

Fan Cultures and Fan Communities

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Introduction

When Henry Jenkins (1992b) started his discipline defining *Textual Poachers* by describing an infamous *Saturday Night Live* skit in which William Shatner tells *Star Trek* fans to “get a life,” he raised and then rejected the stereotype of fans as socially awkward, maladjusted losers living in a fantasy world. Thus began academic fan studies’ more earnest attempt to make sense of fan communities, identities, and textual play. Jenkins famously described fans as “scribbling in the margins” and as reinterpreting and responding to media texts, not simply accepting them as presented. Following various scholars’ early insistences on the importance of studying rather than caricaturizing, much of fan studies’ subsequent work has attempted to map out fans’ intricate and thoughtful engagements with popular culture texts, and with each other. Marking a major shift in this project, though, Jenkins’s recent *Convergence Culture* (2006a) focuses more on the mainstreaming of fannish behavior, and on fans as the new trailblazers of a “convergence culture” based on “collective intelligence.” Much of fan studies has occurred in between these two positions of fans as fundamentally othered (for better and worse) and fans as early adapters and adopters of particular audience behaviors that have become widespread.

In this chapter, we trace the methodological and theoretical implications of this trajectory of fan studies. Aware that Jenkins is also contributing to this volume, though, our prime concern will not be to detail convergence culture; rather, it will be to examine fan communities. In particular, we ask what happens to fans and fan studies when a combination of increased interest in fan psychology and in fans as *individuals* and the industry’s “discovery” of fans, again often as individuals, might seem to abandon former interests in fan *communities* and audience formations.

Thus, beginning with a brief historical overview that connects theoretical frameworks and methodologies with the audience groups studied and defined as fans, we look at the shifts and changes in fan studies and how these various approaches have political and social implications for audience studies.

While we are invested in acknowledging the range of fans and fannish behaviors, most of our discussion focuses on *fans* as members of *fandom*, and on fandom as a particular identity that affects and shapes its members in ways beyond shared media consumption. For example, an intense emotional investment in a text that is wholly singular may create a fan but does not make the individual part of a larger fandom, where its members are characterized not only by their affect and engagement with the source text but also by their engagement with one another. Of course, there are no clearly defined lines, but we find it useful to consider the overlapping but not necessarily interdependent axes of investment and involvement as two factors that can define fannish engagement. So even though we look at individual fans, it is the community and the social interaction we want to foreground, both as important characteristics of members of fandom (as opposed to casual viewers who display fannish interests or behaviors) and as two of the structural models that now many social networks are displaying.

Discussing what fans are and are not is important not only for the developing field of fan studies but also for audience studies in general. On one hand, fans so often stand in for audiences more generally in research studies. Even though fans are still derided and often invisible in public, for media scholars they are ever present. Fans are some of the easiest and most interesting subjects to study: proactive, self-theorizing, and invested in their texts in ways that few other audiences are, they offer a dangerously ideal research subject as they welcome inquiries, readily describe and explain their own affect, and overshadow other – less visible and less vocal – types of audience engagement (Gray 2003). On the other hand, since fans and fan communities exist on a spectrum of media consumption that more generally includes *all* audiences, findings about fans stand to tell us a great deal about audiences as a whole.

Looking at the way these communities have changed over the past four decades and how they both anticipate and respond to current technologies and varying interfaces allows us to see how and why these more narrowly defined groups of fans can remain exemplary audience subjects. At the same time, this chapter will also address new frontiers for fan research, namely, other forms of strongly affective engagements such as in antifans, “high-culture” fandom, global fandom, and their respective audience formations. But even as the field of fan studies expands and definitions of fans and fandoms become ever more diverse, we ultimately maintain in this chapter that there remains value in looking at the self-identifying, self-analyzing, often quite well-defined and activist groups of fans that in some cases trace themselves back to pre-internet, pre-convergence days of fannish identity formation.

History

As a field, fan studies grows for the most part out of audience studies (and, to a lesser degree, reader response theory) and cultural studies' embracing of popular culture.¹ One of the central influences to all of cultural theory but especially audience studies was Stuart Hall's (1973/1991) incorporation/resistance model: refuting the notion that all viewers automatically take the intended dominant reading, Hall instead suggested that reading or viewing constitutes a complex negotiation that creates multiple interpretation. This more complex understanding of the role of the viewer or reader mirrored literary theory's turn to the role of the reader (see e.g. Iser 1978; Fish 1980), and its insistence (quickly backed up by Morley and Brunsdon's audience research [1999]) that all cultural consumption can involve both negotiation with and outright resistance to meanings within texts.² As a result, cultural studies turned to the qualitative examination of popular cultural consumption. At the same time, Dick Hebdige's *Subculture* (1979) foregrounded the political role played by countercultural readings and appropriations. Often the most compelling and rhetorically powerful act for audience researchers was to turn to those whom society had deemed the least thoughtful, most "passive" consumers. Frequently, this led to the examination of fans.

Hence, for instance, Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* (1984) began with a critical feminist examination of romance literature, but Radway's interviews with romance fans found multiple points of resistance to patriarchy. Similarly, working with a model of reading as resistance borrowed in part from Michel de Certeau (1984), John Fiske (1989) studied how teenage Madonna fans used their own reading "tactics" to oppose and work against the culture industry's "strategies" for the use of Madonna. Fiske infamously pronounced a "semiotic democracy," in which "active audiences" made sense of texts in creative, personally, and communally meaningful ways, frequently writing and talking back to established power hierarchies in the process. Indeed, cultural studies' encounter with audiences was intrinsically about power. Pierre Bourdieu's highly influential book *Distinction* (1984) had argued that taste and cultural consumption were always also acts of performance, of class, and of power. It is thus no surprise that those cultural products generally regarded by society as the lowest were those of the masses, the working class, women, children, and minorities; likewise, those consumers regarded as the most passive and mindless were those at the bottom of social hierarchies. As such, the early study of fans was a political act as cultural studies scholars sought to redeem "low" or "mass" culture and its consumers by showing the texts to be as complex as those of high culture, and the consumers to be as thoughtful and intelligent as any opera denizen or aficionado of European art cinema (see Jensen 1992).

Media fans had often been derided and mocked, seen as perennial losers to a dominant media system, following a subpar pied piper. Celebrity, soap, and *Star*

Trek fans attracted particular scorn, becoming the poster children for rabid attachment to supposedly insignificant, fluffy items of mass culture. In gaining such status, though, they also became ripe for discussion by the first wave of fan studies – and even paradigmatic for future work. Three key early fan studies examinations that grew out of this period were Henry Jenkins’s *Textual Poachers* (1992), Camille Bacon-Smith’s *Enterprising Women* (1992), and Constance Penley’s “Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Study of Popular Culture” (1992), later expanded into *NASA/Trek* (1997). Even though Jenkins, Bacon-Smith, and Penley used different approaches (textual, ethnographic, and psychoanalytic, respectively), all three foregrounded the community that fandom creates and the relationship among the fans as well as between the fans and the texts. Fans, as all three showed, not only were extremely well organized due in several cases to their community roots in science fiction fandom with its well-organized cons, amateur press associations (APAs), and fanzines, but also tended to be quite self-reflexive and able to analyze their own behavior.

Given the predominance of Hall’s (1973/1991) incorporation/resistance paradigm, a central task for early fan studies was to show the subversive nature of fan productions. In that reading, fans became exemplary resistant readers who not only critically analyzed the texts but also actively wrote back, creating their own narratives that filled the plots, characters, and emotions they found lacking in the source text. Building off Michel de Certeau’s (1984) notion of the “textual poacher,” Jenkins posited fans as those who squat on products not of their creation, yet ultimately make of them what they wish. Bacon Smith’s title, meanwhile, employed its pun to suggest an intrinsic act of production and worth (*enterprise*) in fannish activities, and Constance Penley likened fandom to the giving of a vigorous massage that might hurt the text in the short run, yet ultimately was done for that text’s sake (1997, p. 3). All three writers offered a picture of fandom as never necessarily passive and compliant, as thoughtful and deliberative, as happening in and through communities of engaged and intelligent individuals, and as a legitimate source of production of meaning and value in and of itself. While the cultural studies of the 1980s and early 1990s endeavored to chart resistance, after all, it also examined how culture was produced by those who live it, not simply passed down a chute from the cultural industries, and thus early fan studies began to explore fandom as a culture and as an audience formation.

Following on from this, Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) critiqued Hall’s (1973/1991) incorporation/resistance model as often automatically (even if unintentionally) framing audience reactions as purely reactive. Instead, they attempted to initiate a new era of audience and fan studies with their *spectacle performance paradigm* that regarded the act of being an audience as performative and as constructive of identity.³ Also revising fan studies’ focus, Matt Hills (2002) and Cornel Sandvoss (2005) somewhat shifted emphasis in their object of study from fan communities to fans as individuals, from social interaction to psychological

motivation, and from a focus on resistance to one on affect and individual engagements with texts. While both still looked at communities, these communities often were constructed in the minds of individuals only or relevant primarily insofar as they reflect or constitute the individual fan's relationship to the fannish object. For instance, Hills (2002) defines fan cultures as

Formed around any given text when this text has functioned as a *pto* [primary transitional object] in the biography of a number of individuals who remain attached to this text by virtue of the fact that it continues to exist as an element of their cultural experience. (p. 108)

Much as a child turns to a favorite blanket for security and as a substitute for the mother, noted Hills, fans imbue their beloved texts with feelings of warmth and ontological security. Thus, he drew from D. W. Winnicott's theories on child psychological development (1974) and Roger Silverstone's subsequent application of an understanding of the individual's relationship to television as a transitional object (1994) as the kernel of a theory of fan communities.

Sandvoss (2005), likewise, focused on the individual fan and actually redefined fandom for his purposes:

In a broader understanding of "fandom," as on a most basic level the state of being a fan, this focus on communities and tightly networked fans fails to conceptualize important aspects of the relationship between the modern self, identity and popular culture which forms my particular concern here.... I define fandom as the regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text. (pp. 5-6, 8)

Drawing from Walter Marcuse's theory of the "one dimensional man" (1964), using texts in a narcissistic manner to mirror his own images of the world back at him, and from Wolfgang Iser's theories of textual reception (1978), Sandvoss exhibited particular interest in the engagement between individual fan and individual text, to explore fan texts as a projection of individual fan meanings. For instance, he observed sports fans' ability to fashion their beloved team in their image, seeing it as nationalistic if they see themselves as nationalists, or as diverse and multicultural if they see themselves that way. Sandvoss argued that, as can any text, a team can become a canvas for a fan to project meanings that affirm his or her own values and sense of self. Hence, where previous fan studies had often considered the fan as one part of a greater whole, Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998), Hills, and Sandvoss all offered means by which one can examine the fan as an individual unit too or, rather, redefine the larger whole as a function of the individual. Moreover, this focus on individual subjects, with its larger scope of what constitutes fannish objects and activities, also permitted an approach that connected the multiple ways in which an individual engages fannishly with different objects, intensities, and levels of community involvement.

Convergence and New Media Culture

Just as academic theories of fandom have changed in recent years, so has the relationship between fans as communities and/or individuals, technology, and the cultural industries. Most notably, recent years have witnessed an expansion of fannish activities into more mainstream audiences and a concurrent industry focus on viral marketing and the immense profitability of encouraging and exploiting fannish behaviors. It is this type of fannish behavior that is at the center of much of Jenkins's recent work (2006a), where he traces the interactions and engagements traditionally associated with well-defined and often subcultural fan communities and finds them in more easily accessible and often industry-sponsored arenas. The rise of the internet has led to a revolution in how individuals can access the fan community, and hence in how fan and nonfan "collective intelligence" (Lévy 1997) can be mobilized.

New technologies have facilitated creating one's own content at the same time as social networks provide spaces in which to easily share this content with others. Meanwhile, the increased specialization within the entertainment industry and fragmentation of the audience have required that producers follow the rules of what Jenkins calls "affective economics," capitalizing on (and frequently disciplining) fan practices in order to ensure a loyal audience base. Both developments – in technology and cultural practice and in industry and marketing practice – have given much mainstream consumption a fannish look. Thus, for instance, today's fan of any given television program can access the program's official website, which will likely include a discussion forum, computer wallpapers and screensavers, extra video and webisodes, and perhaps even links to other sites within the show's diegetic frame, spinoff books, comics, merchandise, and/or competitions for fan creations. In *Convergence Culture* (2006a), Jenkins addresses mainstream and subcultural discourses, suggesting their similarities in terms of practices and behaviors. In fact, in his analysis, the communities that spring up spontaneously either with or without the help of industry-sponsored spaces and activities would appear to mimic the fan-created magazines, listservs, and conventions that carried the responsibility of keeping fan communities alive in earlier years, yet were decidedly subcultural.

Whereas a decade ago, fans were easily identified and defined as those more intense and invested media audiences who engaged and connected with one another, media convergence, new technologies, and transmedia marketing have all created new types of fans who exhibit many similarities and yet may not be quite the same. At first glance, convergence culture seems to facilitate being a fan, with new technologies making it easier to access media, engage with others, and create one's own content. Only a few years ago, downloading an episode one might have missed the night before required at least a certain degree of computer savvy and often connections to a network of other fans; with legal downloads and online

streaming, it is now possible for anyone with high-speed internet access to keep up fairly easily with any show. Likewise, for instance, creating fanvids in the 1980s and early 1990s was a lengthy, exhausting, and expensive endeavor, using two VCRs and keeping track of the song via stopwatch (see Coppa 2008). Today, every computer comes with a simple movie maker program that allows anyone within minutes to edit digital media files with immediate results. The cultural industries, for their part, have recognized the marketing potential of both transmedia products and user-generated content as forms of viral marketing, and they often openly encourage its development, thereby moving previously marginalized fan behavior into the mainstream.

However, the similarity in terms of behavior and textual productions obscures the clear differences between traditional fan communities and new industry-driven fans: fandoms as specific social and cultural formations – as communities – have a history, a continuity, and a sense of identity that are at times profoundly distinct from contemporary convergence culture. Our interest here is in the sense of identity at the center of our approach to fans, fan communities, and fandom as a specific audience formation. Indeed, it is one that is often threatened by convergence culture. While we do not want to negate or exclude other forms of fan engagement, we suggest that there are particular insights that can be gained by focusing on more organized fan communities as we have chosen to do in this chapter: their members function as exemplary viewers as they self-consciously and freely interpret and share their responses. More importantly, focusing on traditional fan communities may allow us to pinpoint exactly where they differ from more casual fans, individual fans, or other forms of fan engagement, thus offering further understanding of the emotional engagements and cultural attachments of all fans.

After all, there remain central differences between fandom as social community and congregates of individual fans, between what fans would call *fan works* and what the industry has termed *user-generated content*.⁴ Some of it may be measurable in intensity and investment, not just emotionally but also in terms of time and length of involvement. These differences, of course, have always existed. Fans humorously distinguish between Fandom-Is-a-Way-of-Life (FIAWOL) and Fandom-Is-Just-a-Goddamned-Hobby (FIJAGH): the former denotes fans for whom their fannishness is a central facet of their identity, affecting all aspects of their lives; and the latter is used by fans who feel that liking something is one among many of their hobbies that do not shape their identity and that may be temporarily limited. Whereas for a long time, fans tended to mostly fall into the Way-of-Life category, more and more fans are now actively created, not only by more exposure of fandoms themselves but also by the media industry actively interpellating viewers as fans (see Stein 2010).

And yet, unless the industry actually creates online spaces for fans to meet – often with quite clear rules and guidelines – it still requires committed fans to create and sustain that infrastructure. Such spaces then allow other users to gather and use the offered materials and spaces. For example, many casual fans may visit

a wiki, and some may even add material and thus create user content, but it still requires someone more dedicated to provide server space, maintain the wiki, and assure its continuance. Fan film, machinima, and vids may be *watched* by thousands on Youtube.com, but a much smaller band of fans actually dedicates the significant time and creative energy needed to *make* such films. In fact, the media industry often seems to be more interested in large numbers of low-level users than it is in the fewer, more dedicated fans – more often than not tied to organized fandom – that tend to control the noncommercial spaces.

When the industry itself steps in to create such spaces for fans to gather and communicate, and to share their ideas and creations, they often curtail the more unusual and extreme forms of fan responses, which is one of the biggest fears many members of fan communities express. Often fan material is critical or completely re-envisioning the purview of the show – many fan communities are adamant in maintaining their own spaces to continue to create material that might not be approved of or condoned by the industry itself. Whereas so-called coloring within the lines is something encouraged and desired by industry, it is the very limitation of those “lines” that has many members of traditional fan communities rejecting these more legal and endorsed spaces (see Cupitt 2008). Anne McCaffrey, for example, encourages stories told in her Pern universe, but for the longest time, such stories could not expand existing story lines she herself might still use, and even today she continues to impose limits on fanfictional worlds.⁵ Furthermore, one contentious issue is the often adult nature of many fan productions, especially when the source text is geared toward children and teens. J. K. Rowling, thus, encourages fan fiction as long as it remains sexually nonexplicit.⁶

Even in cases where rating and authorial competition are no concerns, critical commentary may still be: many fan creations pay homage to the sources that inspired them and expand their universes, but others offer biting critique. Yet whereas a film critic or book reviewer can safely criticize, creative responses’ citations may threaten to violate copyright of the very texts they so bitterly critique. George Lucas, for example, supported *Star Wars* fan film contests, but set firm rules as to what story lines and genres were permitted, encouraging parodies while preventing the public showing of more critical engagements.⁷ Since fandom often questions, pushes, or removes a show’s “lines,”⁸ tensions between fans and those entrusted with entrenching such lines are inevitable, yet through intellectual property laws and/or posturing, the media industries attempt to lay claim to the power to silence critics. At various times, numerous media companies have sent cease-and-desist letters to fan fiction writers and other fan creators, despite the at best questionable validity of their legal claims to own characters and universes (see Tushnet 2007). Or, they have also excluded such productions from the walled gardens of their official sites. Yet the question remains as to what degree such acts are motivated largely by the urge to silence criticism.

The question of what should ultimately constitute the central object of fan studies is a crucial one. Critics, in fact, debate whether the focus should remain on

or be shifted from heavily engaged and active fans and cult aficionados, that is, fans who may have higher status within a given fan community due to their particular engagement with the fannish object (Hills 2002, pp. ix–x). In other words, can fan studies be relevant to audience studies only if they shift focus to the individual fan whose fan engagements are parts of their everyday lives? Or can the study of the more defined fan *communities* become useful even if their members' behavior may not be easily extrapolated or generalized? Moreover, even if fandom communities turned out to be more different than similar to casual viewers and those differences are qualitative rather than merely quantitative, would those differences still afford us insight into all viewers and the way they engage with texts?

Fan Communities: Exemplary or Exceptional Audiences

We would like to suggest that fan communities should be of particular interest to current media and especially new media scholars for the way they employ and create social publics, and manipulate and alter social network engines to their needs. Given the wide range of what might be defined as *fans*, we focus on the fan as a member of a fan community, for a number of reasons:

- There are specific ways in which those fans engage that are more explicit and useful for audience studies in general.
- Even where their responses differ from casual audiences, we would argue, their communities are still a useful object of audience studies.
- The recent focus on media convergence, user-generated content, and individual fan risks replacing or overshadowing these fans and their particular infrastructures and modes of engagements.

Fans hold interest for literary scholars as an example of intertextual engagement on multiple levels: fan works are created in dialogue with their respective source text, but they also in many cases respond to other fan textual productions – be they theoretical or creative (see Derecho 2006; Stasi 2006; Tosenberger 2007). As such, many fans create in a complex intersection where meaning production is highly dependent on shared interpretations and interpretive communities. As fannish artifacts gain wider mainstream popularity, some if not many are misread as they lose their specific contexts of shared interpretive frameworks (see Busse 2007). For audience studies, fan communities and their audience responses remain exemplary cases of active readers, involved respondents, and an interactivity that creates a co-imaginary fan community that may be present but that is often far less pronounced in casual or individual fans. Finally, fans use wiki software, blogging platforms such as LiveJournal.com, or bookmarking sites like Delicious.com in

very specific ways: Livejournal.com, for example, was never intended to serve as a story archive, yet many fans developed specific workarounds such as newsletters, announcement communities, and particular tagging and bookmarking systems to customize the site for their particular use.

In order to better describe differences between types of fans, we want to suggest a way to categorize levels of fannishness, drawing from but expanding upon previous models such as Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998). Fans, we argue, function along two central lines of involvement and investment, and it is this particular matrix that defines the more intense fan of the Fandom-Is-a-Way-of-Life variety. Both community interaction and affect exist on a continuum (changing between different people and even within a person over time). Conceptualizing fan identity along these two axes allows us to cover those who may be quite unevenly aligned along the two axes: the fan who may be singular but heavily emotionally invested as well as the member of a community who may refuse to self-identify as a fan. Moreover, it also allows for understanding the lone noninteracting fan who is nevertheless emotionally invested in community.

Fan psychology has long been read within the context of mass psychology; as a result, the psychology of audiences has often, falsely, generalized or simply asserted a given response of an imaginary ideal viewer that then gets assumed to function for all. Of course, research of actual viewers indicates that their levels of engagement and emotional and intellectual investment are often quite different and indeed change over time, even within a given viewer. Matt Hills (2002) and Cornel Sandvoss (2005) have both focused on the psychology of individual viewers: Hills foregrounds how every viewer creates his or her own matrix of fan objects that often overlap and affect one another. For Hills, the transitional object, then, can very much be communal, and even though it is a concept that begins with the individual, it takes on extra meaning when it is communal. Likewise, even as Sandvoss's fans may be by themselves, their fandom of one creates an imaginary space that is shared with others. After all, psychological engagement with a text can be intense, even in the absence of others to share that particular sentiment, that obsessional focus. Thus, the lonely fan reading, watching, and/or enjoying fannish products is in fact often participating in an imagined community of other fans – even when they are not explicitly interacting as part of a community *per se*, they may think of themselves as part of that community, in a way creating parasocial relations with other fans.

Focusing on fan communities allows us to foreground the highly intertextual aspects of fan works and the way community and artifact are in constant communication with one another. This, in turn, helps us look at how communities then get created (even if imaginarily) in the fan's affective space. In a way, fandom often literalizes otherwise more subtle engagements. For example, much audience reception and reader response are concerned with trying to understand and describe the particular and individual textual reception, often attempting to generalize large audience groups or constructing ideal readers. Looking at creative fan

communities, though, can show us how varied individual responses really are. In fact, one could argue that viewers or readers often voice readings that are more similar and normative than the ones they may personally have. Fan fiction writers, for example, suggest that more aggressive (and at times more subversive) readings are not unusual but part of the spectrum of audience responses. In particular, fan fiction discourse evokes Barthes's notion of writerly texts where "[t]he reader [is] no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text" (1974, p. 4), and where individual readings indeed are *written* – where readers are writers.

More generally, using reader response with a clear awareness of individual readers as distinct fan writers, actual readers of literary texts can and ought to be studied, and fan studies is a particularly apt venue in which to do so. Literary studies – even in its guise of reader response criticism and reception aesthetics – has mostly focused on the “ideal” or “implied” readers constructed by the text (see Iser 1978; Fish 1980; Suleiman and Crosman 1980; Tompkins 1980; Jaus 1982; Eco 1992); in turn, since readers attempt to become ideal readers, they tend to imagine the text as an artifact that needs to be deciphered. Fan readers and writers, however, provide us with an approach to reading that is more personal and more idiosyncratic, thus offering an approach to the text that is more immediate and less normative. After all, reader response criticism has yet to fully account for the multiple personal variations and levels of identification and personal investment involved in reading texts, an issue central to fan fiction studies and any attempt to analyze the dialectical reading processes practiced within fan communities. Liking or hating a character, feeling kinship to one, or identifying with a situation has little place in academic discourse. In fannish discourse, however, personal investment is crucial to any reading process. So, whereas it may be much harder to question individual fans' idiosyncratic, aggressive counterreadings, fandom's creative artifacts testify to these readings, offering traces of the particular affective engagement and the personalized engagement with the text.

Moreover, fandom can also offer us a more intense understanding of how viewers employ intertextual clues and interpret within an intertextual cultural field, again, by literalizing this community. All texts are created and read in context (see Kristeva 1980; Bakhtin 1981), but most contexts either are fairly general (i.e. feminist readings of Joyce, or the reception of *Knight Rider* in Germany) or tend to be quite individualistic (i.e. as readers or viewers, we bring our own experiences and ideological background to texts as we interpret them). While these large-scale ideological and personalized individualist contexts exist for fannish readers as well, fan texts also contain more limited shared interpretive spaces. Clearly, fan creations are commentary on only the source text, and thus their readers or viewers tend to share that interpretive framework that reads the fan text with and against the text to which it responds. More interestingly, however, all these texts and conversations create a fannish space so that fan texts also tend to be intertextual with the fan community in which they are produced and circulated. In a way, they can be seen to respond to all the other texts, all the interpretations and debates. As the internet in

particular allows fans to share their work and communicate with one another easily, creative fans often tend to be part of a community. Thus, fans engage in an emotionally invested negotiation not only with the source text they analyze, criticize, and expand, but also with their fan community and its discourses.

Drawing from reader response criticism, we can think of such groups of fans as what Stanley Fish has called *interpretive communities*. Fish (1980) defines interpretive communities as being “made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions” (p. 171). It is important, however, to realize that unlike Fish, for whom interpretive communities denote a collection of interpretive strategies rather than *actual* readers, fan fiction readers and writers create actual *communities*. Likewise, Fish does not mean *writing* literally but instead uses it in a Barthesian sense of active interpretation. In fact, it is interesting how he chooses terms that come to life within the fan fiction community, that is, fans read texts by writing their critical and creative responses within an actual community, thus literalizing Fish’s metaphors. This writing is seen most obviously in fan fiction and online fan discussion forums, but also visually in fanvid creation, in how one dresses and/or decorates, and in daily spoken discussions. Fish describes the struggle between varying interpretive stances and the communities they create:

The assumption in each community will be that the other is not perceiving the “true text,” but the truth will be that each perceives the text (or texts) its interpretive strategy demands and calls into being. This, then, is the explanation both for the stability of interpretation among different readers (they belong to the same community) and for the regularity with which a single reader will employ different interpretive strategies and thus make different texts (he belongs to different communities)... Interpretive communities grow large and decline, and individuals move from one to another; thus while the alignments are not permanent, they are always there, providing just enough stability for the interpretive battle to go on. (1980, pp. 171–172)

Again, these words ring all too true in describing fandom and the way fannish disagreements about the source text tend to get played out in terms of having access to the “true” reading rather than as competing interpretations. Members of an interpretive community share certain “articles of faith” about the definition of “good writing,” as well as a “repertoire of interpretive strategies” with respect to canon. In other words, they tend to agree on central interpretive choices and values. Relationship pairings are one of the clearest markers of interpretive communities; in fact, many fans identify themselves primarily as fans of one or another pairing. As such, they agree on particular events, characteristics, and interpretations of the actual texts. An unconventional relationship, for example (i.e. a fan who reads or writes stories where a particular pair of characters – not romantically connected on screen – is, has been, or will be a couple), will read certain canonical events with a particular lens toward supporting this pairing choice; the interpretation will be inflected by the shared presupposition.

Moreover, as Fish suggests figuratively, fandom exemplifies literally that readers can simultaneously or consecutively belong to various interpretive communities (in Fish's sense) as they choose different approaches for the same or differing texts. Likewise, actual readers are members of various interpretive communities. As such, they can celebrate a particular reading of their preferred pairing for one story and accept a vastly different interpretation in another. These communities are diverse in what they consider and emphasize as shared values: some place a high emphasis on formal concerns, such as grammar and spelling in writing or editing techniques and matching aspect ratios in fanvids; others focus on specific characters or pairings; and others yet congregate around a preference for particular genres such as Alternate Universes or Constructed Reality vids, or subgenres such as transformation stories or fanart. At times, the interpretive communities simply comprise a reading consensus, whereas at others they may be an explicitly defined society, group, or community. Given that such affiliation can revolve around issues as diverse as pairings, character interpretations, or even style, it is clear how a fan could simultaneously be part of several interpretive communities.

Fans are exemplary in the ways they literalize theories of reading and actively talk back to the text and thus allow easy access to interpretive as well as affective strategies. Fans, however, are also exceptional in the intensity of their attachment and the particular ways they communicate, share, and thus mutually affect their audience responses. Even as these mechanisms are taken up by more mainstream viewers and often consciously encouraged by media producers (as described above), we need to be careful to acknowledge that members of fan communities may exhibit exemplary audience behavior but simultaneously that we cannot always extrapolate from it, and that there exists a certain affective surplus that does not easily transfer onto individual or casual fans. In turn celebrated as aficionado knowledge and derided as fanaticism, it is not only the level of investment and the quantitative time and effort poured into supporting fannish infrastructures and creating paratexts but also the way the community (as opposed to the fannish object itself) affects the fan's identity. And yet fans literalize the virtual and imaginary senses of belonging (see Sandvoss 2005) by actually embodying the imagined community and turning them into something more viable: a couch space for visiting strangers, a postcard to cheer up a friend, a collection for a fan in need, and encounters at a con or even long-term relationships.

So, to fully understand fannish reading practices, it is important to always remember that they are inextricably connected to the communities from which they arise and the way fans define themselves vis-à-vis these texts and communities. Of course, the social and cultural structures of fan communities are interesting and important to study on their own, but we would like to suggest that they are also a fruitful subject of research for audience studies, simply because their use of intertextuality and their quite explicit and literal writing back to the source text allow insight into at least one particular engagement with texts.

Beyond Communities

Since Jenkins, Bacon-Smith, and Penley's opening salvos in the early 1990s, fan studies has developed considerably as a subfield of media and cultural studies, and its ranks have also developed within literary studies. In a 2001 interview with Matt Hills for *Intensities*, Henry Jenkins (2006b) describes a natural shift, if not evolution, in his work: whereas his early work was dominated by a rhetorical imperative to place fans on the map and to write back against the pervasive pathologization of fans that took place throughout popular culture and academia, Jenkins's more recent work – reflecting fan studies more generally since then – has explored a larger range of issues and agendas. As it has done so, various traditions and theoretical foundations have been utilized, often in contradiction to one another, as fan studies has become as contestatory a space as are many of the fan communities it discusses. For instance, in the summer of 2007, Jenkins's personal blog, *Confessions of an Aca-Fan*, hosted a series of discussions over the place (or lack thereof) of gender in academic discussions of fandom, and it was frequently fraught with disagreement. Without wishing to diminish the importance of the issues discussed there, or to overlook the discussions' unresolved tensions, one might also step back and observe that such an occurrence attests to the vitality of fan studies, which in 2010 finds itself setting out in various directions with a wide range of questions to examine, and little consensus on which theoretical toolboxes to bring along, or even on who counts as a fan anymore.

With this in mind, here we survey a few of fan studies' new frontiers. As alluded to above, a growing rift within fan studies stems from the media industries' own relative and contingent embracing of fans in what Jenkins dubs "affective economics." Fandom has traditionally been a subcultural entity, existing outside mainstream audience practices and responses. However, as *some* of those practices are now stamped with approval by the media industries, and as *some* of them are allowed or even openly encouraged, fans and fandom are being balkanized. The front door is enticingly left wide open for those fans willing to play within the confines of the industry-set rules, but that legitimation reifies the subcultural existence of those not playing in the proper sandbox and/or with the proper tools – whether it involves fan fiction of stories whose authors publicly decry fannish creations, photo manipulations that draw from copyrighted material, or fanvids that use songs whose owners have not permitted their use. Moreover, given the uncertain legal status of many fan works, there is a real danger that critical or seemingly offensive material gets singled out and targeted for copyright violations as the media industries interpret them. Thus, a key danger for fan studies in particular is that many within the field might find the seeming promise of an affective economics that allows participatory culture so attractive that they too follow the more socially acceptable forms of fandom through the open door, leaving an interest in the full range of fandom behind. Certainly, research of all types is required, but whereas fan studies began with a concern for the disempowered in society, and for

their creative responses to mainstream and cult media, a fan studies that follows industry-sanctioned fans too closely may lose much of its critical edge.

At the same time, though, a renewed and reinvigorated fan studies will need to pay greater attention to race, ethnicity, and global practices of fandom. The overwhelming majority of fan studies have come from the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, examining middle-class audiences in developed nations. Notable exceptions exist, as with, most prominently, the ever-growing field of anime studies that examines Japanese and other East Asian fandoms (Napier 2007). But fan studies have for too long rendered the white middle-class Western fan as normative. As Bertha Chin (2007) argues, fandoms around the world may operate in wholly different ways, with entirely different relationships posited between fan, fan object, industry, and the surrounding society. Not only could a great deal be learned by studying fans of local media around the world, but also more work on fans of transnational media could tell us much of audience formations globally. Indeed, Aswin Punathambekar (2007) notes that global media studies have traditionally focused on issues of production and trade, meaning that a close study of global fandom could add multiple layers of depth to global media studies. Fan studies has proven a powerful lens through which we can examine the practices of power through media transmission and reception in the West, so let us use fan studies to examine similar processes internationally. Let us also use fan studies to examine minority racial and ethnic communities within the West. If the middle-class white American posting comments about an American network drama on *Television without Pity* is rapidly becoming the hegemonically normative fan in *some* accounts of fandom, a global and racially sensitive fan studies could further help to destabilize this odd norm, returning fan studies' focus to issues of power.

Finally, if fan studies began in part as a reaction against taste hierarchies, and hence developed by examining the fans of culturally "suspicious" and derided texts – whether soaps, teen television, sci-fi, pop music, or sports – we pose that it is time for fan studies now to apply its methods to the study of high-culture fans or "aficionados." Joli Jensen's early and influential essay "Fandom as Pathology" (1992) argued persuasively that we all have our fandoms, whether of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* or Mozart, slasher films or James Joyce, and 15 years later Roberta Pearson (2007) suggested many similarities between fans of *Star Trek*, *Sherlock Holmes*, and Bach. But neither piece was borne out by much audience research, nor have many studies in the intervening years taken up either polemic with hard data. As a result, many still tend to see fandom as a practice endemic to "low culture" and to modern mass media. Should fan studies turn to the "scribbling women" and subcultural, sometimes subversive consumption practices of aficionados and fans of high culture, though, much of the ground that social hierarchies of values posit themselves as resting upon could be exploded, perhaps demanding a more accurate accounting of the varying forms and cultures of consumption that exist across the class and cultural spectrum. Fan studies, in other words, still has much to study and still may have much to say about the politics of taste.

A continuing issue for fan studies in all its diverse and propagating variations regards the representativeness or uniqueness of fans. Simply put, are fans important because their practices are indicative of general processes of consumption, or are they important because their differences are illustrative? As fan studies becomes a field in its own right, drawing from myriad disciplines, and as the subjects and objects of inquiry become less easily placeable in single categories or definitions, it becomes clear that fans are both and that any inquiry from here on needs to be less concerned with large-scale claims and instead look at particular scenarios, specific fandoms, and individual fannish expressions.

Notes

- 1 Given the framing of this book, we choose to discuss fan studies within the context of film, television, and media studies only. For a contrast between media and sports fans and a discussion of disciplinary differences, see Schimmel, Harrington, and Bielby (2007).
- 2 Whereas audience- and reader-focused theories responded to models that had advocated singular readings, they do not suggest that all readings are equally valid or that a given text supports any interpretation. What they do, however, is acknowledge audiences as part of the interpretive framework of texts.
- 3 Though neither writer finds their theoretical footing in Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998)'s work, Lancaster (2001) and Coppa (2006) both provide examples of work that focuses on fan engagement as intrinsically performative.
- 4 The different approaches and cultures are mirrored in terminology. A group of fans of creative responses to media recently found Organization for Transformative Works, part advocacy group, part legal council, with the purpose to create a permanent archive for fan works. Many fans supporting the organization articulate their separate community space by making icons and banners proclaiming, "I am not your user-generated content." See <http://transformativeworks.org>. See also Russo (2009) on the differences between music videos made in response to a sponsored contest and fan vids in *Battlestar Galactica* fandom.
- 5 See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dragonriders_of_Pern/; <http://chillingeffects.org/fanfic/notice.cgi?NoticeID=143/>; <http://web.archive.org/web/19981111191431/http://pern.dreamhaven.org/>; and http://annemccaffrey.net/index.php?page_id=20/.
- 6 See <http://www.chillingeffects.org/fanfic/notice.cgi?NoticeID=534/> and <http://www.guardian.co.uk/print/0,3858,4814875-103680,00.html>.
- 7 See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Official_Star_Wars_Fan_Film_Awards/; <http://web.archive.org/web/20051231065227/>; <http://www.chron.com/dispatch/story.mpl/ae/movies/jump/1381119.html/>; and http://news.cnet.com/Star-Wars-and-the-fracas-over-fan-films/2008-1008_3-5690595.html.
- 8 This aggressive reading and pushing of boundaries are most comprehensively studied in slash fiction. See Jenkins (1992), Bacon-Smith (1992), and Penley (1992) for early accounts, and Jones (2002), Willis (2006), and Kohnen (2008) for more recent ones.

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