

Fan Culture

Fan Culture:
Theory/Practice

Edited by

Katherine Larsen and Lynn Zubernis

CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS

P U B L I S H I N G

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INTRODUCTION

KATHERINE LARSEN AND LYNN ZUBERNIS

A recent fan convention for a popular U.S. television show featured actors who repeatedly told the gathered fans how much they appreciate the fans' efforts to keep the show on the air. In private, one actress told us that *The Powers That Be* (typically the last to know what fans want) are now turning to this show and its fandom as a new (and lucrative) model for cultivating a fan base. The actors in attendance have certainly demonstrated how clearly they understand both the power of fandom and the new model of interacting with their fans. They tweet to us, they have friended us on Facebook. And in opposition to the historical construction of fan/producer interactions as strictly para-social relationships (see for example, Horton and Wohl 1956; Berger 1997; Meyrowitz 1985), they have even formed more "meaningful" relationships with some of us – friendships, business partnerships, and connections that further mutual charitable causes. Over the course of the convention weekend, they chatted with us in intimate meet and greets. They joined us for drunken karaoke. When one actor was informed that a scholar/fan was in the process of writing a paper about him and his relationship with his fans, he immediately expressed a desire to read the paper. If there are boundaries here between fan/scholar/producer, they are increasingly difficult to identify.

For further evidence of this we need look no further than a recent article in the popular entertainment news magazine, *Entertainment Weekly*. "Just do It!" (Jensen 2012) welcomes readers to the "shipper nation," explaining the tendency of fans to vocally champion a romantic pairing between their favorite television series characters, and to read and write fan fiction and produce videos featuring their preferred couples. The article also acknowledges the impact of shipper passions on series' popularity. Not surprisingly, both fans and "experts" are quoted in the article – including the expected executive producers and actors. More unexpected is the input from academics Kristina Busse and Christine Scodari. Once again we are reminded of the ever more porous boundaries

between academic, fan, and mainstream understandings of the underpinnings of fandom.

Those boundary crossings are not limited to fans, academics, and those who produce our favorite texts. During a university class exercise in which students were working in groups discussing an article on fan fiction, one of the groups suddenly became quite animated. A phone was being passed from one group member to the next and one or two “OMG’s” were uttered. Apparently one of the students in the group had just discovered fan fiction written about him! (Actually it was about a character he had played as a child.) At first the student was amused and not a little flattered that someone had written a story about the character he portrayed. Class stopped, and discussion turned to what he had just found, veering off topic almost immediately when the rest of the students started to Google their classmate, pulling up his IMDB page and shouting “no way!” and “get out!” What had begun as a lesson on the ethics of fan fiction had shifted to an exercise on fame and celebrity. When the instructor and student met after class to talk about what had just happened, the discussion shifted once again. By then the student had read over the fanfic in question and discovered that the fan writer had described his character in the throes of despair over finding out that he was adopted. The suicidal character was attempting to cut his wrists (with no success since he was a robot) – something the student found deeply disturbing even as he recognized that the author may well have been working out her own personal issues via his character. Concern for his character quickly turned to concern for the writer, and another dimension of fan fic writing – the possibility for producer/fan interaction – was made strikingly clear.

Similarly, (and as the title of this collection would suggest) the boundaries between theory and practice in fan studies are blurring more all the time. Previously we had theorized what fans do and why they do it, yet fan voices were often oddly absent from the discussion, and the theory seemed to bear less and less resemblance to what fans were actually doing online, at fan gatherings, and on fan pilgrimages. Researchers described the increasing interaction between fan and producer, but often without access to producers themselves. All this is changing. Not only are fans interacting with producers, but academics are as well. And as the scope and practices of fandom are changing, so too are the ways in which we theorize, study, and teach it. The essays in this collection are an attempt to give voice to that broadening scope, to move away from valuing certain practices over others, to question accepted or dominant theory, and to examine these issues from perspectives that reflect the multi-disciplinary and global nature of the field.

Far from being “merely” theoretical concerns, these issues have real world implications for our scholarship and our lives as educators. For instance, at the beginning of our own classes, we encourage students to embrace their inner fans. We then, of course, almost immediately tell them to stop “squeeing” and require them to approach their chosen and perhaps newly acknowledged fandoms through a critical lens – that critical lens being a thoroughly researched and rigorously chosen (and approved) framework that has in the past ranged from Chomsky to Said, Fiske to Jenkins. What does this say about the way we position ourselves? We acknowledge our own fannishness. We even acknowledge our own “guilty pleasures” – to a point. A poster for the Showtime series *The Tudors* hangs in Kathy’s office. One for the series *Supernatural* hangs in Lynn’s. Do we let our students know that we have been fans for years and that these (let’s be honest here) infatuations began, not because we noticed a certain actor’s skills as a thespian, but rather his attractive appearance? No. Do we couch most of our own fan experiences as “research”? More often than we would care to think. Do we rationalize this behavior by reminding ourselves that we are charged with teaching students the rigors of academic research and writing and therefore we must move them past the “Oh gosh!” moment? Do we think this is a weak argument at best and one which undermines our adopted field at worst? We have to say yes.

The goal of this collection, then, is threefold – to raise questions about our own practices, to consider where some of those practices lead us as scholars, and to ask how they impact our teaching. In keeping with these newly blurred boundaries, we have not divided this collection into discrete sections of theory and practice, since one inevitably impacts the other. We do see four broad themes emerging across the essays in this collection: a re-evaluation of aca-fandom, a new attention to the ethical questions necessarily raised by our work in fandom studies, a need to reexamine fan/producer relationships, and a fresh look at some of our assumptions surrounding “gendered” fan behaviors. These four themes often overlap and are dependent on one another, and again, no easy divisions are possible.

We also see a movement from re-examining our own scholarship to reassessing what we do in the classroom. Thus the last four essays, while raising many of the same questions about ethics, fan/producer relationships and our own sometimes fraught relationship with our scholarship, focus more squarely on how we negotiate the ways in which we approach teaching and the challenges we face with our students.

Rethinking Aca-Fandom

Inevitably, we all bring our own passions and proclivities to bear on our research. We let our fanboy or fangirl knickers show either proudly, reluctantly, or from some negotiated position between those two poles. In other words, as Matt Hills observes, we tend to focus on what is familiar. Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson prioritize fans' desires for privacy and a safe space over the disciplinary conventions that can sometimes be at odds with fan expectations of privacy. Heather Meggers defines the online community as a female-dominated space and fanfic writing as one of the primary fannish activities, to put forth a theory about the positive effects of exploring sexuality for women. John Walliss observes that women locate themselves primarily in fan communities, men primarily in their academic discipline. Catherine Coker embraces the view of fandom as a utopian space free of racist vitriol, and together with Larisa Mikhaylova, she sees fandom as a politically negotiated space, both from within and from outside the community.

In our own work, we have privileged certain activities – fan writing, the particular lexicon of fan icons, and attendance at fan conventions, for instance – over others, mindful of the fact that we are inevitably leaving things out. Much of the academic work on fandom is influenced by aca-fans' pre-theoretical investments in specific fan practices, often with transformative fan practices emphasized over mimetic ones. Thus certain fan practices are over-valued and rendered canonical, while the rest are "othered". Rethinking our position as aca-fans requires interrogating our own processes and challenging our own blind spots. We might also consider revisiting some of our assumptions, and schooling ourselves to look past some of our self-constructed boundaries. This involves moving out of our safe spaces, including outside the predominantly Anglo-American formulation of fan studies. Thus, Larisa Mikhaylova looks at *Star Trek* fandom as it is constructed and performed in Russia, from the perspective of a researcher working within Russian norms and belief systems. Revisiting boundaries that are sociological rather than geographical, Heather Meggers and Simone Becque explore other reasons for female fan fiction – not as disruptive to the texts but as actually upholding the moral economy of the original -- and Catherine Coker asks us to revisit the foundational theories of Henry Jenkins. Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson ask us to step outside our disciplinary structures in order to see fandom from the perspective of the fans.

Lincoln Geraghty encourages us to recognize the existence of blind spots and pre-existing investments in our students as well. Just as we, as

aca-fans, prioritize our own favored fan practices, students attribute value to their own interests and patterns of media consumption, and devalue others. Some may be reluctant to recognize their own fannishness or acknowledge their participation in fan practices, even as they wrestle with assignments to write fan fiction or join fan communities. Students struggle with the multi-disciplinary nature of the field just as researchers do, particularly as the field evolves rapidly across an increasing array of platforms and practices. Geraghty reminds us that students must find their own voice in their writing – something that we, as aca-fans, must also do. Similarly, Paul Booth attempts to de-“other” fandom by encouraging his undergraduate students to discover and acknowledge their identity as fans, while mentoring graduate students to embrace the “aca” side of the equation. Both Geraghty and Booth recognize a resistance to recognition of oneself as “too fannish” in students and aca-fans alike, with both tempted to take a position of superiority that prioritizes certain (rational) fan practices over other (overly emotional and invested) ones.

Ethics and Fan Studies

Several of the essays in this collection grapple with the ethical dilemmas of being a scholar fan – beginning with a rethinking of the very terms. Academic disciplines are shaped by their own moral economies; in a multidisciplinary field, there is thus a need to unpack the relevant disciplinary silences and assumptions, rather than merely performing one’s disciplinary affiliation. There is also the need to avoid speaking only for a highly selective fan experience, and the risk of “taking sides” in rival moral economies. Our own biases have the potential to impact fans themselves, as our ability to understand the field as a whole is limited not only by our interests, but by the disciplinary lenses we look through.

Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson discuss the impact of the researcher’s discipline on how we study fandom – in this case, how we cite, reference and source the work of others, including fans. Busse and Hellekson prioritize fannish norms which expect privacy, and their “fans first” position asks us to think about the meaning of that term in a post-internet culture. The presence of such companies as Reputation.com is a telling reminder that we no longer enjoy the (illusion of?) security and privacy that we once supposed we had. But Busse and Hellekson point out that theoretical discussions about the nature of privacy can have real world implications for a fan who does not want others to know that she writes kinky fan fiction. Once again, we are faced with a choice – whose moral and intellectual economy do we privilege?

The positioning of the aca-fan is itself an ethical challenge. Even if we see ourselves as fans first, we occupy a position of power, able to influence public perception and select which semiprivate utterances get more attention and validation. Busse and Hellekson revisit the inherent dangers of being part of the community analyzed and the biases this may create in terms of objectivity and selection of analyzed works – an ethical dilemma as well as an issue shaping the evolution of the field. Some argue that we cease to be “fans first” the moment we set pen to paper to begin writing about fans. We experienced the difficulty of negotiating these challenges first hand as we simultaneously researched and participated in the *Supernatural* fandom (2012, Zubernis and Larsen), academics one moment and squeezy fangirls the next. Our resolution of the challenge was far from perfect.

As Matt Hills emphasizes, the fannish code of secrecy is just one of many conflicting moral economies, both within fandom and within academia. This particular norm prioritizes fan expectations of privacy and leads us to ask “How can academic rigor be reconciled with fan privacy?” Further, do fan communities appeal to the same moral economy for acceptance? Are fans even struggling for such acceptance, or are they struggling instead to remain out of the mainstream? Can we even continue to use the collective “they” and “we” with any sort of agreed upon meaning?

The danger of subscribing to a particular moral economy is related to the danger of locking fans into stereotypes, even if we believe those stereotypes to be empowering. Thus, Heather Meggers asks us to understand a different kind of empowerment, one that prioritizes individual female sexuality and identity development over transgressive societal change in women’s fanfiction writing.

Lisa Macklem tackles one of the longstanding ethical issues in the field, analyzing the application of basic copyright law and fair use doctrine to current fan practices and academic study, and providing practical suggestions for introducing these important topics to students. Michael Lachney also questions how media educators approach issues of copyright, as students remix pre-existing media content in the classroom and confront issues of privacy and ethics in the digital age.

Fan/Producer Relationships

The historical view of fandom as political, in the sense that it challenged dominant discourse, is expanding to capture other forms of “political” response. Such responses can occur within fandom or between

fans and producers. Christine Handley discusses an instance of the former, in which a fan's corrective text itself generated fandom antagonism, based on conflicting moral economies. Several other essays explore the politicized interactions between fans and the creative side.

Particularly in the rapidly evolving reciprocal relationship between fans and producers in the time of Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, iPhones and instant access, Catherine Coker argues that entertainment and politics have become increasingly conflated and calls for "textual liberation" – the expansion of canon as separate from considerations of authorial intent, viewing canon as a "living thing". Similarly, Christine Handley proposes a view of fanworks not as poaching, but as part of a dialogue between fans and the creative side – rejoinders instead of appropriations. Handley explores intertextuality as inevitable, present in all writing, and increasingly visible. While this is a departure from Jenkins' early descriptions of textual poaching, Handley nevertheless acknowledges the continued subversive potential of fanworks, as fan authors counter the dominant media representations that give primacy to the exploits of male heroes and traditional patriarchal themes, rewrite equality for marginalized and subordinated groups into texts, and open up the possibilities for alternative voices silenced in the source material. Both Coker and Handley focus on the problematic portrayals of female characters in media texts, and suggest fanworks as offering a different perspective and opening up possibilities for alternative voices silenced within the source material. Coker also cites the exposing of *Twilight*'s sexist and patriarchal themes in several popular fanvids and music/vid mashups, as an example of the overt use of fanworks as a political critique, not just a media entertainment one. Simone Becque, in contrast, cites ways in which those themes are upheld and extended in *Twilight* fanfiction, filling in blanks that author Meyers has teased her audience with – intended, yet not articulated.

Handley views textual production as continuous and communal, with producers increasingly responding to their fans through further textual production, but seeks to replace the concept of "poaching" with the more collaborative term "dialogic". In our own work on *Supernatural*'s unprecedented breaking of the fourth wall, we have found a similar potential for transformation (Zubernis and Larsen, 2012). The dialogue between fans and producers has impacted both the interpretation of the source text by the fans, and the evolution of the canon universe in view of its continually changing perception in the media and the writing room. As Handley notes, "the texts meet, contradict, and revitalize each other, and the producers in turn respond to their fans through further textual production."

However, Coker, like Hills, also reminds us of the inherent power imbalance in the “reciprocal relationship” between creators and fan creators, even in a shared meta-textual property which is collaborative, mutable and constantly evolving. Coker discusses the ways in which the reciprocal relationship can either work or fail miserably, citing the case of Marion Zimmer Bradley and “the Contraband incident” of a disgruntled litigious fanfic writer and a heartbroken author (and former slashwriting fanficcer herself). Both Larisa Mikhaylova and Coker also explore fandom’s role in the creation of *Star Trek*’s recent reboot, and the mixed reactions once the final product made its way to the big screen. Mikhaylova asks us to consider what happens when fan/producer relationships cross cultural boundaries and reminds us again that texts reside in the hands of the fans.

Gender

Several essays in this collection examine themes related to gender, which continue to impact the field. Fan shame persists across gender lines, with media portrayals of fans still tending toward depictions of bizarrely overinvested people who engage in strange, borderline illegal practices. The new reality television show *Geek Love* follows fans who date each other (because of course they cannot possibly mingle with the population at large). An episode filmed at New York’s Comic Con featured “speed dating with nerds.” The fact that the show exists means that geeks/nerds/fanboys/fangirls have a more prominent place in culture. We recognize them. However the show is one of many that has popularized the exploitation of marginalized groups for entertainment purposes. Little people, hoarders, the significantly overweight are all put on display for us to get to know and love in ways that are ultimately voyeuristic and somewhat condescending (the audience is often left laughing or thanking their lucky stars that they are not like “those” people.) This is the context in which we are asked to embrace fans and fan culture by mainstream media.

Often those who are portrayed as the most overinvested, and those who come in for the most ridicule, are women. On “Mr. Monk and His Biggest Fan,” (6.1) Sarah Silverman portrays “Marci Maven”, a fan of the obsessive compulsive titular detective. She combs through his garbage, wears his cast off clothes and has clearly sexual designs on the character. “Becky the Fangirl” is well known to the fans of *Supernatural* as someone who loves too much and in all the “wrong” ways (she engages in the “icky” practice of writing Wincest fan fiction, cannot keep her hands off

Sam when she meets him, and saves the day in one episode only to be definitively portrayed as a loser in her latest appearance).

Fanboys, in contrast, are to some extent enjoying the new cachet of being a nerd. The president of the United States has been photographed on the White House lawn wielding a light saber, or posing with fanboy enthusiasm next to Nichelle Nichols, *Star Trek*'s original Lt. Uhura. Simon Pegg's recent autobiography (2011) positions him as a smart, funny, socially adept man who also happens to be a nerd – a huge *Star Wars* fan as well as a fan of popular culture in general. The very first stories he tells are of his early sexual encounters, perhaps in an effort to once and for all dispel the idea that fanboys live – either literally or figuratively -- in their parents' basements and have never kissed a girl. Pegg assures us that he's kissed his fair share of girls (and even married one of them). No such work yet exists for the fangirl, and the stereotype persists that fangirls are overweight cat ladies with unhealthy fixations on the male leads of their favorite television shows.

Inequality in mainstream portrayals of fans is mirrored by the continued (mis)understanding of the ways in which male and female fans participate in fandom, perhaps influenced once again by our blinkered approach to our research. We most often sidestep discussions of sexuality or take them on without questioning the hierarchy that created them. Slash writers have traditionally been understood as embarking on subversions of the dominant hierarchy, challenging gender norms and exploring both masculine and feminine identity. Yet shame, and a concomitant desire for secrecy, persists among female fans, particularly when any expression of sexuality is added to the mix. The shame is especially intense around the most "othered" fan practices, such as slash and hurt/comfort. Even within fandom, and certainly from outside, the idea of women writing slash continues to elicit reactions of confusion, shock or even horror, while men indulging in the analogous genre – lesbian porn – is mainstream enough to be the focal point for a tour de force of ribald humor. In the British series *Coupling* (1.4), the character of Steve is questioned about watching lesbian porn by his girlfriend Susan during a dinner party. In an attempt to justify his interest in *Lesbian Spank Inferno*, he first tries to describe the film as an art house production in which an independent collective of lesbian filmmakers comes together to screen their films (rather than a group of women with cameras in their bedrooms filming themselves). When the "high culture" gambit does not work, Steve winds up delivering an eloquent speech in which he explains his interest in lesbian porn as being completely "natural" ("I'm a bloke! We're supposed to like naked women!"), and indeed the foundation of all civilization (fire was less

useful for cooking than for seeing women's "naked bottoms"). No such declarations of normalcy exist in the mainstream for women.

Despite lack of outside validation, female fans report finding sexual self acceptance as a benefit of fandom participation. Heather Meggers' original research study on online sexual activity is in line with our own theories about fandom as an antidote to persistent female shame about sexuality and a means of validation and identity exploration for women. Meggers' respondents reported that fandom had played a significant role in changing their attitudes about others' sexuality, bringing greater acceptance and discouraging stigmatization of others' orientations, behavior, preferences, and kinks. In line with exposure theory's "contact hypothesis" as powerful in reducing stereotypes, fans gained greater empathy and perspective taking skills from participation in fandom and its established norms of acceptance and tolerance. Female fans also reported greater acceptance of their own sexual selves, reduced shame, guilt and embarrassment, and increased freedom from social proscriptions that limit female sexuality. Similarly, our own research has located the therapeutic aspects of fandom in both the perceived safe space that allows for open discussion and exploring of identity, and the validation of the fandom community in creating and sustaining change (Zubernis and Larsen, 2012).

The notion of fandom as play has influenced our understanding of the therapeutic aspects of fandom, and points up other gender-related issues addressed here. As in gendered play itself, males may be more likely to play competitively, while females may be more likely to play cooperatively. This distinction is suggested by the divergent ways in which fans participate in their chosen fandom. For example, John Walliss examines the (mostly male) *Warhammer* fandom, noting that in its original incarnation, *Warhammer* players collected and painted scale miniatures, amassed their armies, and played wargames, negotiating power and identity. However, Walliss also undertakes a relatively rare examination of male *Warhammer* fanfiction writers. Many have suggested that fanfiction and vidding are stereotypically female, while fan films and machinima are stereotypically male, so Walliss' essay is unique for its comparison of fanfiction across genders. At least within the *Warhammer* fandom, he finds an overt and strict emphasis on canon compliance, to the extent that the norm of "never go against the fluff" is articulated and well understood. *Warhammer* fanfiction communities overtly define the role of fanfiction as "not to attempt to change the nature and parameters of the existing universe", emphasizing staying within the boundaries. Thus, fanfiction is created to fill in the gaps, but not to expand the universe outside the lines.

In contrast, female fanfiction writers have been hypothesized to be more likely to create “transformative works”, deliberately coloring outside the lines to expand canon in order to either focus on female characters not sufficiently painted in canon or to slow down the action to explore themes of sexuality and emotionality in more depth. Walliss’ finding that male-written fanfiction tends to be more orthodox and canon compliant, he suggests, may reflect the fact that the fictional worlds are already male-centric and presented with the patriarchal themes of the broader culture intact. Thus, males may have little need to transform a universe which already fits their needs and interests – as Walliss notes, the canon yields “easy pleasure” and requires no transforming, transvestism or refocusing. Indeed, Walliss locates some of the differential attraction as located in attributes of the media property itself, describing *Warhammer*’s fictional universe as “100% mansauce, a universe of testosterone-fuelled conflict with little or no room for emotional complexities or morally grey areas.”

Females, in contrast, may be more inspired to subvert existing cultural norms in their fanworks, by changing the focus or the gender norms. Our work in the *Supernatural* fandom, which skews heavily female, reveals a text which seems to offer appeal to both male and female fans. On the surface, the dystopian, graphically violent fictional world, seems to skew to stereotypically male interests, and indeed, the network certainly had the coveted young male demographic in mind when it launched the show. Scratch the surface, however, and the appeal of *Supernatural* becomes less about the weapons and more about the relationships, specifically the close, conflicted one between brothers Sam and Dean, described in canon as “erotically co-dependent” (Zubernis and Larsen, 2012). The *Supernatural* universe, in contrast to that of *Warhammer*, is almost entirely morally ambiguous, with the series played out in shades of grey and delving into repeated angst-driven moral conflicts. Thus the media text becomes a fertile playground for female fans interested in emotional elements, not to mention slashers who are there for the subtext.

Both *Twilight* and *Supernatural* offer the appeal of attractive male characters, certainly an additional explanation for the gender skew of the fandoms – and the emphasis on sexuality and emotionality in fanworks. Walliss finds that *Warhammer* fanworks, in contrast, tend to lack sexual themes, and there is virtually no slash in the fanfiction. Interestingly, the canon world is occupied by prostitutes (smile-girls), graphic violence (mutant clowns disemboweling each other with chainswords) and drug use – but little finds its way into fan fiction. In our research on sexuality and fandom, male *Star Trek* fans also spoke about their attraction to fandom as

being an escape from the perceived burden of being male and the pressure of being both sexual and sexually successful.

Female fans, on the other hand, as Meggers describes, often cite the freedom to express their authentic sexual selves in fandom – a freedom they have not experienced elsewhere. While male fans may use fandom as a way of escaping the pressure of being not sexual enough, female fans may find escape from the criticism of being too sexual, mirroring the dominant cultural expectations of both genders. The slash fiction of female *Star Trek* and *Supernatural* writers, which reverses the subject/object positions to objectify the male characters, is often about as far from fade to black as you can get.

Walliss also suggests that the reasons for writing fanfiction may be different in an additional way for males and females. While traditional female fanfiction culture is structured as a gift economy, with fans valuing the creating of fanworks as something given to fellow fans without expectation of anything in return (other than the savored comments), the male fanfic writers in *Warhammer* fandom tended to view their writing as a competition for publishing rights. The difference in purpose may contribute to a closer adherence to canon as well, since writing inside the universe may be more likely to be published by The Powers That Be.

Christine Handley, however, challenges the overly simplistic breakdown of ascribing certain modes of participation to female versus male fans. As Becque and Coker highlight, *Twilight* fanfiction, like the canon texts, often reads as a romance novel of the type described by Radway, adept at making both the female main character and the reader feel like the object of a courtship. The female *Twilight* readers who supply the missing bits that author Meyer may have intended but didn't provide are engaging in the same type of "male" behavior that Walliss discusses. Similarly, Handley examines a work of fanfiction written by a female fan which nevertheless indulges in the stereotypically male tradition of taking pleasure in technology, elaborating on starship technical specifications and weapons capabilities. Since Handley only looks at one example here, it's difficult to say whether the studied fan novel is merely an anomaly. However, the admonition to avoid making broad assumptions is well taken, and Handley's research underscores the limitations of artificially imposed textual gender divisions.

Conclusion

All of the issues above come back into play when we enter the classroom, and some new ones are raised as well. One of the additional difficulties in teaching fan studies is that we teach our students the goals of fan participation, but we expect them to demonstrate this understanding through the scholar subject position – a position which, as we’ve seen, can be at odds with the fan position. Ultimately we are asking them to accept, understand and then reject the very acts they were originally asked to embrace. How do we create a space for them? What do we teach them about research in fan communities?

Our own text-centric proclivities as academics are evident in the consideration of fan practices included in this collection. A recognition of the breadth and depth of fandom, and a concurrent expansion of aca-fans’ research endeavors, are beginning to occur, reflected in the diversity of conference presentations and theoretical work on gaming, cosplay, mashups, and furies, among the many underexplored practices in which fans engage. Fan practices, fan spaces and fan/producer relationships are rapidly evolving, and the field of fan studies is endeavoring to keep pace. The essays here offer a starting point from which to nurture that growth and change.

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“PROPER DISTANCE” IN THE ETHICAL POSITIONING OF SCHOLAR-FANDOMS: BETWEEN ACADEMICS’ AND FANS’ MORAL ECONOMIES?

MATT HILLS

This chapter tackles a number of issues which have been embedded in the theory and practice of work on fan culture, focusing on the hybrid identity of the scholar who is also a fan. In the opening section below, I consider how the scholar-fan has been represented in cultural studies and fan studies, suggesting that we still have rather limited and singular images of scholar-fandom, assumed to productively combine elements of fandom (passion/knowledge) and academia (critical detachment). Set against this rationale is an emergent view that scholar-fandom is no longer a useful concept, since scholarly and fannish identities can now be lived and experienced as continuous, without any question of institutional or discursive limits. I argue that we need to move beyond these reiterated and restricted arguments, or discursive mantras, to consider scholar-fandom not just as one entity or one concept to be valued/surrendered. A more multiple view of differently positioned modes of scholar-fandom is, instead, called for at this point in fan studies’ development. In the second section of my chapter, I therefore consider how approaches to scholar-fandom, in the plural, can be analysed as adopting different positions of closeness/distance in relation both to sections of fandom, and to academic disciplines. I draw on the notion of ethical “proper distance” (Silverstone 2007, 23) to argue for specific values and approaches in scholar-fan writings, before concluding in the final section by linking these debates to multiple academic and fan “moral economies” (Jenkins 2006). Above all, I am interested here in the need for those of us writing academically about fandom, but also drawing on fan identities, to carefully consider just who we are speaking for, and what scholar/fan exclusions might structure this engagement. To begin with, then, how has scholar-fandom been defended as a useful practice in fan studies, and attacked as no longer necessary?

Old and new discursive mantras of scholar-fandom

In *Fan Cultures*, I argued that there were structurally different ways of hybridising academic and fan identities; I defined “scholar-fans” as professional academics writing primarily for fellow scholars via the publishing institutions of the academy. By contrast, I discussed “fan-scholars” as fans using academic concepts within their writing, outside the licensed spaces of “pro” academia (Hills 2002, 2). Scholar-fandom or aca-fandom has become an increasingly normative form of academic identity across the past two decades within specialised areas of TV, cultural, and fan studies (Hills 2010b, 212; Burr 2005). Typical rationales are given for the performance of scholar-fandom; as Will Brooker has noted, “in theory at least [this] combines personal passion with the objective analysis of scholarship.” (Brooker 2007, 48). And Henry Jenkins has similarly argued in favour of aca-fandom “which acknowledges and explores our emotional connections to popular culture and the way it functions as a resource in our everyday life” (Jenkins 2010 online). Again, the fan’s presumed passion is drawn upon, but articulated with a detached, critical sensibility, i.e. exploring functions of resources. A related aspect of the discursive mantra of the scholar-fan has been reiterated in a special issue of *Flow*, focused on aca-fandom. Contributors Catherine Coker and Candace Benefiel observe that the “fan” component of scholar-fandom is not just a matter of passion, but is also about textual accuracy (2010 online). In short, the scholar-fan is presumed to combine scholarly practice with the depth, detail and rigour of fan knowledge. Scholar and fan identities are rendered contiguous, or brought closely together.

Now, if one strand of thinking in what’s been termed “fan studies” valorises the scholar-fan’s hybridity as scholarship plus fan passion/knowledge, then a second, emergent position can also be discerned. Here, rather than scholar-fans proffering the best of both worlds, scholar-fandom is approached itself as a limitation on the fuller integration of fan and academic identities:

By remaining fan-scholars at the same time that we become scholar-fans, we hope to shift the concerns from a dichotomy of academic and fannish identity to subject positions that are multiple and permit us to treat the academic and fannish parts as equally important. Our identities are neither separate nor separable. We rarely speak as fan or scholar; we rarely differentiate between an academic and fannish audience, except perhaps in formality of tone (Busse and Hellekson 2006, 24–5).

Rather than aspects of (institutionally and discursively) separable identities being combined, it is argued that fan and academic identities can be experienced as unified, integrated and continuous (although note that “formality of tone” recurs as a marker of academic identity; that is, certain protocols of writing likely to be linked to forms of cultural and educational capital actually continue to demarcate academic distinctions). Issues of cultural power seem to dissolve: fandom and academia can supposedly co-exist positively and productively, without any tension. As a result, such identities can be balanced or equated, each being equally important. Similarly, Paul Booth has sought a route out of the “post-structuralist quagmire” allegedly instantiated by *Fan Cultures* (Booth 2010 online). In such approaches, it is presumed that fandom and scholarship can be smoothly aligned. Reflexively theorising scholar-fandom as linked to forms of institutional, discursive and cultural power is thus apparently rendered unnecessary. Indeed, recent debate has taken this position forward, with the very value of the term “acafandom” being further challenged (see Stein 2011). As Jonathan Gray suggested as part of the SCMS 2011 Workshop on “Acafandom and the Future of Fan Studies”:

Ultimately, it's unclear how each half – the aca and the fan – is commenting on the other half... Is one side an *apology* for the other, as in, “no, no, don't worry, I'm not a fan, I'm an *aca-fan*”? If so, the phrase protests too much – just be an academic, and be a fan, and don't feel they need to clash. Or is one side *modifying* the other, suggesting a special type of fandom or academia, above that of the middling masses, as in “I'm not just a lowly fan, I'm an *acafan*”? Or is there some suggestion that the two are a *binary*, and the hybrid formulation is meant to suggest a marrying or greying of the two, as with “infotainment”? If so, haven't we moved beyond the point when they were seen as binaries? Not completely, I know, but still, it ain't the 1950s, so can't we abandon the term? (Gray 2011 online)

Again, the sense here is that fandom and academia can readily be integrated, such that “acafandom” becomes conceptually redundant. Gray usefully directs attention to precisely how “aca” and “fan” may inter-relate, and this forms much of my topic, and my area of concern, in what follows. However, suggesting that the individual scholar shouldn't “feel they [scholarship and fandom] need to clash” evacuates questions of cultural and discursive power in favour of exaggerated agency. Rather than scholars being free to choose to “just be an academic, and be a fan”, I would argue that these continue to act as differential interpretive communities with divergent norms and discursive practices (Brooker 2011), meaning that the identities cannot be united without losing sight of

these contexts (or, indeed, losing sight of the precise micro-context within which such a union may seem more possible, e.g. TV Studies or fan studies where acafandom has arguably been normalised for a generation of researchers).

In this chapter, I want to take issue with these stances on scholar-fandom – the “valorizing” approach where scholar-fans are superior to scholars without fan passion/knowledge, and the “leveling” or dismissive approach, where scholarship and fandom can co-exist without any difficulty or tension and where the need for “acafandom” as a term is contested. Each argument, I will suggest, positions scholar-fandom monolithically, whether as a positive phenomenon or a restrictive/unnecessary theorisation. Instead, and in line with my own ongoing return to scholar-fan debates (Hills 2010b), I will suggest that scholar-fandom needs to be viewed not as one “thing” to be celebrated or transcended, but precisely as a multiple series of bids for identity. As such, scholar-fandom cannot, ultimately, be defended or attacked as a singular entity nor as a singular concept. “It” is, instead, better thought of as an umbrella term for a coalition or conglomeration of academics whose hybridised “scholar” and “fan” identities can vary in a number of significant ways. This being so, I will go on to argue that we need to re-open questions about the positioning of scholar-fan work. And by thinking of scholar-fandom as variously positioned, we also need to consider the ethical status of relations between scholar-fandom and the fan cultures it represents (both in the sense of mediating and standing in for). In prior debates over how fandom and scholarship can be brought together via scholar-fandom – to “improve” scholarship, or to “overcome” discursive and institutional discontinuities – differential distances between scholar-fandom and fan cultures have been neglected. To address this, in the next section I will employ an avowedly ethical concept from Roger Silverstone’s *Media and Morality*, that of “proper distance” (2007, 23).

Scholar-fandoms as too close/too far: Speaking for whom?

The conventional critique of scholar-fandom is that it is too in love with fans; that it becomes overly celebratory of fandom. This observation – a supposed forfeit of academic detachment – is present in some 1990s responses to Henry Jenkins’ work (see Hartley 1996, 65) and it remains present in the field. For example, in the “Aca-fandom” issue of *Flow*, Michael Dwyer argues that:

authors [such as Jonathan Gray and Jason Mittell – MH] position fandom as a concept that must inherently be respected and revered. In the long tradition of media studies, it would seem, fandom has gone from the profane to the sacred. ...as academics and as fans, we ought to seriously interrogate our investment in the social, political, and cultural potential in “fandom,” and recognize that we ourselves are predisposed to believe that impassioned engagement with cultural texts is valuable, laudable, and politically useful. ...[However], it ain't necessarily so (Dwyer 2010 online; Robson 2010, 216).

This style of argument hinges on scholar-fandom allegedly being too close to its objects of study. That is, a supposed lack of symbolic, epistemological, and emotional distance is crucial to how scholar-fandom is devalued. At the same time, as I have noted, symbolic closeness/distance is also vital to discursive mantras which defend scholar-fandom, since these revolve around scholar-fans sharing passion/knowledge with fan cultures.

In what follows, I appropriate an approach that is not rooted in fan studies, nor even explicitly about the study of fans. Silverstone (2007) sets out to theorise the conditions for citizens' productive participation in contemporary media culture. Perhaps surprisingly, fandom is significantly absent from this project, despite the work of Van Zoonen (2005) which fuses considerations of fandom with analysis of democratic politics. Nonetheless, I will suggest that Silverstone's exploration of “the value of a notion of *proper distance* as a measure for ethical positioning in media work” (2007, 23) has much relevance for fan studies.

Silverstone defines proper distance as referring to “the importance of understanding *the more or less precise degree of proximity required in our mediated inter-relationships if we are to create and sustain a sense of the other* sufficient not just for reciprocity but for a duty of care, obligation and responsibility, as well as understanding” (2007, 47: my italics). Drawing on theorists such as Arendt and Levinas, Silverstone offers examples of how media culture – on both its production and consumption sides – fails to attain this proper distance. The reduction of difference occurs when false sameness of self and other is constructed through mediation, and audiences' imaginative (and ideological) engagements. Conversely, a denial of sameness, or basic humanity, occurs in the pronounced, mediatized othering of groups such as Moslems, Iraqis, Palestinians, Jews or Americans. Silverstone also refers to the cult of celebrity, which he says “destroys difference by exaggerating it (the ordinary made exceptional) as well as naturalizing it (the exceptional made ordinary), and denying, in its seductive dialectic, the legitimacy of difference.

Neither close nor far.” (2007, 48). In this sketchy account, celebrity fandom seems to (potentially) involve the failure to accurately recognise difference, dialectically both elevating the celebrity, and bringing them into problematic focus as a spurious mirror for the self (see also Sandvoss 2005). An immorality of distance, where self-other relations are alienated, can thus be supplemented by the “refusal to accept difference, in its resistance to recognizing and to valuing the stranger. Perhaps this could be called the *immorality of identity*” (Silverstone 2007, 173). Against Silverstone’s accounts of “*Too close... Too far... Neither close nor far*”, proper distance is said to be “*both close and far* – [it] requires imagination, both from those who construct the narratives and images of the media, and... audiences and readers, who... construct their own images and narratives based upon them” (2007, 48).

Given my argument that scholar-fandom should not be apprehended monolithically, how then might this dialectic of alienation and mirroring be used to illuminate the multiple ethical positionings of variant interpretations and enactments of scholar-fandom? We need to consider not just one axis of closeness/distance from fandom, but also what types or modes of fandom are mediated by scholarship – that is, what fraction of a fan culture or what specific fan activity is represented? And we need to simultaneously consider the closeness/distance between scholar-fans and specific academic disciplines; how are disciplinary norms mirrored, othered or ignored?

Scholar-fandom approximates to Silverstone’s “too close” not simply when it celebrates fandom *per se*, but also when a scholar mediates his/her own area of fan experience without engaging with alternative or rival modes of fan activity. Thus we can find scholars whose work focuses on fanfic (see, e.g. Busse and Hellekson 2006) but does not engage with wider sets of fan practices, or work which theorises fandom of a specific actor/character, again reflecting the academic’s own lived investments in fandom (e.g. Pearson 2004). For that matter, in my own work there has been an absence of fanfic theorisation, and a focus instead on fans’ interpretations of texts, or on “cult geography” (Hills 2002, 144). This also reflects my own particular investments in fan practices – that I haven’t written fan fiction since my teenage years, while I have continued to engage in fan pilgrimage. I would suggest that a wide range of work in fan studies, going beyond the few examples here, cleaves to this trajectory, with pre-existent fan commitments – whether to fanfic production, fan speculation, character/actor interest, vidding, pilgrimage etc – being mirrored in scholar-fans’ academic texts. The problem then becomes that areas of fan practice remain in the margins of academic work as long as

there are not scholar-fans mediating these precise activities – what body of work exists on fan costuming in comparison with that on slash fiction? Or what of other mimetic fan practices such as the building of replica props? There is precious little scholarship on such activities, I would argue in large part because the scholar-fan community has yet to draw on such fan identities. Elsewhere, I have suggested that scholarship has felt more comfortable championing “transformative” fan activity which can be readily positioned as creative, rather than studying “mimetic” fan activity which seems to be merely secondary or imitative in relation to the fan object (Hills 2010c). Academics’ trained and tutored facility for dealing with texts also leads to a situation where fans’ textual practices are well studied and represented, whereas the material cultures of fandom (costuming/prop-building) are again far less studied and mediated (Gilligan 2011). The mirroring of specific fan identities in scholar-fandom is thus a skewed, distorting mirror which threatens to render specific fandoms academically canonical (*Star Trek*, *Doctor Who*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*) whilst also marginalising a massive range of media fandoms, and material cultures of fandom, whose participants have not yet been drawn into the ranks of scholar-fandom. More than this, by denying difference in favour of sameness, scholar-fans all too frequently represent their experienced fandoms not just in terms of favoured texts, but also in terms of their situated agency within the given fandom.

I am not arguing that scholar-fans are simply “too close” to fandom. Instead, I want to point to the precise situatedness of the “fan” aspects of scholar-fandom, and how these can problematically give rise to academic work which replays scholar-fans’ pre-theoretical investments in specific fan cultural practices, and non-investments in other fan practices. We thus risk a scenario where far from perceiving a community of scholar-fans, what we really attain in current scholarship is a series of writers speaking and writing across one another, and a series of sub-communities which are more closely bound together not via scholar-fandom, but via the fact that they are mediating, in their scholarship, similarly situated fan identities, e.g. a community of *Doctor Who* fans producing scholar-fan work, or Joss Whedon fans doing the same, or groups of fanfic writers, and so on. The issue is not necessarily one of whether scholar-fans attempt to make broad, generalising claims across “fandom” instead of producing more limited conclusions based on the communities they stand (in) for. Rather, the problem here is that specific fan identities and communities are over-represented, or rendered canonical in academic work, whilst other fandoms remain barely present in the literature (see Busse 2011).

A version of “too distant”, or the denial of sameness in Silverstone’s terms, can be linked to this. When scholar-fans represent and mediate their own embeddedness in a fan culture, the other side of the coin is that they effectively “other” fan activities falling outside their fandom experiences. Such othering results not necessarily in negative stereotyping (although it can), but rather in a symbolic annihilation or exnomination of fan practices beyond the scope of the scholar’s pre-theoretical affective relationships (see Click 2011). Proper distance, where close and far, sameness and difference, are fully and critically acknowledged would not appear to be attained in this scenario (it being noted that I am including my own prior work within this critique, and not at all absenting it from censure).

Having said this, there are also relationships of closeness/distance from precisely situated academic disciplines to consider in the case of hybridised scholar-fandom. If proper distance has perhaps gone awry in fannish aspects, what of academic commitments and lived investments? Here, I would propose that “too close”, or a denial of difference, occurs in work that mirrors and reproduces the norms of an academic discipline with which the scholar is affiliated. Simply carrying out a poststructuralist reading of fandom, or a Foucauldian reading of a fan object can leave disciplinary commitments unsettled and firmly reinforced. Normative disciplinary positioning results in work which tends to mirror foundational assumptions, e.g. a critical sociology of fandom can be expected to interpret fan subjectivity within societal power relations (Sandvoss 2005; Longhurst 2007). But the “critical” component of this work is produced via the citation of “critical” forebears and predecessors – that is, its critique is conventional (Sandvoss 2005, 153 poaches from Marcuse), and can be predicted or anticipated, in disciplinary terms. Similarly, work in fan studies drawing more centrally on Winnicottian object-relations can be expected – in line with this strand of disciplinary commitment – to position fan creativity as healthy, non-pathological and ordinary:

Persuasive as Hills is in expanding Winnicottian theory and adapting it to explain the cultural interface between psychic and social investment in texts... He makes no special case for what might be regarded as the extremes of fan devotion... Neither does he consider this “ongoing” adult process as anything other than normal. Could it not be that fans who establish what might be termed an unhealthy fixation upon a certain cultural object have not as infants effectively decathected transitional phenomena, but have repressed them in some way? (Smith 2010, 186).

The critical stances of the likes of Sandvoss and Longhurst, then, as much as my own specific Winnicottian stance, can all be interpreted as

normative in disciplinary terms. Whether working in media sociology, fan studies, or TV studies, such scholarship performatively affiliates itself with dominant and disciplinary/disciplined ways of reading fandom. However, scholar-fandom in TV studies has been joined by scholar-fandom focused on TV texts but produced within very different disciplinary norms. This is an issue which goes beyond the need for academics simply to acknowledge their theoretical lenses, and the impact these will have on interpretations of texts and fandoms, as it can result in work which is itself marked by specific blind spots and presuppositions, and which particularly tends to neglect medium-specific and industry-specific forms of knowledge (see Hausken 2004, 392-7). It is this alternative mode of scholar-fandom, hailing from beyond TV Studies and cognate areas, that I will consider next.

Philosophers now write about popular TV as scholar-fans, as do classicists (see, e.g., Lewis and Smithka 2011; Garner, Beattie and McCormack 2010). Elsewhere I have contrasted this mode of scholar-fandom with that which is more-or-less strongly contained by disciplinary codes and conventions, e.g. work done by TV studies' scholar-fans. In marked contrast, philosophers' and classicists' scholar-fandom tends to venture outside its disciplinary home, usually as a result of lived fan identity, and can be referred to as "transitive" on the basis that it engages in a process of transition between disciplines, without necessarily being fully "interdisciplinary" (Hills 2010b, 212). Transitive scholar-fandom risks Silverstone's "too far", potentially failing to attain proper distance in relation to scholarly identity by not engaging with relevant work, e.g. assuming that television can be written about (as a renegade philosopher) without studying published scholarship on television *as* television. Here, auto-didacticism is substituted for (cross-)disciplinary awareness, seemingly premised on the model of autodidactic fan knowledge, where it is often not deemed important to cite scholarship, but rather to express one's own (more-or-less tutored) view. Whereas normative, disciplinary scholar-fandom risks being too close to its roots in TV studies or cultural studies, thus skewing representations of fan culture and denying any difference from the discipline's assumptions, transitive scholar-fandom risks being too far from relevant scholarship, denying any shared sameness of academic knowledgeability or expertise between its "home" school of thought and those specifically premised on tackling popular culture, fandom, or television.

I am therefore not ushering in any sort of straightforward "discipline war", where TV studies or fan studies should be viewed as the "proper" location of work on television fandom, but am instead indicating that there