

Hye Jean Chung, **Media Heterotopias: Digital Effects and Material Labor in Global Film Production**, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018, 240 pp., \$99.95 (hardcover), \$25.95 (paperback).

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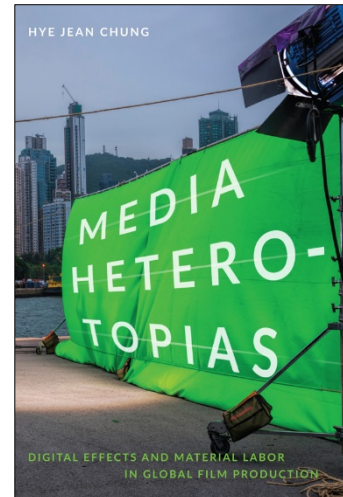
In Hye Jean Chung's **Media Heterotopias: Digital Effects and Material Labor in Global Film Production**, an ambitious analysis of Michel Foucault's notion of heterotopia (or "other spaces") is applied to global cinema practices. It examines the "networked connections among film production, digital filmmaking, visual effects, creative labor and digital aesthetics" (p. 2). Although not an easy task, Chung insists that this type of research is necessary in an industry going through so much change because of emerging and evolving technology.

Foucault first described heterotopia in a 1967 lecture as spaces that are of the "other"—disturbing, contradictory, or transforming. Simply put, heterotopias are spaces that have layers and more than one meaning (Foucault & Miskowiec, 1986). For readers who may be discouraged that the infamously confusing French philosopher is associated with a book about the film industry—fear not! A degree in philosophy is not a prerequisite to understand Chung's work; her book is for everyone to enjoy. And although this theory is an already favored vehicle for analyzing certain films in the critical studies arena, Chung is one of the first critics to ever use heterotopia to analyze the filmmaking process on its own. A noble mission, as she notes, closes that the "gap between creator and spectator in the process of producing and exhibiting films further facilitate the erasure of multiple forms of labor" (p. 30).

The book covers five subtopics of heterotopia—media, mapping, modularity, monstrosity, and materiality. Chapter 1 on media formally introduces the concept of heterotopia and shows how to apply it when discussing "mediated spaces that are digitally created by a globally dispersed workforce" (p. 13). Here Chung argues that when a process is computerized, the human "factors" of creativity and work are viewed as automated or inferior in the film industry. She includes pictures from the films *The Martian* (2015) and *Prometheus* (2012) to illustrate how computer-generated visual effects produced for the Martian landscapes create layers of heterogeneous materiality.

In chapter 2, on mapping, Chung analyzes the two films *The Fall* (2006) and *Ashes of Time Redux* (2008) to communicate that heterotopias can serve as maps, as different territories (from shooting on location to the editing bay) are linked through the production process. She focuses on the "transnational trajectories that embody physical and virtual cosmopolitan mobilities in and beyond the films' diegetic spaces" (p. 45) to emphasize the intersection of global and digital modes of connection.

Chapter 3, on modularity, explores hybrid environments digitally created for science fiction films (like *Avatar*, 2009). Chung undertakes a heterotopic analysis that reveals that the transnational geographies



in these films are created in a globally dispersed digital workflow. The term "composite" is defined at the beginning as "indicat[ing] a temporal and spatial compression of multiple layers" (p. 76) to introduce how live-action and CGI footage are assembled into media heterotopia.

Chapter 4, the monstrosity chapter, focuses the lens even closer, emphasizing that monster characters in films like *Godzilla* (2014) are presented as heterotopias that "comprise of multiple layers of various national origins and cultural identities" before deemed "palatable for global consumption" (p. 15). Chung also introduces the concept of composite bodies, as transnational collaboration in digital film populates important heterotopic spaces that carry out "economic and cultural exchange" between various nations (p. 106).

In chapter 5, materiality is examined by comparing how two films (*The World*, 2004; *Big Hero 6*, 2015) create a global media network that transcends geographical boundaries with their digital aesthetics. These films were chosen to represent the two modes of digital filmmaking: low budget digital cinema and high-budget computer animation (p. 141). Chung insists that it is necessary to separate the two processes and compare them to "examine how they expose the material seams of digital practices" (p. 142).

Chung brings the conclusion by stating that although she focused on narrative films for her analysis, the heterotopia model can be applied to all media but cautions its overuse. She also suggests answers to some final questions such as, "What is expressed and embodied through the extensive use of visual effects and digital compositing in this digital movement?" and "How does digital cinema effectively incarnate physicality and mobility in ways unforeseen?" (pp. 179–181). She also predicts that even though filmmakers are beginning to experiment with virtual reality and augmented reality for storytelling purposes, the "human" aspects of these production processes will always be able to be picked apart and analyzed with theory (p. 183).

To a young film production student, *Media Heterotopias* may initially seem unnecessary. They might ask, "Why would I need to understand how complex systems are linked through heterotopia? How will this help my career?" The truth is that any film industry professional, young or old, can find value in Chung's rich analysis. Entertainment players often stay inside their comfort zone when it comes to literature, sticking to trade articles or biographies of their favorite filmmakers. Stepping into the critical studies realm with Chung can help anybody working with digital media understand the meaning behind (what seems like) tired practices.

Students and researchers in the global studies field also could benefit from Chung's political approach, which is rare in media studies publications. Although she mostly discussed popular American films, her emphasis on global activism (in terms of workflow, consumption, and the merging of territories and boundaries) is apparent throughout.

Some readers and academics (Wong, 2018) have pointed out that Chung's definition of "media" is problematic in its vagueness. She introduces her definition by saying, "although I envision media heterotopia as a portable, versatile concept that can be readily applicable to various modes of mediation, a sweeping generalization that all audiovisual texts are media heterotopias is hardly discerning or productive" (p. 16).

Despite the great connections, Chung consistently distinguishes between the stages of production and their spatial relationship; she can struggle with defining terms and making hard claims beyond that (for example, what constitutes a hyperreal realm?).

Still, *Media Heterotopias* has the potential to find a place on any film professional's bookcase. By the end, Hye Jean Chung fulfills her mission of "[reemphasizing] the political, social and ethical stakes" in the global digital filmmaking process (182). Her emphasis on the erasure of human bodies in a digital era in particular is more relevant than ever as an increasing amount of production roles are relying on technology alone to tell stories—an unnerving reality to some. But even with that divide, she concludes on an optimistic note by stating, "although we may need to devise different ways of perceiving seams, their presence will always already exist as residues of lived realities, waiting to emerge" (p. 183).

Readers of *Media Heterotopias* will be able to find their own heterotopia connections after reading just one chapter thanks to Chung, who honors Foucault's theory with care and continues his legacy. Indeed, I am confident that the next time I rewatch *Avatar* I will be thinking about the modular nature of the locations used to create the world of Pandora—from the green screen to the silver screen. I recommend this book to any friend or colleague interested in philosophy, media, and global issues and look forward to the new heterotopia analysis I find in my own future viewing experiences.

### References

- Foucault, M., & Miskowiec, J. (1986). Of other spaces. *Diacritics*, 16(1), 22–27. doi:10.2307/464648
- Wong, A. (2018, August 23). Media heterotopias: Digital effects and material labor in global film production/Amy R. Wong. Retrieved from <http://asapjournal.com/media-heterotopias-digital-effects-and-material-labor-in-global-film-production-amy-r-wong/>