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BOOK REVIEW

Rob Eagle, University of Leeds

Lisa Messeri. *In the Land of the Unreal: Virtual and Other Realities in Los Angeles*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2024. 312 pp.

It is challenging to write an ethnography about any industry that is more of a loose, emerging ecosystem of companies and individuals than an established, coherent community. It is all the more admirable to attempt to understand the ins and outs of such a network when it is as disparate, scattered, and precarious as the virtual reality (VR) industry in a city as large and complex as Los Angeles. But that is precisely the challenge that Lisa Messeri takes on in her illuminating book, *In the Land of the Unreal: Virtual and Other Realities in Los Angeles* (2024).

Drawing on her year-long fieldwork in LA in 2018, Messeri deftly brings together approaches from the anthropology of work and science and technology studies (STS) to examine how technologies are never universal but localized in their adoption. That local specificity (what Messeri here terms a “technological terroir”) provides the fertile ground for imaginaries of a technology, shaped by the histories and industries of that place. With its status as a dream factory for the entertainment industry, LA provides the perfect setting for an emerging technology to be reimagined as a tool for “good.” According to this imaginary, in a fractured world where we all live in our increasingly separate versions of reality, VR in the hands of good people can wake audiences up to injustices and unite humanity around good causes. Throughout the book, Messeri explores how VR makers in LA adopt this mythology (in what she terms “fantasies”) and the promise that VR can improve humanity if employed virtuously to center and amplify traditionally marginalized voices.

Messeri divides the book into three sections, linked by three fantasies that united the VR community in LA at the time. Part 1 explores how a *fantasy of place* for the author’s interlocutors shapes their view of LA and is perpetuated by how they use VR. Chapters 1 and 2 argue that the history, geography, and depictions of LA all contribute to a mythology of the place as unreal, where new worlds can be imagined. This pervasive narrative of the place shapes how new technologies, such as VR, can be adopted as part of this industry in imagining new and more just realities. These first two chapters blend theory and a strong sense of the author’s experience of the city as a series of unreal facades, but the voices of interlocutors are noticeably absent. Approaching a vulnerable industry understandably wary of an enquiring anthropologist, in Chapter 3 Messeri finally strikes what she calls “ethnographic gold” (79), gaining access to a Hollywood postproduction company working with VR. While this company attempts to position VR as a storytelling technology, their enthusiasm seemingly blinkers them to the reality that there is a limited potential consumer market for their content. This team disbanded in 2019 after VR failed to become mainstream. Messeri argues that LA’s exceptionalist fantasy of place (mis)leads VR makers to believe that, as the center of the world’s entertainment industry, only they can make VR succeed.

Part 2 examines the promise that VR could allow someone in a headset to experience the reality of another person—what the author terms a *fantasy of being*. Particularly in LA, the belief in VR's use for "good" was exploited to evangelize its potential. VR was first developed in the 1960s, kept alive through aerospace applications in the 1970s and 80s, and saw another short-lived iteration in gaming in the 1990s. Core to its latest resurgence in the 2010s was the hope that VR could work as an "empathy machine" that would ultimately lead to healing the increasingly splintered versions of reality in modern society. While Chapter 4 critiques the naive belief in using VR to induce empathy in an audience, Chapter 5 provides a more hopeful example where the technology can facilitate training and dialogue within communities, particularly in allowing care workers to gain an understanding of reality from the perspective of patients.

Part 3 highlights the use of VR in generating a *fantasy of representation*: in 2018, the era of #MeToo, LA's VR industry could be led by women and those from backgrounds previously marginalized in both entertainment and tech to redress historically misogynistic and racist industries. By building a more inclusive tech-meets-entertainment industry, VR makers in LA could imagine a better future to right the wrongs of the past. For such a fantasy to succeed, according to several interlocutors, women must be at the helm of the industry. Therefore, they purport, VR as an intimate and empathy-inducing medium must be inherently feminine. Messeri, from an STS perspective, debunks this gender-essentialist myth that women are naturally more suitable to lead and create work in VR than men.

As an STS scholar, Messeri provides a welcome critical assessment and deconstruction of the simplistic fantasies that VR should be used as a tool for good. Chapters 2 and 4 in particular offer balanced yet damning indictments of how optimism throughout the VR industry (especially in LA) fed into naive beliefs that a re-emerging technology could solve inequalities in the workforce and a reality crisis in the Trumpian post-truth era.

When Messeri gains access to otherwise closed VR companies, as we see in Chapters 3 and 5, her strengths as an ethnographer make for sharp and nuanced analyses. This is an example of the anthropology of work at its finest, where Messeri effortlessly blends theory with ethnography. For the reader, it seems that she clicks with some interlocutors, while her critical STS lens leads to not entirely flattering depictions of others. Chapter 4 is perhaps where the marriage of anthropology and STS is least harmonious; the key interlocutor here, Nonny de la Peña, termed the "godmother of VR" by an industry magazine in 2015, is portrayed as one of the prime culprits in perpetuating the empathy machine imaginary. de la Peña is not afforded the full nuanced ethnographic portrait that interlocutors elsewhere are given. Readers coming from anthropology may wish for a more satisfying vignette of an interlocutor that provides greater insight into why and how they participated in a flawed imaginary.

For those unfamiliar with the latest developments in VR, the book provides something of an elegy for the optimistic (albeit naive) fantasies that pervaded the industry in LA in 2018. One might even come to the conclusion that the technology today must be dead and buried. Nearly all the interlocutors in the book became disillusioned with the imaginaries that drove the VR industry in LA at that time and have since moved on to

other industries. Perhaps here is the greatest strength and one of the key messages in the book: there is no singular VR community, just as there is no singular LA, no singular understanding of VR, and no singular perception of truth or reality. This fleeting snapshot of an emerging industry over the course of a year offers a study that resonates with both anthropology and STS; technologies can never be universally understood or applied but are always adopted and adapted in locally specific ways. Even in an online, globalized world, physical place *and* reality—for all of their multiple and contested understandings—still matter.

The ethnographic vignettes and in-depth focus on particular interlocutors in Chapters 3 and 5 are where Messeri's writing shines. We see only a couple of examples of those who have managed to weather the boom-and-bust nature of the VR industry. Overwhelmingly, though, there are somewhat tragic portraits of those let down by the industry's limited and short-term metrics of success as financial profit and mainstream adoption. If those are the only two methods for measuring the value of a technology, then most people working with VR for the foreseeable future may be disappointed. While LA may be large and its VR community scattered, beyond this bubble there is a larger national and international industry for whom VR is still very much alive in gaming, storytelling, social platforms, training, and enterprise applications. Hopefully, Messeri's work will inspire more anthropologists to conduct similar studies on immersive industry ecosystems in other "technological terroirs."

More than a book about a failed and disillusioned community, *In the Land of the Unreal* offers a cautionary tale of building fantasies wherein a technology is lazily assumed to be a panacea for social ills. VR cannot be assumed to unify those across radically unequal and polarized segments of society. Rather, the book illustrates how one of VR's more modest yet strongest applications might be in fostering discussion and connection amongst those already within a community.