The unusual alliance that was forged between the production company and the fan community The One Ring testifies to the shifting relationship between fan culture and media industries in the early twenty-first century. In this process, fans were addressed not only as the ideal consumers of a commercial fantastic franchise but also as valuable contributors to the process. The Tolkien enthusiasts who ran this website were quickly reframed by the production company not as hostile spies but as brand ambassadors thus legitimizing both their affective investment in the text and the sociocultural practices they had developed. Jackson’s collaborative approach thus explicitly established fans as both participants and crucial “influencers” and legitimizers: getting the most vocal Tolkien fans to support the film adaptations became the first important step toward bringing in a larger audience while positioning the LOTR films as “cult blockbusters” that cannily bridge the divide between “authentic” cult property and “artificial” mainstream. As a result, a set of “fannish” practices that once constituted an alternative to a corporate-driven mass culture was all too easily absorbed by the system it had previously resisted. This process illustrates how sub- and counter-cultural activities that emerged and developed outside of the mainstream can be reterritorialized by the media industries as valuable forms of immaterial labor.

In the context of Empire, immaterial labor has become the hegemonic form of work, where it has been able to intertwine the production of subjectivity with the production of things. Unlike the physical products that result from industrial processes, immaterial labor involves “the less-tangible symbolic and social dimensions of commodities.” In this sense, fandom’s labor in creating valuable “buzz” around a transmedia franchise like LOTR typifies capital’s new reliance on participatory audiences in the age of media convergence. Like the fans who became instrumental in promoting and legitimizing Jackson’s film project from its early stages to the later prequel trilogy, these influencers have only increased in relevance as media industries have come to rely more and more on networked cultures and “spreadable media.”

But this form of collaboration is ultimately much less participatory than the fan cultures from which these practices were derived. The grossly asymmetrical relationship between media producers and fans results in a continuous negotiation of questions of ownership as media corporations seek to maintain control over what they consider their intellectual property. When storyworlds like Tolkien’s become highly profitable global entertainment brands, they no longer make up a form of cultural commons that can be appropriated, embellished, transformed, or subverted by anyone freely. Instead, they become lucrative corporate franchises made up of a wide range of commodities, most of which are dependent upon fans’ affective and immaterial labor to achieve their desired commercial value: “What gives these

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83 Hardt and Negri, Empire, 29.
84 Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter, Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2009), 4.

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commodities value beyond their initial sales price is what fans add to them—the new uses to which fans put old things and the emotional landscapes [44] that fans construct around them.” The irony is that as the successful incorporation of fandom’s affective energy changes its direction from “transformative” to “affirmational,” the radical spirit that informs these storyworlds simultaneously seems to diminish or even evaporate.

The emotional landscapes constructed around storyworlds like Tolkien’s are more than merely the result of fans’ immaterial labor: these practices have also been absorbed and rearticulated by corporate forces that constantly seek out new ways to monetize the cultural logic and affective spirit of fan culture. A new generation of self-proclaimed “geek directors” such as Peter Jackson, Joss Whedon, J. J. Abrams, Brad Bird, Guillermo del Toro, and James Gunn has rapidly become a defining force in twenty-first-century Hollywood. Much of their appeal seems to derive not only from their repeated self-identification as members of the fan community but also from their successful incorporation of fan discourse both in their films and in the voluminous materials that accompany them: trailers, interviews, posters, making-of documentaries, toys, and promotional features all function as what Gerard Genette has described as “paratexts.” It is worth quoting Jonathan Gray at length on the importance of such paratexts as a way of framing a text or franchise in relation to fandom:

Paratexts are the greeters, gatekeepers, and cheerleaders for and of the media, filters through which we must pass on our way to “the text itself,” but some will only greet certain audiences. Many fan-made paratexts, in particular, address only those within the fandom. Other paratexts will scare away potential audiences, as the semblance of being a “fan text” is often enough to detract some. In such cases, though, the paratexts create the text for the fleeing would-be audience, suggesting a “geek factor” or an undesired depth that may turn them away. In other instances, paratexts will insist that a text is more mainstream, less niche or fannish.

The home video release strategy following the first LOTR film offers a vivid illustration of this phenomenon and the way in which the categories “mainstream” and “cult” are becoming more difficult to separate.

After the blockbuster success of The Fellowship of the Ring, New Line announced that there would be two separate DVD releases of the film for home video consumers: first the theatrical version of the film, accompanied by a few short “making-of” specials, and then, in the months preceding the next film’s theatrical release, a four-disc extended edition that added in nearly thirty minutes of additional scenes, together with many hours of elaborate behind-the-scenes documentaries, image galleries, audio commentaries, and other extras. While the movie-only DVD was geared toward the widest possible audience, the more elaborate and much pricier box set was obviously intended for more fannish consumers. The elaborate packaging, the exhaustive background material, the availability of limited-edition collectors’ editions, and the inclusion of extra footage were designed to appeal to viewers eager

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to invest in the films beyond simply (re-)experiencing them at home. But the franchise’s skyrocketing popularity helped make a much larger audience receptive to the box set’s discursive fandom: DVD sales of the extended editions ended up far exceeding expectations, setting a new benchmark for home video releases and winning many awards for their extra features.91

The production company’s impactful approach to the films’ DVD release strategy thereby provided a new model for “turning fan-friendly publicity material into a revenue-producing stream.”92 This was the result of the producers’ skillful negotiation of fan culture throughout the process of marketing, production, and distribution, but perhaps above all because of Jackson’s hugely successful appeal to a recognizable fan sensibility. In the many hours of audio commentary and behind-the-scenes material, he positions himself first as a fan of the books struggling valiantly to adapt the source material for another medium. He speaks candidly of his lifelong passion for the material in the register of fandom, reminiscing about the first paperback edition he used to own, and emphasizing many times that his main reason for making the films was his own fannish desire to see Tolkien’s storyworld faithfully adapted to the screen.93 In the narrative that is constructed in these carefully crafted collages of interview footage and behind-the-scenes materials, all the major cast and crew members become characters in their own right, engaged in a portal-quest that finds legitimacy and emotional resonance through its celebration of fandom.

Throughout the other paratextual material contained on those discs, members of cast and crew are consistently presented as a community of friends and creative collaborators driven by their love for the project, while continuously emphasizing the strong personal bonds that were forged between them. Their combined testimonies in interview form establish a parallel narrative to that of the LOTR storyworld, with Jackson playing what can only be described as “the Hobbit role”: that of the diminutive and unlikely hero who emerges—reluctantly but reliably—from a peripheral agrarian region to fulfill an impossibly ambitious [46] task.94 The cast and crew members that surround him make up a supportive and dedicated Fellowship whose efforts resonate at an emotional level, fostering “an intimate bond between cast, crew, and audience, one that combines with their construction of the film as a Work of Art, and with their construction of the DVD audience as discerning and requiring art aficionados.”95

The extra material on the DVD box sets thereby performed the crucial work of not only framing the films as something more than global Hollywood blockbusters but also constructing the audience as knowledgeable and respected participants in the process. The galleries and documentaries “teach a significant amount of production literacy,”96 moving far beyond the usual promotional videos to create a

92 Thompson, *The Frodo Franchise*, 163.
94 Peter Jackson’s “humble” New Zealand origins uncannily reflect Bilbo and Frodo’s remote geographical placement in the Shire, as far away from the high society of Minas Tirith as Wellington is from Hollywood.
95 Gray, *Show Sold Separately*, 103.
96 Gray, *Show Sold Separately*, 98.
bond of intimacy and involvement with the films’ global audience. The producers even came up with a way to include the fans in a more literal sense by adding to the extended edition’s end credits a listing of all LOTR fan club members. This symbolic acknowledgment of fans’ involvement with the franchise speaks volumes about the successful cooptation of fans’ affective investment and immaterial labor. The inclusion of many thousands of all-but-illegible names as an addition to the end credits guaranteed thousands of sales, while also sending out an important signal: fans are not simply the invisible and passive consumers but also the appreciated and explicitly acknowledged collaborators on this hugely profitable media enterprise.

This dynamic was heightened even further by the time the film trilogy based on The Hobbit went into production in 2011. For this project, The One Ring was established from the very start as the primary platform for the films’ promotion. Jackson used the site to broadcast weekly video reports from the set, explaining the novel technology that was being used for the films, giving guided tours of the reconstruction of familiar sets, and inviting viewers to engage with the project as intimate participants rather than anonymous consumers. And it is precisely this Althusserian interpellation of audiences as fans and participants that typifies the cultural logic of Empire. The rise of media convergence and participatory culture effectively deterritorializes the striated landscape of mass media, transforming the traditional distinction between “mainstream” and “cult” by making fans the valuable legitimizers and ambassadors of the most valuable transmedia franchises.

Therefore, just as Tolkien’s storyworld seemed to anticipate the dissolution of industrial capitalism’s imperialist order, the appropriation of fan culture in the films’ promotion and distribution shows how easily capitalist hegemony incorporates and subsumes countercultural practices. In the process, fans’ voluntary and immaterial labor is transformed from a set of social relations that operates on the fringes of capitalist culture to an essential component of Empire’s biopolitical power. Just as the difference between the cultural mainstream and countercultural elements has been irrevocably altered, twenty-first-century geek culture reterritorializes audiences’ affective relationship with imaginary storyworlds, finding in them new forms of value that suit the context of cognitive capitalism.

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