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Book Review: Ashumi Shah: The Mediaverse and Speculative Fiction Television: Understanding Speculative TV Fandoms

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Book Review

Ashumi Shah: *The Mediaverse and Speculative Fiction Television: Understanding Speculative TV Fandoms*

KEYWORDS

mediaverse, speculative fiction, television, fandom

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Book Review

Ashumi Shah: *The Mediaverse and Speculative Fiction Television: Understanding Speculative TV Fandoms*

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In *The Mediaverse and Speculative Fiction Television: Understanding Speculative TV Fandoms*, Ashumi Shah seeks to “parse, complexify and present as a template the interconnectedness of television texts and their stakeholders” (1). Shah refers to the “mediaverse” as a theoretical framework that combines “media-centric, text-centric, audience-centric, and production-centric approaches to media” (5). Shah deftly draws upon major scholars in each of these fields to synthesize these approaches and reinforce the concepts discussed in the text, beginning with Henry Jenkins’ aca/fan approach to media and fan studies (cf. 1). Shah’s mediaverse framework consists of four interrelated “primary structures” (8) based on Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of the ‘field.’ These structures include the media text, that text’s paratexts and intertexts, spectators, and networks and platforms (cf. *ibid.*). Shah clarifies that spectators include “active audiences, fans, and anti-fans” (*ibid.*) who all contribute to interpretive viewing practices and/or discussions of the text. Networks and platforms are also glossed as “physical and virtual sites that serve as networks for delivering media text” (*ibid.*) in a “post network world” (2). Importantly, Shah conceives the mediaverse as functioning as “a critical lens by employing concepts such as transmediality and intermediality to contextualise the texts in the current social, political and cultural climate,” allowing for “extensive comparison between various texts” and “their place in the development of media sub-cultures” (6).

The text consists of an introductory chapter, four case studies, and a concluding chapter. Shah takes an autoethnographic approach (cf. 11) and selects for each case study a speculative television text with which she is familiar as a fan. The introduction includes a description of these proposed mediaverses within the context of Web 2.0. The introduction also includes descriptions of each of the texts used for the case studies that follow and situates them within speculative fiction as well as within their franchises where relevant. The case studies include analyses of *Star Trek: Discovery* (2017-2024) and *Star Trek: Picard* (2020-2023), *Black Mirror* (2011-), *The OA* (2016-2019), and *Good Omens* (2019-).

In “The *Star Trek* Mediaverse,” Shah applies the mediaverse framework to the *Star Trek* franchise. To open with this case study is fitting because, as Shah points out, *Star Trek* and its fans have frequently been the vanguard for case studies in media and fan studies (cf. 23). One of the strengths of this chapter is that Shah establishes a point of contact with *Star Trek*, its long history, and its influence on fan studies without simply rehashing old talking points: her analysis focuses mostly on two newer shows, *Discovery* and *Picard*, about which there has been less scholarly debate but much fan (and anti-fan) conversation in recent years. In this chapter, Shah examines “the inception of the show, the history and development of the Tekker fandom, and the diegetic and formatting transformations evident in contemporary iterations of the text” (87). Shah uses the four structures of the mediaverse to trace the “codification of production, consumption, and prosumption practices associated with the text” (*ibid.*). The chapter focuses

more heavily on *Discovery* than *Picard* as the former was the series that initiated the (web) television revival for the contemporary *Star Trek* franchise. Both texts are placed in conversation with the overall franchise and are connected textually to earlier iterations. For example, Michael Burnham, the main character of *Discovery*, is revealed to be the human adopted sister of Spock from the original *Star Trek*, and *Picard* focuses on Jean-Luc Picard, the captain in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Shah points out how contemporary *Star Trek* shows trade in nostalgia to engage viewers and bring audiences to SVOD platforms but that these shows sometimes receive backlash in the form of #NotMyTrek anti-fan practices (cf. 88). All aspects of intermediality, transmediality, anti-fan response, and transformative creation are considered in the *Star Trek* mediaverse. Shah describes the “collaboration between the Trekkers [fans] and show’s cast members, creators, and delivery channels” (ibid.), outlining “Trekkers and audiences of the show as critics who engage with the text and determine its identity with the franchise at large” (88f.).

Star Trek as a franchise, and especially *Discovery* as a text, are placed within the context of speculative fiction as a response to “social and political circumstances” (89), while the third chapter, “Digital Consciousness in the *Black Mirror* Mediaverse”, examines *Black Mirror* as techno-dystopia (cf. 92f.). For this case study, Shah analyzes the interactive film *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* and two *Black Mirror* episodes, “Striking Vapors” (S5E1) and “Black Museum” (S4E6). The case study examines “the viewer as player” in *Bandersnatch* (93), “the virtual queer” (112) in “Striking Vapors”, and “digital consciousness” (118) in “Black Museum.” Shah argues that the selected *Black Mirror* texts “align the text with science fiction” and “provide commentary on contemporary culture within a near-futuristic setting in a way that involves audiences and thought experiments while at the same time exploring the limits of human knowledge” (126). In addition to the texts, Shah examines audience response and online discussions of the texts in fan spaces as part of the mediaverse framework, describing how audiences engage with media texts through “second screens” (130f.). Shah expands on “the use of the second screen by the producers or creators of the show, which tend to inform the experience of consuming the show by its audience” (152) in the following case studies of *The OA* and *Good Omens*.

In “The Metamodern Utopia in *The OA* Mediaverse,” Shah seeks to continue “to develop the concept of the mediaverse through a further exploration of the meaning-making process and its manifestations in fan-created and fan-altered texts” (135). *The OA* is described as operating somewhere between science fiction and fantasy within the larger umbrella of speculative fiction, and Shah engages with science fiction and fantasy fan practices and activism in *The OA* fan community in this case study, citing prominent scholars in the field—including Hills, Booth, Jenkins, Bacon-Smith, Coppa, and Pugh (cf. 132). As in the other case studies, this conversation is preceded by a lengthy textual analysis, taking the reader from a discussion of storytelling in *The OA* (cf. 141) to the narrative’s use of fantasy tropes in its depiction of the spiritual and its intertextuality with Biblical and mainstream fantasy depictions of the figure of Lucifer (cf. 157). In other intertextual analyses, *The OA* is also connected to the influential *Star Trek* franchise via the #SaveTheOA fan campaign after its untimely cancellation (a letter-writing campaign conducted by *Star Trek* fans famously saved the show from being canceled) (cf. 138). Shah also connects the authorial voice in *The OA*’s creator-writer-star Brit Marling to the later discussion of Neil Gaiman’s auteur in *Good Omens*.

Within the mediaverse framework, Shah argues that “celebrities may be identified as serving a paratextual function, and engaging with them may be seen as a means of allowing paratexts to influence one’s consumption practices and meaning-making, which in turn influence the popular and preferred



meanings and interpretations associated with the text among its producers, prosumers and consumers” (181). In “The *Good Omens* Mediaverse: Myth, Prophecies and the ‘Voice of God,’” Shah focuses on how the television series *Good Omens*—Gaiman’s adaptation of his 1990 novel with Terry Pratchett—meets the genre markers of fantasy fiction, bringing the reader fully into the realm of the fantastic from the science fiction *Star Trek* and *Black Mirror* via the multigenre *The OA*. For the *Good Omens* case study, Shah turns more fully toward fan fiction in her discussion of fandom (as opposed to other forms of fan engagement, such as online discussion of the text). She argues that, in *Good Omens*, the voice of God’s role as the narrator in season 1 reflects writer and showrunner Neil Gaiman’s authorial tone.

This segues into a discussion of Gaiman’s celebrity and auteur status within the fandom, wherein he once frequently engaged with fans on social media platforms and acted as the metaphorical ‘voice of God’ by providing additional production details and confirming or denying fan theories (cf. 221). Shah argues that, especially in the case of *Good Omens*: “While Barthes’ ‘Death of the Author’ argues for the dismissal of authorial intent when examining a text, such authorial intent is, in contemporary media consumption culture, crucial in determining canon as well as fanon, and thereby shaping the nature of the text’s consumption and appropriation. Authorial intent, therefore, can no longer be dismissed, especially when considering the kind of solid fan base that Neil Gaiman’s celebrity boasts” (215f.). Unfortunately (through no fault of Shah), this once-compelling argument about Gaiman’s celebrity status in a networked mediaverse must be reexamined in light of the enormous change in Gaiman’s public persona. In 2024, several women came forward and accused Gaiman of sexual misconduct. Gaiman is no longer publicly active on social media platforms or in online fan spaces. Several adaptations of his works have halted production, while others, including *Good Omens*, have distanced themselves from him (cf. Blair, Elizabeth: “Neil Gaiman has responded to sexual misconduct allegations. *NPR*, Jan. 14, 2025 [<https://www.npr.org/2025/01/14/nx-s1-5259516/neil-gaiman-response-sexual-misconduct-allegations>]). Fans have also largely distanced themselves from Gaiman in online spaces and in fan texts. While Shah’s argument about Gaiman’s celebrity/authorial status is no longer applicable, her analysis of *Good Omens* fan culture stands as a time capsule for the ways fans used to make room for authorial participation in the fan spaces around Gaiman’s texts. In a world of increasingly accessible media creators and actors, these arguments can still be applied to the stars of *Good Omens*, David Tennant and Michael Sheen (cf. 203), as well as to other celebrities and other texts, as in Shah’s discussion of *The OA*.

However, the *Good Omens* case study hinging on Neil Gaiman’s authorial status as the ‘Voice of God’ reveals one limitation of Shah’s analysis, in which she dismisses Terry Pratchett’s contribution to the text of the *Good Omens* television adaptation. In two separate footnotes, Shah explains that “the concept of the series itself will be analyzed as independent of the novel” (183) and that “[w]hile Pratchett also served as co-writer of the novel, he did not contribute directly to the series and also does not have the celebrity presence on social media that Gaiman commands, as a result of which Pratchett’s part in the text does not feature heavily in this analysis” (184). In these footnotes, Shah chooses not to mention that Pratchett’s lack of social media presence or involvement in the adaptation is because he died in 2015. In the first season of *Good Omens*, Gaiman provides a faithful adaptation of the original novel’s tone and style, which was arguably more heavily influenced by Pratchett’s writing style than Gaiman’s, so Pratchett still maintains authorial influence on the television text just as his fans in the networked mediaverse Shah describes ‘follow’ him from one text to another as Gaiman’s fans do (or used to do).

The work would additionally be strengthened by more numerous or varied examples of fan texts in Shah's mediaverse framework, which would provide more balance to the four structures of the mediaverse. The author provides some examples of online fan and anti-fan discussion but only incorporates one work of fan fiction to support her analyses. Each of the case studies includes rigorous textual analysis of the speculative television texts—and Shah shines here—but the fandom component of *Understanding Speculative TV Fandoms* can sometimes seem to be lost underneath the close reading of the canon texts.

Overall, *The Mediaverse and Speculative Fiction Television: Understanding Speculative TV Fandoms* provides a useful framework for discussing multiple aspects of media texts, their intertexts and paratexts, spectators, and networks and platforms in the increasingly interconnected world of post-network speculative-fiction television. Shah examines each case study with great facility and in great detail, making the texts accessible for readers unfamiliar with any canon text or its historical context. Additionally, Shah contextualizes her arguments and her proposed framework by skillfully drawing on major scholars in the fields of media studies and fan studies.

