

Gray, J., Sandvoss, C., and Harrington, C.L. (Eds.). 2007. *Fandom: identities and communities in a mediated world*. New York: NYU Press.

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Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World (2007) opens by asserting in its Introduction: "Most people are fans of something" (p. 1). This sentence underscores the central premise of the text that far from being a marginal subcultural phenomenon populated by crazed groupies, or "Trekkies" and "Potterheads," the status of fandom and the culture of the fan are far more pervasive than we have in the past (and possibly still today) would care to admit. In their Introduction, the editors address the major shifts in fan studies acknowledging fan cultures have, in the past, provided the grounds for interpretation of subcultures, countercultural communities, and social hierarchies, all deftly negotiated, challenged or reinforced by fans, the producers in cultural industries, and, more recently, fan scholars. *Fandom* wants to expand the range and sites of what we consider fans and fandom and mark a new wave of fan scholarship that repositions fan culture and fan objects unequivocally within the context of the contemporary moment between modernity and postmodernity.

Yet fan studies remains a marginal discipline within the greater arena of academia and the editors exhibit in their introduction a worry about their field signaled in the Introduction's title "Why Study Fans?". In posing the question of the relevance of fan scholarship, Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington assert:

Studies of fan audiences help us to understand and meet challenges far beyond the realm of popular culture because they tell us something about the way in which we relate to those around us, as well as the way we read the mediated texts that constitute an ever larger part of our horizon of experience (p. 10).

We often do not realize that beyond the dichotomy of pro-active or passive consumer of popular culture, especially media culture, that we are contained within sometimes loose, sometimes strict borders of fandom, and yet *most people are fans of something*. Are we afraid to confront the reality that scholarship of fandom translates in its entirety to a study of our complex interpersonal and social relationships and construction of personal identities? Does the field challenge academics' identities, formal disciplines, and scholarly norms?

Overall, the text under review reconsiders fandom in a multiplicity of approaches and contextualizes the study of

fandom across three distinct "waves" since the 1980s. The first wave of fan studies, inspired by Michel de Certeau's notion of the tactics of the disempowered and John Fiske's emphasis on resistant readings and construction of the popular from below, focused on guerilla-style tactics of audiences constructing meanings, fan communities, and thus subcultural resistance to the dominant culture. This is the celebratory phase that proclaimed "fandom is beautiful" in the editors' phrase, or better, "fandom is cool." The early phase of fan studies "constituted a purposeful political intervention that sided with the tactics of an audiences in their evasion of dominant ideologies, and that set out to rigorously defend fan communities against their ridicule in the mass media and by non-fans" (p. 2). The first wave of fan scholars attempted to take what was sometimes viewed as a derogatory practice and status and to turn it into a positive one.

The second phase responded to the proliferation of new media and new forms of fan culture in the 1990s in which fan communities proliferated endlessly, often fuelled by the Internet. These fan studies followed a more sociological optic that differentiated fan communities into segmented taste hierarchies, following Bourdieu. Further, we would add, in this phase, scholars often focused on fan's construction of identities through their insertion into fan communities. During the second wave of fan studies, politicians and celebrities, as well as ordinary citizens, helped define themselves through their identification with fan-objects, and fandom appeared more positively in the culture industries themselves, which nourished their fan communities in a highly competitive market.

The editors claim that a third phase of fan studies has emerged, of which their book is participatory, in which studies of fans and fan-objects expands from looking at individual tastes and participation and examination of fan objects to "investigation of fandom as part of the fabric of our everyday lives" in which fan studies "aims to capture fundamental insights into modern life" (p. 9). The contributors to *Fandom* often pursue this broader agenda and the works chosen disclose an expansion of fans and fandom to include news fans, theory fans, Martha Stewart fans, and backyard wrestling fans, as well as fans of high culture, a topic marginalized or ignored in earlier fan studies within the broad field of cultural studies which focused attention on the popular.

Throughout the book, one central theme emerges, and that is, as argued by Tom McCourt and Patrick Burkart (pp. 261ff), the importance of fans has reached an apex in cultural currency with the proliferation of new media and always expanding scope of the culture industry. As the editors note:

As we have moved from an era of broadcasting to one of narrowcasting, a process fueled by deregulation of media markets and reflected in the rise of new media technologies, the fan as a specialized yet dedicated consumer has become a centerpiece of media industries' marketing strategies... Rather than ridiculed, fan audiences are now wooed and championed by cultural industries, at least as long as their activities do not divert from principles of capitalist exchange and recognize industries' legal ownership of the object of fandom (p. 4).

The editors divide their contributors' studies into six areas of scholarship, providing a useful heuristic to guide the reader through the thickets of contemporary fields of fan studies. Part I "Fan Texts: From Aesthetic to Legal Judgments" opens with a study by editor Cornel Sandvoss followed by a study by Matt Hills that want to rehabilitate aesthetics into cultural studies and combine cultural studies with literary studies, a project that we sympathize with. Both authors note how aesthetics has been marginalized within cultural studies and provide diagnoses of how this has happened due to a variety of academic and disciplinary reasons. While their critique of the banishing of aesthetics from cultural studies is astute, they do not, however, offer detailed examples and analyses of how one can do this, so their demands remain rather empty.¹

Studies in Part II, "Beyond Pop Culture: Fandom from News to High Culture," range from Jonathan Gray's study of news fans and how this impacts on citizenship to Alan McKee's ironic discussion of fans of cultural theory to studies by Roberta Pearson arguing that fan studies should embrace forms of popular literature and high culture ranging from Bach and Shakespeare to Sherlock Holmes and Chekhov. Part III, "Spaces of Fandom: From Place to Performance" stress the importance of a sociology of space and reflections on place, elective belongings, symbolic pilgrimages to sites of fandom. Studies here range from Nick Couldry's visit to the set of *The Sopranos* to Will Brooker's virtual explorations of the world of *The X-Files* to McBride and Bird's investigation of backyard wrestling.

Hence, place and social interactions are crucial to fan and fandom studies which as Part IV, "Fan Audiences Worldwide: From the Global to the Local," is now a global terrain of struggle as fan studies goes global and global media studies is urged to "go fannish" (p. 14). Part V explores "Shifting Contexts, Changing Fan Cultures," ranging from concert halls in 19th century America, which suggests a historical turn in fan studies, to the

marginalization of female sports fans and emergent fandom in digital music communities and digital game culture.

Part VI discloses antagonisms within fan culture, and struggles of fans and anti-fans, exploring intrapersonal grapplings in which individuals deal with their love/hate relationships with texts as well as other members of fan communities and the producers of the objects of fandom. This turn discloses studies of conflict and antagonisms within and between fan communities that were viewed more as cohesive subcultures in earlier fan studies. In the final section, the essays explore the notion that it can be a struggle to admit and live out ones' fandom. In the media culture that seems to be white-knuckling its hold on that elusive "mainstream" while simultaneously cultivating the favor of cults of niche markets, what it means to be a fan is often as convoluted as the culture and objects of fandom.

Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington and their contributors have provided the groundwork to create a context within which to engage novel, contemporary and significant reconfigurations of "fandom" as a central feature of modern life, but more work is needed. As Henry Jenkins asserts in the Afterword, "We no have tools for studying and concepts to talk about the social dimensions of fan culture, which is no longer the 'weekend-only world'...this kind of fandom is everywhere and all the time, a central part of the everyday lives of consumers operating within a networked society" (p. 361). Through our fandom we recognize our connection to fan objects, to the texts, to society, and most importantly to each other.

As rich and illuminating as the various articles are, questions remain as to what exactly *is* a fan and what is the fate and future of fan studies? In a succinct "Afterword: The Future of Fandom," Henry Jenkins poses a number of issues facing fan/fandom studies in the contemporary era of proliferating digital media. Jenkins notes some commentators remarking on the death of the fan in an era of digital culture and social networking sites where the passive consumer gives way to an active producer of commentary, re-edited and YouTubed artifacts, fan literature and videos reproducing their favorite media artifacts, and circulating of material and comments on social networking sites. Everyone in this practice is a participatory player in the production and circulation of digital culture, thus dramatically expanding the range of fan activity.

While Jenkins sees this trend as extremely important, it does not signify the end of fandom or fan communities, but simply redefining fan activity and fandom. Jenkins notes that some scholars want to go back and focus on what the individual fan does in the matrix of emergent and proliferating media, but

he prefers to stay in the social field of fandom and make the latter the focus of attention, exploring social networking, fab communities, and larger contexts of how fandom intersects with economic, politics, social life, and culture more generally. This requires, Jenkins claims, an interdisciplinary widening of the terrain of study and dialogues about business and intersection of fandom and economics, the transformation of politics by new media and practices, changes in social life, relations, and identities, and the impact on the nature and role of culture. Thus Jenkins concludes that "fandom is the future" (p. 361), although he leaves open what forms it might take in an always mutating and sometimes surprising field.

Returning to the book as a whole, it is one thing to propose that *most* of us are fans, but quite another to say that we are *all* fans. When does watching a TV-series or genre of movies morph from being a consumer of media culture to being a fan of a specific product? How long does one have to be a consumer of something to be a fan? How intense does one's devotion or commitment to a fan object have to be to make one a fan? In the postmodern moment, lines are erased and boundaries reconstructed at a disarmingly rapid pace in the virtual and real communities of fans and expanding realms of fandom. What does this say about identity formation and community maintenance in a mediated world? How many objects of interest can one consume and still be a "fan"? The answers are not readily at hand, but the exploration of what were once "marginalized" communities in "ghettoized" academic study offers more broad applications of research that extend into all areas of social and media studies, showing that fans and fandom are a defining feature of the contemporary media and consumer society.

Hence, Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington have compiled a comprehensive collection of fan research that is accessible to the layperson in a range of disciplines, and provide an invaluable resource to those engaged in scholarship of audiences and media communities, as well as society and social life at large. We have only engaged a small number of the rich and provocative studies assembled in this state of the art collection that illuminates diverse facets of contemporary society and culture and should thus be studied by sociologists as well as cultural theorists.

Note

ⁱ The failure to concretely embody aesthetics into cultural studies can be contrasted with Berube who has written an entire

book on the topic. See Michael Berube, *The aesthetics of cultural studies*. Malden, Ma.: Blackwell, 2005.