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Book Review: Derek Johnson, *Media Franchising: Creative License and Collaboration in the Culture Industries*



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Franchising, as a term in media studies, tends to be associated with overtly commercial texts with little cultural value. Derek Johnson, with his new book *Media Franchising*, looks to bring a new perspective on the issue. In doing so, he doesn't so much overthrow the previous perception as complicate it in a highly-generative way; this book, though perhaps so rich in ideas that some concepts are left notably underserved, contributes greatly to a new scholarship of the franchise as a media practice.

The book has a simple structure: an introduction, five chapters in which Johnson presents case studies in support of various concepts relating to the book's central argument—that media franchising, rather than being a merely commercial operation, actually contains a variety of social relations and hegemonic claims to authority—and a conclusion. The introduction establishes the terms of the discussion, framing an opposition between transmedia scholars like Henry Jenkins (who are sometimes accused of advancing utopian ideas about audience empowerment via participatory culture) and cultural theorists who

posit, in their Frankfurt-esque way, that franchised mass media is only a tool of mass control. Johnson here emphasizes the tone in which he will be operating, claiming that “[t]he multiplied media production under examination here will highlight franchising not just as industry and business, but as shared and iterative culture” (8). Notably, Johnson invokes venerable industrial scholar Caldwell's *Production Culture* (2008) here, and its claims that those operating within the production system, though often conceived of as cogs in an industrial machine, actually form a culture that functions as a creative community.

The first chapter, “Imagining the Franchise,” delves into the definitional questions behind what franchises are and what they do. Johnson draws a comparison to fast-food franchising, an operation which he claims, on first look, seems to pivot around power imbalances between the franchisor and franchisee. However, according to Johnson, upon closer examination, a multitude of conflicts papered over by the underlying power imbalance reveal themselves. Johnson touches on

a variety of topics here—one of the weakest is his too-short eight-page discussion of the gendering of franchising, which, by failing to delve into the topic in depth, has the unfortunate side effect of treating gender as a side note instead of a often main structuring force of franchising. For the most part, though, the chapter does what it needs to, finishing the yeoman's work of setting up the terms for the more exciting discussions yet to come.

Chapter two, "From Ownership to Partnership," revolves around a discussion of franchising as a historical practice in relation to the evolution of corporate media work from the synergistic, horizontally-integrated '80s to the modern return to contracted license work. As a case study, Johnson examines the *X-Men* franchise in particular and Marvel Entertainment as a media company in general. Johnson often loses the more-specific focus on the *X-Men* franchise as his argument develops; however, the narrative of Marvel's failure in the '80, its success as a producer of multiple medias, and its subsequent retrenchment as a comics publisher/intellectual property clearinghouse is far more interesting than the specific story of one franchised property. Johnson also doesn't engage very precisely with the shared nature of the Marvel comics universe, in which the X-Men exist as one set of characters who interact with other IPs within the same continuity, nor does he deal substantially with Marvel's film division, which would seem to contradict his belief that Marvel, after its '80s setbacks, completely withdrew from producing works outside of its four-colored comics remit. These issues notwithstanding, the chapter does an excellent job of marrying theory with history, and will be of interest to comics scholars and film scholars alike.

In "Sharing Worlds," the third chapter, Johnson establishes and defends one of his biggest points of contention with the idea that franchises are to be understood solely as a commercial practice. Instead, he argues, the franchise should be looked at as a contested space between commercial and creative interests in the production, with the latter seeking ways to differentiate their work from what has come before in order to carve out an auteur-like creative identity. Johnson focuses on Ronald Moore, former *Star Trek: Deep Space*

Nine co-executive producer and showrunner on the 21st-century remake of *Battlestar Galactica*. Moore, Johnson claims, takes pains to establish himself as the chief creative voice on *Battlestar*, and also tries to occupy the positions of both a fan of the original series and the creator of an almost-wholly reimagined version of the show. Without a grounded historical perspective like that of his other chapters, Johnson's writing isn't quite as tightly focused and can come off as meandering; at the same time, Johnson makes a persuasive case for why this kind of work should be seen as creative, or at least as vying to be seen as creative, thus making space for the concept of the franchise creator/remaker as a figure of authorial note.

The next chapter, "A Complicated Genesis," describes the production history of the *Transformers* franchise as a case study in the interaction between franchising and transnationalism. Johnson points out the way that the brand first contracted from regionally-specific iterations, like the Japanese *Dialclone* toy line, into a unified identity, and then refragmented into regionally-specific media extensions. Johnson doesn't pay a lot of attention to the American film series, which might have helped his argument; otherwise, this chapter is the book's strongest, reframing nationalist film and television discourse in a way which deconstructs both the idea of wholly separable national cultural entities in a late-capitalist context and the opposed concept of the uniformly globalized culture. Transnational culture, in Johnson's framing, isn't an "either/or" "local/global" proposition; it's both at different times and in different circumstances.

The final chapter, "Occupying Industries," might be the book's most controversial section. Here Johnson describes transmedia campaigns attached to franchises as mobilizing fan labor in exploitative ways, as well as transforming the idea of labor (as embodied in franchises like *The Office*) into a form of play. This flies in the face of much positivistic work on transmedia storytelling. Johnson doesn't completely ignore fan agency in his argument. The early portions of the chapter, jumping back and forth between online extensions for *The Office*, *Battlestar Galactica*, and *Lost*, are perhaps less coherent than may be hoped, but his closing argument about fan-mod games and their relationship to commercial productions

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(as embodied by a pair of *Battlestar* mods and the franchise's officially-licensed games) is quite persuasive.

In his conclusion, after parsing out a set of points about franchising and media indicated by the preceding work, Johnson claims that his book is simply the beginnings of a much longer conversation to be had about franchises from a variety of perspectives. If so, it is a promising

beginning. In its plurality of artifacts and perspectives, *Media Franchises* may be disruptive to those theorists with a strong investment in a single unified framework for understanding franchising as a process. However, to interdisciplinary media and cultural scholars with less commitment to an ideologically-charged point of view and an interest in the popular and the commercial, this book should prove indispensable.

Joshua Richardson is a Master's student in the Bryan Singer Division of Critical Studies at the School of Cinematic Arts at the University of Southern California. His scholarly interests include horror, new media, and fan culture. He has been published (with colleague Ora McWilliams) in *In The Peanut Gallery With Mystery Science Theater 3000* and Open Court Press's *Inception and Philosophy*, as well as the journal *Film Matters*.