

Rethinking the Audience/ Producer Relationship

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Activist Acafandom? When Fans, Academics, and Producers Collide

Last Spring, I participated in what was for me a memorable panel on “Designing Transmedia Worlds” at the Transmedia, Hollywood workshop preceding the Society for Media and Cinema Studies’ annual conference. Both events were held in Los Angeles this past year, and thus contained several panels with people involved in production, ranging from scriptwriters to authors of affiliated comic books to the showrunners of *Lost*. The conversations that emerged between media production professionals and academics revealed fractured, divergent assumptions about the nature of audience engagement, fan/audience identity, and the possibilities and purpose of transmedia developments. Since then, I’ve been thinking not only about how different media producers envision their audiences and what producers believe/assume drives fan behavior, but also what it means for us to have spaces of dialogue and debate that encompass—to different degrees—producers, academics, and fans.

For my Flow provocation I want to dwell on the complex interactions between panelists and audience in situations where academics, fans, and professionals come together to share insights, and where, as a result, significant differences in perspectives come to the fore in fairly heated question and answer sessions, or erupt into debates on twitter. For example, in a moment of semantics at Transmedia Hollywood, we found ourselves debating whether fans who participate online and author their own texts are “active” or “activist.” I came down on the side of active—indeed, I was very surprised to hear the term activist raised in this context. The murmur throughout the audience seemed (to me, at least) to suggest multiple, divergent perspectives on this topic that were not being fully represented in the conversation. I was struck by the extent to which this conversation and others like it seemed to unsettle many of the participants and attendees, myself included.

In situations like this, I’ve witnessed (and experienced) the impulse to educate producers as to what fandom is and what they’re missing. Panel discussions and question and answer sessions seem to offer necessary opportunities to explain the complexity of fandom, to communicate and complicate, for example, issues of identity, investment, and transformative production. But should this position (educator, empowered representative, corrector of long standing assumptions about fans) be our role? And if it’s not our role, then what is? Now perhaps the answer sounds obvious: we’re not there to educate the producers or advocate for fans. That’s not the role of an academic or a fan! And yet, I’d argue that such unspoken assumptions often underlie and inform the experiences of workshops and roundtables that bring together academics and producers around the subject of audience.

These questions spill beyond the closed doors of conferences. Digital media has not only put production tools in the hands of fans, it’s also meant that fans and producers

and *academics* all share the same platforms and interfaces for self-representation and transmedia authorship. These shifts have made academics who study fans more visible, which changes the stakes of our work. As we position ourselves as acafans (or remove ourselves from the label) on our blogs and twitters as well as at conferences, we step into an elusive and messy performance space, laden with cultural expectations and assumptions about fandom and about academia. The acafan positioning complicates our relationship to producers and fans in terms of issues of authenticity and power. The aca part conveys a sense of power, the fan part a sense of authenticity. And so, while it might be easy to dismiss these questions as inappropriate or unnecessary, I find them undeniably necessary: What are our responsibilities as scholars and acafans as we engage in dialogue with producers? Are we there to educate producers about fans (with a sense of “authentic” knowledge that we bring as acafans)? Is it our role to correct misrepresentations that circulate in culture and in production (not to mention in media representations)? If producers have differing notions of audience and fan engagement than we do—and they often do—how do we respond to and engage them on these issues, and what outcome are we hoping for?