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Topic of Research: Gamers in the 'Bad Place': A Study of Select Young Adult Dystopian Fiction

Findings

The objective of the current study is to read select texts from the Young Adult dystopian fiction genre for their construction and treatment of gamified, dystopian cityscapes with specific interest directed towards Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* trilogy, James Dashner's *The Maze Runner* trilogy, Marie Lu's *Legend* trilogy, and Cindy Pon's *Want* duology. The study includes an analysis of these texts along with their multimedia adaptations wherever available. This study is built on the acknowledgement that these texts have a common narrative that tells the story of subversive survival in a cityscape governed by rules of competing, surviving and securing the urban experience in an urban dystopia. In studying the cross-platform media manifestations of these texts, this thesis operates at the intersection of urban cultures, dystopian literatures, film, reality-TV, (video)games and fandom studies.

The entry into the area of study is facilitated by a rumination on the end of the world in the 21st century – Y2K, 2012, and the end of the world as it continues – and the allure of the dystopia in popular culture. Early on, the thesis highlights the importance of the novel inclusion of videogames in most discussions of 21st century pop cultural participation of the dystopia, which occurred parallel to the growth of Young Adult dystopian fiction. This thesis studies how these two different media objects began to interact with and infect each other more and more through this proximity. Alongside the twin flames of blockbuster YA dystopian franchises and AAA games came new media, new markets and new appropriations of culture and art through the incisive proliferation of the culture and program industries. This thesis showcases how these industries, today, produce and normalize images of lived dystopias into the urban imaginary of which YA dystopian fiction is but a mirror of. As liveable spaces shrink and cityscapes become the site of both covert and overt survival games of limited resources in the face of war, want and disease, the rhetoric around gamification and megacities rises. Most of the existing criticism on urban dystopian fiction, which often doesn't delve deeply into YA dystopias beyond appendices and footnotes, fails to pay more than a cursory attention to the connection between the urban imaginary and the culture industry in the 21st century. This thesis attempts to redress YA dystopian fiction by bringing it to centre-stage as the space where this connection is most evident. The motivation behind choosing YA dystopian fiction as the core of this thesis' study is, however, not merely to discuss an omission but to underline the importance of a genre of fiction that is most symptomatic of the contradictions that make up public consciousness in the 21st century: a consciousness that might appear apathetic at times but is also hungering for political action.

After building on this background, the thesis directs its attention to the consumer of popular culture, a central figure and theme of YA dystopian fiction, the genre which is at once a capitalist-consumerist franchise and a manifesto for resistance and subversion. This figure contains immense, playable possibilities of alternative intricacies and polyvalent intensities of consumption, reception, participation, resistance, subversion and revolt. The thesis, consequently, presents a theorization of the 'playful' Young Adult, a generation characterised by its remarkable abilities of reading franchise fiction critically and re-using it for activism and contribution, as the 'Gamer of the Bad Place'. This is a figure which is able to resist the lure of the invasive culture and program industries while also using these products against the logic

of the industries that produce them. This figure prompts the articulation of highly important questions. How does a product of the culture (and program) industry meant to subjugate, suffocate and destroy political consciousness become a tool against the hold of these industries itself when the masses are situated as consumers in dystopias created for safeguarding against this very purpose? This is the core question and investigation of this thesis and can be articulated as follows: while the culture and program industries seek to control the occupants of the cityscape by appropriating the urban imaginary, this thesis explores the role of YA dystopian fiction and the gamers who inhabit them in using the very tools of these industries to intervene into the urban imaginary and open spaces of political action and escape.

The primary sources of this thesis help engage in articulating a well-rounded engagement with the above multi-faceted research question. These sources are a select collection of popular 21st century YA dystopian fiction which are, primarily, situated in near-future gamified American dystopian cityscapes governed by the logic of survival and perverse entertainment. A number of these series under study enjoy franchise status today so the study is enriched by analyses of the original novels as well as their diverse media adaptations, including film, graphic novels, videogames and digital platformization wherever available. This thesis also presents a detailed justification of the selection of these texts and how they are particularly involved in making sense of the representation of dystopias across media, influencing and being influenced by audio-visual aspects of dystopian storytelling as well as entertainment strategies geared towards the audience of this genre. This is revelatory of the scope of the thesis as well.

The thesis, to best present its study, is organised through an “Introduction”, followed by three extensive, interconnected chapters that have their own sections and sub-sections, and a finale titled “Towards a Conclusion”. The “Introduction” provides an overview of the research project that is carried out through this study, including objectives, scope, current state of the field(s), justification, methodology, and chapter division.

The first chapter enlarges upon the themes discussed above in relation to the dystopian fiction genre. The second chapter is a discussion of the peculiarly gamified nature of YA dystopias and the entanglement of habitation, navigation and survival that underlines them. The third chapter discusses games, gamers, gamified audiences, playable precarities and youth activism. The conclusion of the thesis is an addendum titled “Towards a Conclusion” which seeks to look beyond the first two decades of YA dystopian fiction of the 21st century and has sections on “Where is YA dystopian fiction today?”, pondering on the diversification and mutation of the genre after its popularity, and “The Desire to Dream of a Tomorrow”, a note on utopian futurisms and how to foster them. By making evident the interconnectedness between fictional dystopias and real-life youth concerns, this thesis is an endeavour in bringing to the fore the broader socio-cultural and political consequences of a popular and participatory genre and its lasting relevance in a global mediascape populated by the dreams and hopes of young adults in a dying world.