

Review

Lincoln Geraghty, *Cult Collections: Nostalgia, Fandom and Collecting Popular Culture*, New York: Routledge, 2014. ISBN: 9780415617666, pp.224.

Fan studies, since the work of Henry Jenkins, John Fiske, and Camille Bacon-Smith in the early 1990s, has long focussed on the productivity of fans: fans are “textual poachers” who “actively assert their mastery over the mass-produced texts which provide the raw materials for their own cultural productions” (Jenkins 1992, pp.23-24). This focus on textual productivity served to place fans above and beyond the stereotype of the lonely geek living in his parent’s basement but, as Lincoln Geraghty rightly notes in the introduction to *Cult Collectors*, “collecting has been over-looked in fan studies and [...] it is devalued as a fan practice because of its basis in consumption rather than production” (2014, p. 2). *Cult Collectors* offers a re-evaluation of the significance of fan practices which are born out of consumption and offers insights into fandom overlooked by other analyses. Given the popular media attention focussed on comic conventions like San Diego Comic Con and the broader awareness of fan cultures, the book is a timely analysis bringing together work on nostalgia, comic book fandom and toy collecting.

The book is comprised of four distinct sections, each focussing on different aspects of collecting and each offering a theoretical analysis followed by a case study of a specific fandom. Section one, ‘Stereotypes’, examines the depiction of geeks and fans in popular culture. Bob Rehak in his introduction to the *Transformative Works and Cultures* special issue on materiality and object-oriented fandom acknowledges that “Approaching fandom through an explicitly materialist lens may at first seem redundant: haven't fans always been defined, for better or worse, through their relationships to objects?” (2014, np). Referring to the *Saturday Night Live* sketch on which William Shatner appears, exhorting fans to “get a life” he notes that media fans have always been framed as “excessively devoted, commercially overinvested, and trivia obsessed” (2014, np) and that the sketch’s use of a convention space to denigrate the *Star Trek* fan’s obsession with the material goods associated with the show perpetuates the negative stereotypes connected with media fandom. These negative stereotypes provide the starting point for Lincoln Geraghty’s analysis of collecting cult media fandom, and forms the basis for his argument that collecting is not simply a mode of passive consumption connected with the worst excesses

of media fandom, but a richly productive means of connecting the fannish self to a specific text. He tracks the way in which depictions of fans in popular culture have changed (from the *Saturday Night Live* sketch Rehak refers to, to *The Big Bang Theory*) and explores the ways in which academic work on the representation of fans fail to “separate the actions and practices of the ‘nerd’ or ‘geek’, but none really separate the actions and practices of the ‘nerd’ or ‘geek’ from that of being a fan” (2014, p. 17). This is followed by a case study on collecting Hollywood memorabilia, which interweaves work on nostalgia and affect with notions of identity and what it means to be ‘ourselves’.

Section two, ‘People’, examines the role that gender plays – or appears to play – in what fans collect and how they collect them. Geraghty notes that scholarship on the gendered identity of the fanboy versus fangirl has “discussed the typically male-orientated texts and associated fan practices such as collecting and learning trivia” (2014, p. 55). Geraghty wonders whether academics lose sight of broader questions about what it means to be a fan rather than a casual viewer. Geraghty states that his aim with *Cult Collectors* is not to establish a distinction between male and female fan collectors but to examine what it means to be a collector and what that suggests about contemporary media culture. The examples Geraghty provides in his case studies are thus chosen for what they reveal about being a fan, but despite his attempt to examine fan *collectors* rather than *male* or *female* fan collectors, the examples he uses are predominantly of male fans. This, then, for me was the weakest part of the book: fan practices are still heavily gendered by mainstream press (as Geraghty notes in his analysis of Comic Con reporting) and to avoid engaging with this in a book on fannish collecting seems like a mistake. The case study associated with this section is on Transformers, and Geraghty “rebirth and repackaging” of the Transformers franchise through toys, animated series, and contemporary live-action films (p.6). I wondered here whether examining My Little Pony would have been a more fruitful analysis, given its similar rebirth and the way in which gender roles are reframed and contested through the Brony fandom. I do acknowledge that Geraghty does touch on bronies in the book’s conclusion, but does so through the lens of rebellion and nostalgia.

Nostalgia is a key theme in ‘Places’, in which Geraghty examines the cult geographies of San Diego Comic Con and the role that toy collecting plays in personal identity through an analysis of the *Star Wars* franchise. Geraghty argues that, for fans, comic con allows for the sharing of an “oral history” which enables fans to share their connections with the text and the actors (p.93). More importantly, however, the consumption practices observed at comic con are also tied up with memory: “Fans bought things because they meant something, it brought them closer to that very text they were remembering and celebrating in the main hall alongside fellow fans” (p.93). Comic con does not simply afford fans the ability to buy toys, but to also produce them and Geraghty’s analysis of production in connection with toy collecting complicates the consumption/production divide that typifies much work on fandom as well as popular understandings of what it means to be a fan. This analysis comes to the fore in the case study on *Star Wars* fans. Here, Geraghty draws on Jonathan Gray’s work on paratexts to demonstrate that collectors use licensed corporate products to assert

and recreate their own identities. Geraghty acknowledges the importance that toys have to children as well as to adults and the role that nostalgia plays in the sharing of toys between generations as well as the rediscovery of much-loved childhood objects.

The final section of the book moves from places to 'Spaces', examining the placement of fandom in the functional high street and online. Among the areas which are analysed in this chapter are the UK conventions Memorabilia and Collectormania, and here Geraghty raises the concept of "second-hand fandom". Much work on fannish consumption, and popular media understandings of fandom, focuses on the new, and so Geraghty's assertion that "the practices of shopping" (Gregson and Crewe 2003) in relation to second-hand objects are important indicators of the skills of the fan and their expertise, or cultural capital, in their fandom. Second-hand fandom draws us back to notions of nostalgia and identity building and sharing in fan communities, and allow both second-hand objects and second-hand stories to circulate along with the subcultural value attached to them. The final chapter, again linked to the digital spaces of fandom, concerns the Lego franchise and its position as a transmedia fan object.

It is in this final chapter which Geraghty most clearly draws connections between the consumption of collecting and the production of fan practices. Examining the ways in which Lego fans construct their own creations by using pre-existing Lego sets, assembling them from quantities of plain bricks or remoulding and repainting Lego figures. Geraghty argues that My Own Creations are "the very definition of fan productivity" through which their own identity can be expressed (p.168). Collecting is not merely a passive form of consumption. Lego *Star Wars* fans create intricate works that evidence their fandom, make fan videos utilising Lego figures and display their subcultural capital and fannish knowledge through their collections and the ways in which they interact with them.

Cult Collectors is an excellent and insightful analysis of the different forms and spaces of collecting. Geraghty does not simply look at the collection but analyses it in relation to memory and nostalgia, and examines the spaces and places in which and through which collecting takes place. Although I feel that issues around gender could have been explored more, Geraghty's focus on collecting opens up new insights into fandom and popular culture and complicates existing scholarship and mainstream press discourse. This book will certainly be of interest to an academic audience focussed on fan studies, cult and nostalgia.

References:

- Jenkins, Henry. 1992. *Textual Poachers*. New York: Routledge.
- Rehak, Bob. 2014. "Materiality and Object-Oriented Fandom" [editorial]. In "Material Fan Culture," edited by Bob Rehak, special issue, *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 16. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2014.0622>.

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Biographical note:

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