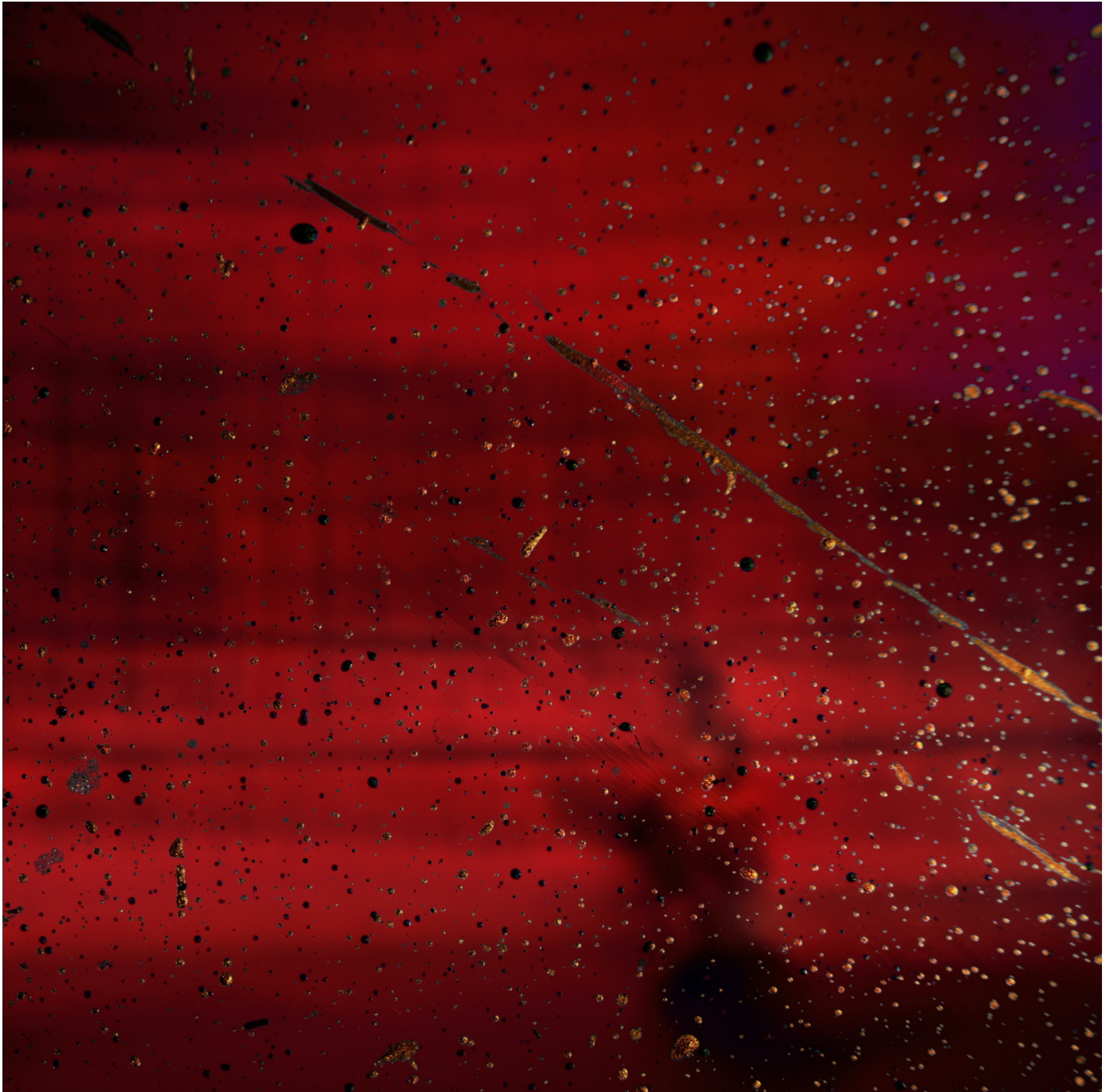




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2021 Volume 29





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Popular Culture and the Civic Imagination:

Case Studies of Creative Social Change

Edited by Henry Jenkins, Gabriel Peters-Lazaro, and Sangita Shresthova. NYU Press, 2020. 400 pages. \$32.00 (paperback).

Can we make the world a better place? Can we, as individuals, contribute to the breaking and building of social structures? Is it possible to imagine and create better? According to this book edited by Henry Jenkins, Gabriel Peters-Lazaro, and Sangita Shresthova the answer is: yes, yes, and YES!

What constitutes a better world is subjective. However, no matter what the definition, it always begins with one key element: imagination. Imagination is a process used by artists to create worlds not yet thought of—worlds different than our own. Once out there for everyone to consume, these creations have the power to ignite passion across communities; they can settle into the realm of popular culture, and magic can happen. Who can deny the power of the Harry Potter or the Star Wars series, *Black Panther*, or *The Handmaid's Tale*?

Popular Culture and the Civic Imagination is a collection of thirty case studies and essays establishing how “the popular” can be of service to pressing social issues such as racism, civic justice, and/or immigrants’ rights. This book makes visible the powerful and useful elements of popular culture. Regrettably, popular culture is too often associated with inconsequential entertainment (assuming that there is something wrong with that notion) because it is not a language in which powerful institutions are fluent. Beyond entertainment, popular culture is an agent of change and influence and, as this book demonstrates, “activists around the world

[are] appropriating and remixing popular culture to fuel their social movements” (6).

Henry Jenkins, the Provost Professor of Communication, Journalism, Cinematic Arts and Education at the University of Southern California, and one of the three editors of the book, defines civic imagination as “the capacity to imagine alternatives to current cultural, social, political, or economic conditions; one cannot change the world without imagining what a better world might look like. Beyond that, the civic imagination requires and is realized through the ability to imagine the process of change, to see one’s self as a civic agent capable of making change, to feel solidarity with others whose perspectives and experiences are different than one’s own, to join a larger collective with shared interests, and to bring imaginative dimensions to real world spaces and places” (5).

The civic imagination may seem all talk and no action and can be frustrating for groups who are action-driven. Still, reading the book, we find that pop culture infiltrates political protests when women dress as handmaids, in reference to Margaret Atwood’s famous novel *The Handmaid’s Tale*, or people hold three fingers up in the air as a reference to the Hunger Games series. We realize the X-Men tales can help simplify information on Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA); we see how *Miss Marvel* can inspire young immigrants living in the United States. We are faced with the fact that it is much too easy to reduce popular culture to trivial entertainment. When studied through a lens informed by cultural studies, readers are encouraged to contribute to this line of work or at least, treat popular culture with the respect it deserves.

Overall, not only is this book an overview of great works of art, but it becomes undeniable that “pop culture has power” (8). I, for one, am glad to finally read an academic book dedicated to it.

Reviewed by: Cynthia De Petrillo (Concordia University)

