Setting Fire to Wet Blankets: Radical Politics and Hollywood Franchises

Dan Hassler-Forest

> There's an awakening from hedonic depressive slumber, and *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire* is not merely in tune with that, it's amplifying it. Explosion in the heart of the commodity? Yes, and fire causes more fire ...
>
> — Mark Fisher[1]

One of the most exciting things about Mark Fisher's writing was the unpredictability of his critical response to big Hollywood movies. As one of our age's most sensitive, acute, and politically impassioned cultural theorists, his reviews of popular blockbusters were as refined as they were counterintuitive. Rather than mere knee-jerk think-pieces, his blog entries and published film reviews offered thoughtful reflections on the relationship between politics, ideology, and popular culture.

Thus, Mark's "k-punk" blog entry on the blockbuster sequel *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire* (Lawrence US 2013) gave an infectious account of the film's political direction, all but forcing us to view Suzanne Collins's politically ambivalent YA fiction as the "counter-narrative to capitalist realism" his effusive review made it out to be. Like Walter Benjamin responding to the latest Charlie Chaplin feature with uncontainable joy, Fisher's written pieces like "Remember Who The Enemy Is," seemed to transform the object of analysis by sheer force of will. And having read his explosive review, it's impossible not to look upon the film with similar fondness, even if we may remain skeptical about this franchise's actual ability to "corrode the commodity culture that frames it."[2]

One of Fisher's most productive obsessions was indeed this contradictory relationship between ideology and popular entertainment. Always critical of coyly "edgy" or "subversive" movies like *The Dark Knight* (2008), he could also be bowled over by the radical energy of a dystopian action movie and its uncanny ability to allegorize the monstrous logic of global capitalism. In the decade that has passed

since *Capitalist Realism* was first published, this contradiction has only intensified, as the growing power of global entertainment conglomerates like the Walt Disney Company has been accompanied by an increasing presence of progressive politics — from the anti-imperialism of *Black Panther* (2018) to the explicit anti-fascism of the recent *Star Wars* movies. But at the same time, these entertainment commodities remain deadlocked by their status as entries in ongoing serialized franchises, which ultimately defeats any attempt to follow up on their occasional suggestions of radical political change.

Writing as someone with a similarly conflicted passion for popular fantastic cinema, my own reading of the popular culture that has accumulated in the decade since *Capitalist Realism* was first published has become more complicated than ever. For in coining a term that has an irresistibly totalizing power, Mark's own instincts – as his *Catching Fire* review illustrates so vividly – were to search incessantly for exceptions to the rule: movies, albums, novels, TV shows that somehow managed to offer an alternative within a global order that violently denied the existence of any such thing. Or, to put it differently: his writing engaged the eternal problem of how to separate out meaningfully progressive or even radical ideological meanings from a text that was itself a commodity circulating within a global capitalist economy without an outside or an alternative.

In this sense, ideology criticism was at least somewhat more straightforward in the era of mass media, mainstream audiences, and "dominant ideology." It was fairly easy to criticize a relatively homogeneous culture industry for the ways in which it incorporated and mythologized the most basic values of patriarchal capitalism — just as critics could simultaneously distinguish, describe, and celebrate more subversive texts that emerged from "underground" or independent film industries. But one of Mark's major contributions to the vocabulary or cultural theory and ideology criticism was of course that the historical era of global capitalism has shifted the ground under those cultural critics' feet. Thus, he points out memorably that seemingly anti-capitalist films like *V for Vendetta* (2005) or *WALL·E* (2008) are in fact tailor-made for a system of cultural production where lifestyle and consumption choices stand in all too easily for political engagement.

Capitalism's uncanny ability to incorporate an unlimited variety of texts, practices, and meanings into its system, for which Mark so memorably uses the shape-shifting monster in John Carpenter's *The Thing* (1981) as an uncanny signifier, has clearly developed even further in recent years. Consider, for instance, how Disney-owned entertainment franchises like *Star Wars* and the Marvel Cinematic Universe have pivoted towards socially and politically engaged storytelling forms, or how something like *The LEGO™ Movie* (2014) initiated a cross-platform transmedia franchise that somehow combined a feature-length toy commercial with a celebrated work of cultural criticism, that has even been used by some to teach Frankfurt School critical theory to undergraduate students.

If media studies theorists were trained to consider the culture industry as a central site of the production of ideological messages that served industrial and patriarchal capitalism, Mark's introduction of capitalist realism as a critical term remapped those coordinates dramatically: for if there was truly no outside to the cultural, social, and economic logic of global capitalism, then ideological analysis seems almost pointless. In other words, if ideology has been reduced to a range of commodified lifestyle choices, what is the point of ideology critique?

This is where it could be helpful to distinguish between the different, or even contradictory, functions and forms of value embodied by popular texts. On the one hand, these texts are produced and distributed as commodities within a capitalist system, explicitly designed and planned to generate financial profits in a variety of ways. On the other hand, they are also highly visible cultural objects that connect to social, political, and cultural struggles and debates, more or less separately from their basic commodity status. One of the odd particularities of the neoliberal era then seems to be that the ideological messaging of these texts no longer seems as fully constrained by the ideological frameworks of patriarchal capitalism.[3]

Consider, for instance, the movie *Black Panther*. A massive commercial success as part of Marvel Studios' ongoing film franchise, the film generated enormous value (in the form of commercial profits) as a commodity. At the same time, the cultural work it performed as a superhero blockbuster that was entirely focused on questions of race and colonialism made the film a meaningful cultural text outside of its commodity status, and in ways that do not seem to map directly onto the Walt Disney Company's central objectives as a diversified entertainment brand. There are, of course, two ways of reading the success of *Black Panther*, which we could translate into a narrative of triumph and a competing narrative of despair. In the triumphant narrative, the film's Afrofuturist iconography and majority-black cast represent an important transformation of a film franchise and entertainment brand that had been historically oriented entirely towards white characters, and dominated by storytelling frameworks centered on heterosexual masculinity. In this narrative, the film's success can be connected directly to the vital ongoing struggles of anti-racist activists for access to and visibility in mass media productions, and *Black Panther*'s financial and critical success legitimizes and strengthens this struggle. The flip side of this coin is of course the narrative in which this important cultural and political work has once again been seamlessly absorbed by a massively powerful transnational media corporation, which is in the process of revising its brand by incorporating convenient expressions of progressive ideological messaging that appeal to an affluent liberal audience eager to spend some of its disposable income on this particular brand.

The same logic holds for the recent revival of the *Star Wars* franchise — another global entertainment franchise now owned by Disney. To the much-publicized dismay of many fans, the new films have transformed the earlier films' overwhelming focus on white male characters, largely supplanting them with new protagonists who are

ethnically diverse, while women occupy central roles in the storyworld. As with *Black Panther*, the visibility of meaningfully diverse characters and role models that these films bring inarguably perform important cultural work by supporting the values of feminist and anti-racist activists. And since both racism and misogyny are deeply embedded within the power structures of capitalism as a system of social relations, this kind of work can even be considered as contributions to anti-capitalist movements — though, as with *Catching Fire*, we might not wish to exaggerate those claims too much.

And again, the counternarrative in this case would point out again that questions of identity (including race, gender, and sexual orientation) are ultimately meaningless to the larger forces of capital: if Lucasfilm and/or Disney sees a market for commercial narratives about women, or black superheroes, they will produce them, more or less irrespective of ideological concerns. Or at least, we might observe that they will make them *as long as they do not present themselves as "political" in ways that directly challenge or critique the organization of capitalist accumulation*. Thus, the utopian nation-state of Wakanda is a hierarchically organized kingdom rather than a communist collective, while the representative of the American CIA is presented as a benevolent ally in their struggle.

One cannot help but wonder what Mark would have made of these debates. Would he be as excited by *Black Panther* as he was by that *Hunger Games* movie? Would he celebrate a *Star Wars* movie like *Rogue One* (2016) for how it connects ethnic diversity to anti-fascist revolutionary struggles? Or would he see them only as further evidence of capitalist realism's stranglehold on our culture, and dismiss them as the kind of "identitarian" war of positions that he was so contemptuous of in his notorious "Exiting the Vampire Castle" essay? Would he respond with ecstatic delight to *The Last Jedi*'s (2017) determination that forging precarious networks of solidarity is what will ultimately defeat authoritarian networks of power? Or would his self-confessed blind spots for issues of gender and race lead him to criticize it for its failure to address class consciousness more explicitly?

It's a deeply saddening question to ponder, having lost Mark's voice so recently. But whatever his critical response to any given film, we know for sure that his sensitive and sharply-honed critical eye would always try to foreground the big issues that were at stake in the larger struggle for a more just, more equitable, more livable world. And we also know that his contribution to cultural theory and ideology critique has already made us better equipped to deal with the sometimes-baffling contradictions of media production in the age of global capitalism.

As the more recent work of critical thinkers like Christian Fuchs has taught us, we must in any case be willing to work harder to make sense of the interaction between ideology and political economy in the 21st century. As tempting as it may be to adopt an "either/or" perspective, in which we strategically foreground either the nice things about commercially-produced entertainment or on the ugly face of capitalist

exploitation lurking behind the curtains, we should instead do both simultaneously, seeking not a choice between ideology critique and political economy, but a well-balanced combination of the two.[4]

This combination, in fact, is where the legacy of *Capitalist Realism* — as well as the recent publication of Mark's collected blog writings in *K-Punk* (2018) — helps conceptualize and solidify the weird and increasingly counter-intuitive intersection between ideology and political economy. Firstly, his insistent focus on the contradictory nature of capitalism's cultural logic foregrounds not just its lack of coherence, but even its fundamental lack of ideological substance. The most accurate way of describing capitalism would therefore be, as Slavoj Žižek has put it, as a wholly vapid, even "worldless" ideological system: "the first socio-economic order which de-totalizes meaning."[5] What this helps us articulate and understand is that — counter to the most common twentieth-century forms of political economy — there is no basic relationship between capitalist culture and the ideological meanings it generates.

Therefore, the implications of the term "capitalist realism" for the current era express the most basic logic of media production: *that anything can (and most likely will) be produced as long as it can create value for capital without explicitly questioning its continued existence.* This dynamic goes beyond Robert Pfaller's concept of interpassivity, which Fisher described as "the role of capitalist ideology is not to make an explicit case for something in the way that propaganda does, but to conceal the fact that the operations of capital do not depend on any sort of subjectively held belief."[6] What we are seeing in recent years is, in fact, a stronger emphasis on entertainment commodities that actually do mobilize forms of action, as various strands of fan culture actively connect media texts to social and political campaigns.[7]

So part of what we are seeing now, as the power of transnational media conglomerates like The Walt Disney Company continues to grow, is that the ideological messages within popular franchises will continue to proliferate and diversify. With the emphasis shifting from individual texts to never-ending entertainment properties like Marvel and *Star Wars*, explaining what a text like *The Dark Knight Rises* (2011) or *Children of Men* (2006) means is perhaps a little less relevant. For if films aren't merely installments in a numbered series, but entries in a complexly organized storytelling system like Marvel's, then every event, every decision, every cathartic moment can (and most likely will) be reversed by a subsequent episode.[8]

While the work of traditional ideology critique may have become less central in a media-industrial context of global franchising and complex serialization, a critical framework provided by capitalist realism has become all the more central. In this sense, it is as depressing as it is predictable that Mark's most basic insight into the cultural logic of global capitalism has become more and more pervasive in the decade since the book's publication. Indeed, if we now find ourselves in an age we might describe as "Capitalist Realism 2.0," this means simply that most forms of anti-capitalist criticism have become their own business model. For what is the "outrage

industry" of 24-hour cable news, far-right podcasts, and YouTube conspiracy theorists but a field of cultural production that taps into a common vein of anti-capitalist — or, at the very least, anti-neoliberal — rage?[9]

This is the point where the true constraints of capitalist realism (in its most literal sense) become visible in the corporate ownership of not just the studios and production companies that provide the vast majority of our cultural texts, but also of the infrastructures through which we communicate about them. Leaving aside for the moment the cultural footprint of a movie like *Black Panther*, *Wonder Woman*, or *The Last Jedi*, the ways in which we interpret these texts become irrelevant if the main form of value we create is by our engagement via privately-owned digital networks like Facebook, Tumblr, and Twitter. One might even observe that our corporate overlords have an obvious incentive to invest in the production of texts that are designed to be in some way polarizing, as the cultural conversation this creates yields invaluable data that translates directly to other forms of profit and value.

To return then, finally, to Mark's rapturous response to a blockbuster like *Catching Fire*, we may observe that we have seen a growing number of this very kind of phenomenon: movies, television and VOD series, video games, and other "woke" popular media that express once-subversive and seemingly progressive values, narratives, and/or images. But without trivializing their cultural work or condescending to their makers or their audiences, we must also note that the cultural and economic context in which these commodities circulate are strongly overdetermined by privately owned for-profit digital networks. Therefore, while we are only beginning to understand the implications of this seemingly all-encompassing digital infrastructure, we must in any case continue to absorb, embrace, and extend Mark's critical and intellectual legacy. Not just because we need to keep reminding ourselves of who the enemy is. But also because we must remember to celebrate the moments of inspiration we can salvage from the accumulating wreckage of capitalist realism.

Notes

1. Mark Fisher, *K-Punk* (London: Repeater Books, 2018) 227.

2. Fisher, *K-Punk.*

3. See Jeremy Gilbert, *Anti-Capitalism and Culture* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008).

4. Christian Fuchs, "Dallas Smythe Today — The Audience Commodity, the Digital Labour Debate, Marxist Political Economy and Critical Theory. Prolegomena to a Digital Labour Theory of Value," in *Marx and the Political Economy of the Media*, eds. Christian Fuchs and Vincent Mosco (Leiden: Brill, 2016) 527.

5. Slavoj Žižek, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously* (London and New York: Verso, 2012) 55.

6. Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative* (London: Zero Books, 2009) 12-13.

7. See Henry Jenkins, "What 'Black Panther' Can Teach Us About the Civic Imagination," *Global-E* 11:27 (2018). www.21global.ucsb.edu/global-e/may-2018/what-black-panther-can-teach-us-about-civic-imagination

8. See Gerry Canavan, "The Limits of *Black Panther*'s Afrofuturism," *Frieze* (February 27, 2018). www.frieze.com/article/limits-black-panthers-afrofuturism

9. See Jeffrey M. Berry and Sarah Sobieraj, *The Outrage Industry: Political Opinion Media and the New Incivility*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).