

Rethinking the Audience/Producer Relationship

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Get a Life: In-Text Representations and Gendered Fan Behavior

Among the most dramatic and influential change in recent fan studies has been the mainstreaming of fannish behavior and increased attention to fans by media and show producers. Fans are more easily found these days as fans are less stigmatized; in fact, networks and producers have begun to expect and even create fannish behavior in their audiences. This attention shows itself in multiple ways: stronger awareness and representation of fans within popular shows; interpellation of audiences as fans with interactive social media; and direct conversation with audiences via new media outlets such as blogs and twitter.

Fans are desirable because of viewer loyalty, free advertisement, and increased purchase of connected products. Moreover, fans contribute their free labor to add value to sites. Yet these constructed fans are desirable only insofar as they aren't too fannish, too obsessive, too much. Fans who read and comment occasionally on a network site are much more malleable and less contrary than those who are hypercritical or create transformative works that might compete with studio products. As a result, multiple versions of "the fan" have arisen.

From *Galaxy Quest* to *Misery*, from *Buffy*'s Jonathan to *West Wing*'s "mu-mu wearing chain smokers," fan representations tend to be heavily gendered. And while the fan boys are clearly caricatured, their portrayals nevertheless tend to be done more tongue-in-cheek and lovingly than the respective fan girl characterizations. Probably the best example is *Supernatural* in which fans of both genders show up in the episode "The Real Ghostbusters": where Demian and Barnes get turned from slightly obnoxious LARPing geeks to ghost hunting heroes, slash author Becky is represented as hypersexualized and nearly hysterical in her sexual advances first on main character Sam and later Chuck (who incidentally happens to be the male writer-as-producer-later-turned-God stand-in).

While the male fan boy has grown from pimply geeky parental basement dweller to hero (and producer and successful academic), the fate of the fan girl is more complicated. We can list a sizeable number of famous writers and producers who are quite comfortable declaring their fanboy status. From Joss Whedon to Russell T. Davis, there's no shortage of fanboys having made it good, and the same is true in academic fan studies. Autoethnography has become a near mandatory aspect of studying fans, but a teenage interest in a band or a particular soccer club passion or even having played D&D or liking *Doctor Who* all are more socially acceptable—and might be easier to cop to in one's academic work—than creating fan work, such as fan vids, fan art, or fan fiction.

Consequently, few women within the business proudly proclaim their fannish pasts, and female acafans are only slowly gaining a voice of their own. Part of the dichotomy lies in what is considered worthy subjects—as in another panel at this conference which pits *True Blood* against *The Vampire Diaries* and asks about quality TV. Likewise, there are certain TV shows collectively more acceptable as fannishly beloved texts, and I'd argue they tend to skew male. One aspect that keeps more female professionals and academics from revealing their fannish roots might, of course, be the more sexualized nature of their fannish interests. And yet, I'd suggest even that is problematically gendered in a culture where heavily sexualized images of women are considered appropriate yet women desiring to create similar artifacts for their own desires are considered oversexualized, predatory, or dangerously and unhealthily addicted.

Equally problematic is whom the industry envisions as the desirable male and female viewer: whereas male fans often consider themselves (and thus get considered as) professionals in the making, female fans' gift culture often runs contrary to such desires. Moreover, the hysterical fan girl who chooses affect over analysis and exhibits a squeezy sexualized relationship to a show and its stars seems to be a preferable representation, thus both denying the strong affect among male fan cultures as well as the critical responses that pervade much of the female fan responses.

So the question I want to bring to this panel is what is at stake in privileging specific fan construction; what is at stake in privileging certain types of televisual texts; and what is at stake in privileging certain fan behaviors. Producers and the general media, media and fan scholars, and fans themselves construct different forms of fans and fan communities, and we need to remain wary and thoughtful about the way these terms are used—by others as well as ourselves.