Fandom Studies

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Fandom studies looks at how groups of people or individuals interact with a text. It involves the scholarly study of the members of a fan community and their ability to identify with, or express their identity through some form of media. It focuses on the experience provided by a text and how this is added to and shared by those who engage with it. Fans are then grouped into fan cultures, which work as a structured network that run parallel to the production of the text supporting fans and giving them chances to find other viewers that have formed a similar, strong connection. These cultures can be compared to a special club or organisation that revolves around the text, or even a religion (Jenkins, Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture 13). With origins in spectator studies, subculture theory and audience research, fandom studies moved into a field in its own right as researchers began to focus on the experience of viewers outside of the initial reaction to the text. Though there has been some sort of study of the fans of text for a long time it was the study of the fans of Star Trek, known widely as ‘trekkies,’ that expanded the field of study to look at the production and performance involved with fans of entertainment, especially genre entertainment. The area of study continued to evolve as there was a move to a more digital world. The introduction of the internet, and the continued spread of easy access to it across the globe, has added to the ability of fan cultures and communities to grow. This entry into an ever increasing social digital era has also opened up new areas of fandom to study, and has become the focus of many scholars. Though it is a relatively new field of study, it is also shaped by writers taking a critical approach to fandom studies as a method of research.

As fandom studies stems from a cultural studies background, in a broader sense it has been used to look at the viewer’s reaction and interaction with many other cultural phenomena, including literature, games, sport, music, fashion and even politics. However, the topic has always had a close relationship with film and television studies, which is reflected by the amount of research that has
been written and the use of film and television texts in core works within the area. Therefore, fandom studies within film and television can be considered a broad area of study on its own, as long as these connections to the overarching field of cultural studies are acknowledged. Some key areas of focus within fan studies in film and television reception have been fan cultures, fan production, fan tourism and fan activism. The study of fan cultures, involves research on the communities that form around a text, while fan production looks at the creation of new material from fans that relates to the original text. Fan tourism and fan activism focus on how fan communities affect the world around them, how their fandom contributes to where they go and what the support, and the impact these action can have.

**History**

The roots of fandom studies owe much to the rise of cultural studies which began to gain momentum in the 1960s. Many associated with The Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies looked to reasons behind social change. Cultural studies moved away from film semiotics concern with sound movement and image, instead looking at how media, such as film fits into a larger historical and cultural context. It also looked to move away from quantitative audience studies (Stam 227). Over the next few years it moved even further away from text to focus on audiences and the social structures that lead to an interpretation of a text (Turner 199). There was a focus on how a subject is constructed and how they construct themselves in relation to a text. These ideas are central to fandom studies with a focus on what was outside the text and what this leads too. It was after these initial stages through the late 1970s and the 1980s that writing emerged that anticipated what is now considered fandom studies.

The works of authors Ien Ang, Dick Hebdige, and John Fiske, played a particular role in introducing concepts that would later be used to set the foundations for the field. Ang’s *Watching Dallas* takes an in depth look at the way people responded to the much watched 1980s Texan oil tycoon
television series *Dallas*. She uses letters written for and against the show and its impact to form ideas on mass culture and feminism. This technique of incorporating fan and anti-fan responses became a popular method within the field. Hebidge’s *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* brought attention to fans building of a culture through interaction and involvement (111). While, Fiske’s *Television Cultures* sets out to explore television as it is viewed and interpreted by the audience. It does this by focusing on mainstream television that is viewed by many, as it has the biggest effect on a large population. It looks at how different viewers will make different connections with the text. These texts and others like it were grounded within the field of cultural studies, but demonstrated a possibility of looking at how and why groups can share experience through a text. The ideas they raised and methods they used go on to appear consistently within the field.

Though fandom studies had been touched on in the past, often in connection to spectatorship, it wasn’t until the early 1990s that it began to truly take form. Henry Jenkins’ *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* and Camille Bacon-Smith’s *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth*, both published in 1992, are seen as key works in the formation of the topic as an area of study. Bacon-Smith’s text sets out key areas around fan production. She works to establish a background on staples within the fan production areas such as fanzines and fan fiction. This is done by a detailed look into the world of *Star Trek* fans, particularly female fan groups. She introduces ideas of identity through fandom and how this identity can oppose that of someone’s ‘real world’ life. Her focus on transgression introduces ideas around fans creating a universe around a text, demonstrating the ability of a community to base itself on something larger than just the text itself. Jenkins’ book introduces the idea of fans involvement with a text as “poaching” from it. He also works to define the concept of a fan within the field of fan studies. He speaks in length about the historical use of the term ‘fan’ as an abbreviation for fanatic and the connotations this has. He looks to view fans instead “on the assumption that speaking as a fan is defensible position within the debates surrounding mass culture...this book perceives fans as active producers and manipulators of meanings (Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans &
Participatory Culture 23). This text also provides an insight into fan cultures and how mass communication works within them, using the example of the late 1980s television program Beauty and the Beast. He provides an example of how this mass level of organisation would occur between groups of people united by a common interest, before the days of easy global communication through the internet. He also introduces the discussion around distinguishing fans from general viewers of a program or film, an argument that will continue to be debated with the introduction of the idea of the anti-fan.

Jonathan Grey continued this argument in his 2003 article New Audience, New Textualities: Anti-fans and Non-fans. He further defines the concept of an anti-fan as someone who shows a strong disliking to a show and in a way identifies themselves through that, much as a fan identifies themselves through their enjoyment and connection with a show. This is just one example of the wave of texts that began to surface in response to or to further investigate topics brought forward by the key works of the early 1990s. These included bigger topics such as fan cultures and communities, and fan taste, as well as smaller topics including fan tourism and fan activism.

This has also brought about the use of fandom as methodology, using the experience of a fan to study a text. This method is discussed by Jen Gunnels in her article “We are all together:” Fan Studies and Performance. She discusses how involvement in a topic can offer more insight. She also questions the separation of fandom studies from other academic fields, demonstrating that any study of a text shows some involvement or a degree of fandom. This mirrors the questions raised by many modern articles focusing on fandom. It also demonstrates to an extent fandom studies move into acceptance with-in the broader field of film studies.

The internet bought fandom to a new level that made its impact and relevance even harder to ignore. Gone were the days of letter writing and correspondence between fans through hard copy publications that were very present in the early work of Jenkins and Bacon-Smith. These were replaced by online forums and blogs that allowed for a much quicker and wide-spread way for a
community to act. The concept of ‘Web 2.0’ is much talked about and centres on the idea of the internet being a platform for contributors and not just a place for information to be consumed (Watson). It is into this new web that fandom falls. Kristen Thompson looks at ideas around this in her study of one of the major fan cultures surrounding The Lord of The Rings franchise. Her chapter “Click to View Trailer” discusses the balance between fan web based content and that of the producers of the text (137-138). This also ties into another point of discussion relating to fandom and the owners and makers of a text often referred to as the powers that be (TPTB). The ‘fourth wall’ in fandom is the barrier between the fans and the text. It is a space between the making of the show and those who discusses it; separations that allows acknowledgement but stops direct interaction. Beginning as part of the movement to separate fandom identities from ‘real life’ the fourth wall was “An unspoken rule (that) existed within fandom that no one was to speak about issues with the source material to TPTB (Ballinger).” Its purpose was to limit drama occurring within the community. The bridging of the gap and breaking of this fourth wall has been much discussed as the internet makes the ability to connect easier. New texts that were created into this world also displayed an ability to incorporate fandom from the start destroying the concept of the fourth wall entirely.

Just as the field itself evolved with the implementation of the internet so did the way in which many scholars interacted with and added to it. The creation of online journals, blogs and wikis has increased the output of discussion on fandom and broadened its scope to include detailed research into particular kinds of fans and their communities. This has also brought the academic closer to the subject with many of the influential researchers contributing to these resources or providing their own blogs. As the field does grow, this online presence also serves to allow academics to update their research to include more recent developments. The web based Transformative Works and Cultures and Intensities: The Journal of Cult Media have been the two major journals focusing on fan studies and media audiences. They both publish two or three issues a year with a general focus on fan studies and occasional special issues themed around a particular concept, text or genre. Flow TV
is a prominent example of a more general web based source that often covers issues related to fandom.

**Criticism of Fandom Studies**

As the field of fan studies has worked to establish itself within the world of academia, it has faced criticism over the content that it discusses and the way that it is presented by scholars. The distinction between fan writing and scholarly writing is one point that has received much debate. The argument centres on the use of fan studies as a methodology in writing and the creation of the scholar-fan or the aca-fan (academic fan) (Booth 1). Matt Hill talks in his book *Fan Cultures* about the need to form some separation between a scholar writing as a fan or as an academic. This argument is brought to the forefront through the large quantity of writing on film and television and fan culture that is done on the internet. Writers such as Tom Phillips, in his article *Embracing the “Overly Confessional:” Scholar-Fandom and Approaches to Personal Research*, argue that as more and more academic writing is published on the net the lines between text scholar and text fan are blurred. The once clear distinction between scholarly critique and film fan opinion is becoming more difficult to decipher. In response some have written on the negative aspects of fandom and how this can affect the merit of scholarly writing (Dwyer 4). This debate reflects a broader concern that is raised by fields that are so closely connected to cultural studies as a discipline. Film theory had traditionally made effort to distanced itself from what it was studying while cultural studies has not (Stam 226), and in this case done the opposite. This debate is still on-going and is likely to encompass other areas of film and cultural studies in the digital era.
**Fan Production**

Bacon-Smith put a focus on the concept of fan production, when she looked at television sci-fi and fan fiction around *Star Trek*. This was also touched on by Jenkins, but the topic has now grown to a large extent with many forms of fan production being discussed. The idea of fan production is the almost complete emersion into the text. Fans are extending on the text and creating a world or a universe outside of what the original creators have presented. Out of these forms it is still fan fiction and fan videos that are the most discussed. It is also the sub section of slash fan fiction that receives a lot of scholarly attention. Slash fiction focuses on same sex relationships between characters in a text and forms its own category of fan fiction. This has led to much academic writing coming from the 1980s to the present, exploring how this fan fiction builds a community and how it is reflected outside of fan circles. Fan production has led to its own communities outside of one dedicated text as demonstrated by fandom cultures like steampunk. Steampunk subculture incorporates Victorian era steam powered aesthetics into all aspects of life. The fandom now centres on community production after originating from the likes of H.G Wells and Jules Verne (Onion 140).

Fan fiction is as old if not older than fandom itself, as it is discussed so early on. The idea is central to much of Bacon-Smith’s *Enterprising Women* which also introduces the topic of slash fiction with commentary on the fanzines devoted to the love stories between Spock and Kirk (Bacon-Smith 229-253). Since then much work has been done comparing fan fiction to other forms of professional and amateur writing. There has also been research on how fan fiction can form a community of its own, as demonstrated by Leora Hadas, when she examined the *Dr Who* fan fiction community that existed while the show was off air in the article *The Web planet: How the changing Internet divided Doctor Who fan fiction writers*.

Audience participation is another level of fan production and can include re-interpretations of works, shot for shot remakes and even impersonators costumes and cos-play. These activities create a full emersion into the text. Lynn Spigel argues that it is these forms of activities that allow a source
material to have new life and be continued forever (Spigel 178) in her article about Elvis impersonators.

Like most areas in fan studies, fan production was accelerated by the arrival of the internet. One area that was clearly affected by this was the fan video maker and the vidder. Fan video is the traditional fan made interaction with a text while vidding involves putting together clips from a show to music, arranging them to tell a story (Coppa 107-108). Tools such as YouTube made distribution of fan made and edited films a lot easier and made the possible audience larger than ever before. This also led to another area of scholarship, the fan and the use of intellectual property. Logan Hill looks at both of these areas with his 2007 interview with vidder Luminosity. Similarly, fan video blogs increased in popularity with channels discussing texts in weekly instalments becoming available and popular on video sharing sites.

**Fan Activism**

The networks that grow from a common fandom towards a text have been able to work together for a cause, using their combined power to add awareness to an issue of campaign for change; these scenarios have been labelled as acts of fan activism. Jennifer Earl and Katrina Kimport began to look at how online petitions were dominated by people focussed around entertainment (Earl and Kimport 221). This demonstrated the use of tools for activism and there associations with the fandom communities.

Though still a rather new area of study, the journal *Transformative Works and Cultures* dedicated a volume to it in 2012, covering areas such as fans in a political space, fandom and social justice and fans at protests. The editorial for the issue is written by Sangita Shresthova and Henry Jenkins, one of the key names in the field, demonstrating an importance of this new area. The editorial looks at the impact of pop culture on world issues and highlights that it is fans that make this association. It goes on to talk about how there has been much written on fans working together to help a text,
whether it be to stop a cancelation or protest a change in direction, but fans have also been capable of pushing for social change, “Fan groups have also had a long history of lending their support to the favourite causes of popular performers and producers, or more generally working in support of charity (Jenkins and Shresthova).” This is a key indicator that this particular strand of fandom studies will develop.
Bibliography


