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Past Issues

□ Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss & C. Lee Harrington (Eds.):

Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World

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A Review by Rebecca Williams

Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World is an edited collection of essays on the links between fandom, community, and identity within modern mediated society. Containing twenty-six essays and spanning over 400 pages, the book offers a broad contribution to what it identifies as the ‘third wave’ of fan studies. Within this context, the collection aims to contribute to the field by addressing fandom’s’ growing cultural currency and the increased theoretical and conceptual diversity of fan studies. It also seeks to rationalise the continued academic investigation of fans, arguing that fan studies enables us to understand how we relate to those around us and to the media texts which increasingly have an impact in our everyday lives. It is this emphasis on the everyday which the collection seeks to accentuate, along with its insistence that fandom is linked to industrial modernity as a specific form of social and economic organisation. As the editors outline in the introduction, “studying fan culture allows us to explore some of the key mechanisms through which we interact with the mediated world at the heart of our social, political, and cultural realities and identities” (p. 10).

The collection is well-structured and follows a logical path through six sections, beginning with consideration of cultural judgement and the textual object of fandom which has been neglected in much prior work. The second section considers fans of high culture before sections three and four move into the realm of space and place, with the former examining ideas of media spaces and the latter focusing on the local, regional and global contexts of fandom. Section five considers the historical, social and technological contexts of fandom, refuting the notion that fandom is an ahistorical phenomenon and, finally, section six investigates what Jonathan Gray (2003) has elsewhere termed ‘anti-fandom’, considering how feelings of hate, dislike and distaste might intersect with fandom.

There is much to admire in this extensive and wide-ranging collection. The introduction offers a critical over-view of the various eras and phases of fan studies, locating the collection within this history of prior developments and debates. The book should also be applauded for attempting to remedy some of the omissions of prior work and to open up the field of fan studies to a broader range of fan objects, practices and cultural contexts. For instance, the book’s intention to move away from more typical fan objects (Trekksers,

sports, soap) towards examining high culture (fans of which have commonly been seen as aficionados (see Jensen 1992)) is deftly executed through a section devoted to fans of news programmes (Gray), critical theory (McKee), Bach and Sherlock Holmes (Pearson) and Chekhov (Tulloch). Similarly, the collection seeks to de-Westernise fan studies and consider the international dimension of contemporary fandom by featuring pieces on the possibility of a global fan studies (Harrington and Bielby) and three case studies of Asian film fandom. Contributors also diverge from the perception of fandom as ahistorical and consider its historical context and fandom as subject to the specificity of shifting contemporary cultural practices. This is examined through exploration of topics such as 19th-century music (Cavicchi), sport and gender (Gosling), gaming (Crawford and Rutter) and online music (McCourt and Burkart).

All the contributors demonstrate a commitment to removing fandom from the realm of the 'other' who is in opposition to mainstream society and they instead consider fandom as an integral aspect of everyday life. There is also a healthy dose of the metacritical in many of the pieces and a willingness by the theorists to reflect analytically and self-reflexively on the field and its assumptions, contradictions and dualisms. The book is also notable for the debt it pays to previous theories and work on fandom, both the older 'grand narratives' (e.g. in a section which is indebted to Bourdieuan inspired fan studies work on aesthetics and cultural value) but also newer developments (e.g. Brooker's re-evaluation of Roger C. Aden's (1999) work on fandom as a form of 'symbolic pilgrimage').

Of course no collection is flawless and the editors themselves acknowledge that omissions are inevitable. For example there is no specific chapter devoted to discussion of race (nor, I would add, fandom and sexuality or age) nor analysis of genres such as comic books, telenovelas or teen fandoms. Indeed, most readers could identify their own favourite fan object or theoretical approach which they would like to see covered. However, given the breadth and depth of the book it seems churlish to castigate the book for these apparent absences. Overall, my main point of contention is that some in-depth consideration of the methodological debates within fan studies would have been instructive. Also, despite the editors conceding in the introduction that different types of fandom are accorded varying levels of cultural value (e.g. sports fans are acceptable, Harry Potter 'fanatics' are ridiculed), I wish to sound a note of caution regarding the cultural acceptability of certain types of fandom. Whilst, as the contributors argue, fandom is certainly proliferating in modern society, the stigma and pathologising of certain types of fans and fan practices does continue. For instance, Matt Hills (2007) has recently drawn attention to the derision faced by Michael Jackson fans who seek to impersonate him or those who display overt emotivism towards their fan object; a ridicule perpetuated by the very mass media that are often presumed to have embraced and co-opted fandom. Although fandom may be expanding to include new contexts, genres, and activities we must continue to acknowledge that certain types of fandom remain stigmatised and that not all types of fan practice are treated equally.

Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World is a welcome addition to the fan studies canon. The broad range of topics covered means that the book can be negotiated in various ways by readers with different interests and backgrounds. Ultimately, the collection does not seek to close down debate around fandom or to provide a single 'grand narrative' of theoretical approaches to fan studies. Rather, it poses more questions and opens up contestation and critique. Nowhere is this clearer than in the polemic afterword provided by Henry Jenkins in which he posits that the proliferation of fandom within contemporary mediated society may render the term 'fan' and, indeed, fan studies meaningless. Whether Jenkins' conjecture is sustainable is open to argument but his conclusion, along with the other contributions, will hopefully inspire those within the field to continue deliberating and researching the theoretical and conceptual concerns which lie at the heart of fan studies. In conclusion, this collection should be a key text in the study of fandom but will appeal equally to those interested in audiences, identity, and media more broadly.

References

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Biographical note

Dr. Rebecca Williams recently completed her PhD on fandom and identity in the School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies at Cardiff University. She is currently working on research into Welsh television audiences at the Cardiff School of Creative and Cultural Industries within the University of Glamorgan.

