

## Rethinking the Audience/Producer Relationship

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In a dual effort to develop alternate revenue streams and deepen fannish involvement and investment in their properties, the television industry has increasingly turned to transmedia storytelling techniques and ancillary content housed on official websites. The “mothership” has been embraced as an industrial buzzword to indicate the centrality of the television text within these narrative networks of ancillary content. The significance of who is steering the mothership, navigating these narrative flows, has necessitated a far more consolidated conception of television authorship. This consolidation is driven equally by aesthetic and economic factors, as ancillary texts gain both affective and financial capital when they are (perceived to be) canonized by a centralized author/authority figure. It is also arguably driven by an industrial desire to create a textual authority figure that will appeal to fans and, thus, be better positioned to channel fan interpretation and participation in ways that fortify the mothership and best suit the network’s financial and ideological interests.

Constructed through promotional paratexts, what I’ve dubbed the “fanboy auteur” differs from his pre-convergence predecessors through his narrativized fan credentials and self-identification as a fan/geek, positioning himself as an ideal (if ultimately conflicted) intermediary between producer, text, and audience. Keeping this gendered jargon in mind, I think that addressing the liminality of the fanboy auteur, and considering his relationship to the mothership and the audience, is central to any understanding of shifting producer/audience relations. To borrow a term from Jonathan Gray, the fanboy auteur is an “undead author.” By metaphorically killing himself,<sup>1</sup> or downplaying his ties to the network “suits” and industrial efforts to regulate participation, the fanboy auteur is able to serve as a textual double agent, engendering fannish solidarity even as he monitors and manages fan responses to the text.

Producers have long been referred to as “The Powers That Be” in fan communities, but this veneration has always been tempered by degrees of fannish familiarity (e.g. within fan circles, Joss Whedon is “Joss,” Ronald D. Moore is “RDM,” Eric Kripke is “Kripke,” and Damon Lindelof and Carlton Cuse are fused into “Darlton”). Fanboy auteurs facilitate this sense of familiarity, courting fans with the promise of a more dialogic relationship. These “conversations” range from online Q&As and blog/vlog/message board posts, to podcasts (such as RDM’s weekly *Battlestar Galactica* commentaries), and occasionally self-reflexive episodes depicting the series’ fanbase (in the case of *Supernatural*). The fanboy auteur’s voice is privileged in these one-sided conversations, his interpretations are posed as the definitive or “correct” reading of textual events, and his conception of fannish “participation” stresses canonical mastery over creativity. Moreover, both the text (the “mothership”) and the fan are routinely feminized in these discourses, with the fanboy auteur positioning himself as “protecting” the integrity of the text, and fans’ interests by extension.

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<sup>1</sup> This is especially interesting in the case of *Battlestar Galactica*, which featured a new end-credit logo each week that depicted bloody (and frequently deadly) “battles” between series (re)creator Ronald D. Moore and executive producer David Eick.

Though infantilized in name, the paternalistic nature of the fanboy auteur makes him a polarizing figure for fans. Many fans, female fans in particular, respond negatively to what they perceive to be the fanboy auteur's attempts to block speculation and unauthorized textual expansion. A fan vid such as jarrow's "Tandemonium"<sup>2</sup> offers evidence that fans' are actively interrogating the fanboy auteur's identity and presumed textual omnipotence. Playfully reworking the refrain "and they have a plan" from *Battlestar Galactica's* opening credits, the vid deploys a series of quotes from RDM that frame his "planning" as alternately exacting and arbitrary. The lyrical implication that fans should "take it like a man," coupled with images of (predominantly female) characters being brutalized and violently dispatched, jointly critiques RDM's exertion of aggressive textual authority and the idea that fans who don't comply will be symbolically dispatched/dismissed. Interestingly, the artist acknowledged in an accompanying post that the process of researching and composing the vid renewed his respect for RDM's intelligence and foresight. As the vid's conclusive claim that "They Never Did Have a Plan" indicates, authorial foresight is desired but frequently illusory, while the concept of a creator having "the last word" is openly contested.

Fan investment in feeling like someone is steering the mothership and has thoughtfully plotted its course, coupled with the desire to question that course and create textual detours, is at the heart of the fanboy auteur's paradoxical appeal. Whether we choose to cynically view the fanboy auteur as an industrial strategy to channel or censor audience responses, or optimistically embrace his potential to complicate the producer/audience binary, how his liminality is produced and received deserves further scholarly analysis. In particular, examining how fans negotiate their relationship with the fanboy auteur, simultaneously one of "us" and one of "them," could tell us a great deal about fans' own anxieties about their growing industrial visibility and incorporation.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://sweetsweetvids.ning.com/video/tandemonium-1>