On the intersection of fan studies and comics studies: Contextualization and introduction

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When in 2019, Donald Trump's 2020 election campaign team appropriated a scene from Marvel's *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) to mock (or send a not-so-subtle threat to) those managing the impeachment process, it was followed by enormous outrage online. The clip shows a doctored version of supervillain Thanos' finger-snap with the infinity gauntlet, with Trump's face superimposed on the antagonist's head. The clip's audio provides the line from the film, 'I'm inevitable,' followed by a triumphant-looking Thanos/Trump snapping his fingers; then the video cuts to a lineup of the impeachment managers. They seemingly dissolve to ashes that are blown away by a gust of wind, accompanied by the eerie sound familiar to those who have watched their favorite superheroes and heroines being killed off in *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) (@TrumpWarRoom 2019).

It is quite typical of fans that they read their favorite texts in ways not originally anticipated by their producers, or that they make antagonists their center of attention and rehabilitate them through fanfiction or other means. So, while the *Endgame* appropriation in and of itself could have been mistaken for fan cultural activity – and was clearly designed to display pop-cultural expertise – its context, timing and message indicated otherwise.

Not only did it escape the Trump campaign managers' notice that the scene they took from *Endgame* was followed by Thanos' ultimate defeat (the powerful gauntlet had been exchanged, rendering the finger snap ineffective). It also seemed shocking to many fans that Trump would approve of a comparison that drew a parallel between him and the Marvel supervillain. Comics author and Thanos creator Jim Starlin condemned the appropriation via Instagram: 'After my initial feeling of being violated, seeing that pompous dang fool using my creation to stroke his infantile ego, it finally struck me that the leader of my country and the free world actually enjoys comparing himself to a mass murderer. How sick is that?' (jimstarlin 2019, see also Einwächter 2020).

However, it seems the Trump campaign managers had not come up with the comparison in the first place, but rather picked up the idea from Trump anti-fans and subsequently tried to 'own it.' In a June 2018 episode of *The Late Show With Stephen Colbert*, the show's host referred to people who were comparing 'Thanos to Trump in some ways.' In a discussion about the president with his guest Josh Brolin (who portrays the Marvel supervillain on screen), the two agreed that what Trump and Thanos had in common was a certain 'callousness' in their behavior. The segment became rather popular online because it ended with Brolin reading several of President Trump's tweets in the voice of the iconic Marvel character – much to the amusement of host and audience.

The fact that the Trump/Thanos analogy became so popular it was picked up by the re-election campaign is a good example of how much fandom and comics have left their formerly 'subcultural' niches and become part of mainstream culture. It also illustrates that an analysis of today's transmedia landscape calls for interdisciplinary cooperation: While investigating the cultural and discursive implications of Trump's finger-snap video, we have to consider (inter-)textual aspects; (fan-)cultural norms; modes of media production and distribution; and platform logic. Our example attests to the fact that knowledge of comic book villains (formerly considered 'geek') has become a discursive currency in mainstream public discourse. Furthermore, it shows how authorities in power now mimic grassroots appropriation practices which were formerly used only by those considered powerless.

The incident from 2019 is also a good example of (trans-)media matter that comics studies and fan studies in particular might fruitfully investigate together: How would we be able to understand the fans' and creator's outrage if we didn't know about the source text and its meaning, and how would we be able to interpret the adapted video and its distribution if we didn't know about fan cultural practices? An analysis of both the appropriated material and the response it stimulated would benefit from both perspectives: a more text-centric comics studies view and a more audience- or user-focused fan studies perspective.

This Themed Section aims to bring these two perspectives together. Our experience with institutions, publications and networking in our fields of study has shown that despite their obvious overlaps, the connections between comics studies and fan studies have hardly been explored so far. This seems striking considering how crucially comic book marketing depends on loyal customers – especially fans – and the extent to which the ever-expanding

franchises surrounding Marvel's and DC's comic worlds rely on user participation and fandom.

Can we explain the difference and resulting demarcation between the two by noting that comics studies focus primarily on the text while fan studies focus on recipients and their practices instead? Or is the answer an institutional one? In Germany at least, comics studies have strong roots in (comparative) literary studies, art history, and philology, while fan studies are grounded in either media and cultural studies or in sociology, and focus on individual and mass consumption practices or group phenomena.

This Themed Section of *Participations* presents interdisciplinary research that invites readers to engage with the question of what distinguishes and what unites comics studies and fan studies. Several of the articles featured here continue the fruitful and lively discussions held at the 2019 comics/fandom workshop at Cologne University, which was co-organized by two committees of the German Society for Media Studies (GfM) – the Committee for Comics Studies (AG Comicforschung) and the Committee for Fan and Participation Studies (AG Partizipations- und Fanforschung).[1]

Fan Studies and Comics Studies: Points of Departure, Frictions, and Common Ground

At first glance, the interconnection between comics studies and fan studies seems striking. First of all, fan cultural practices are an integral part of comic book culture. Comic book narratives are highly coded and often require specialized literacy as well as insider knowledge, due to the long history of many popular comic book series (Pustz 1999, 110–56). The materiality of the comic book invites readers and collectors to circulate, exchange, and archive texts and images in the form of tangible objects (Brown 1997, 22–28; Brown 2001). Specialized comic book stores and comic book conventions are important venues for community building (Woo 2011; Bolling and Smith 2014; Gearino and Spurgeon 2017; Hanna 2020).

What may differentiate comics from other fan objects is that printed letter pages and editorials in comic books create opportunities for readers and producers to interact. The approachability of industry players at conventions communicates the impression that the barrier of entering the industry is rather low; also, many comic book artists claim to come from fandom (Brown 2001; Perren and Felschow 2018). Following their example, many fans produce their own comic books as part of their fan cultural practices.

Another commonality between comics studies and fan studies is that both have long struggled with the stereotypes of the 'cultural dupe' or the 'fan as fanatic.' As Joli Jensen very aptly put it in her 1992 study 'Fandom as Pathology: The Consequences of Characterization,' the widely-held understanding of fans at the time was that they were 'obsessed individuals,' potentially threatening loners, or part of 'the hysterical crowd' (Jensen 1992, 9) – an equally problematic, and in severe cases even deadly, phenomenon. Early fan studies scholars (e.g. Jenkins 1992; Penley 1997; Bacon-Smith 1992) thus chose to

highlight the semiotic productivity of fan cultures, and took their departure mostly from ethnographic investigations of fan cultural practices that focused on fans of science fiction and romance television series. As they investigated the social, meaning-making, and educational qualities of fan engagement, they contradicted the fan cliché as it was described in earlier journalistic and sociological accounts. This resulted in a wave of scholarly contributions whose main aim was to rehabilitate certain kinds of audiences (see also Gray et al. 2007 for their theorization of fan studies discursive 'waves').

Quite similarly, the 'comic book nerd' appears to be a culmination of the worst stereotypes about fans: that they're immature, fanatic and antisocial, and that their comic books are infantile, silly commercial pulp (Lopes 2009, Woo 2018). This cliché, albeit outdated, is still frequently on display and/or mocked in popular television shows such as *The Simpsons* (Fox 1989–present) and *The Big Bang Theory* (CBS 2009–19) (Woo 2011; Booth 2015, 75–100; Busse 2017, 187; Orme 2016).

For the longest time, comic books had a bad reputation because they were thought to lack intellectual qualities and – even worse – to effectively contribute to the decline in children's literacy (Brown 1997, 18–22; Lopes 2009. For an overview of the supposed dangers of comics for girls, see Gibson 2015, 71–79). As a consequence of this stigmatization, comic book readers have preferred to stay in closed groups (Pustz 1999, 6). In the last three decades, however, as comic books found their way into libraries and bookstores, genres other than the mainstream superhero narratives have come more into focus (Beaty 2010). One significant event that led to the rise of public awareness of the graphic novel was certainly the awarding of the Pulitzer Prize to Art Spiegelman's *Maus* in 1992. Another significant change in the public perception of comic books came with the growing prominence of Japanese manga in Western cultures (Lopes 2009, 152–57). These too are often sold in bookshops instead of specialized comic book stores and are received more as literature than as pulp. Parallel to these developments on the comic book market, comics studies emerged as an academic discipline.

In his contribution to this Themed Section, 'Shared Trajectories and "Figures of the Fan Audience" in Comics studies and fan studies: Arrested development … or transmedial developments?,' Matt Hills suggests that it is precisely the closeness between comics studies and fan studies on the one hand, and the culturally precarious tradition of comic books on the other hand, that have been hindering stronger collaboration between the two disciplines. Hills argues that, in an attempt to legitimize comic books as literature or art, and to rid itself of the unwanted association with the 'comic book nerd,' comics studies developed a different focus from fan studies.

Indeed, although many historic and industry-oriented comic book studies include observations about the relationship between readers and producers, as well as descriptions of typical fan spaces and comic book distribution modalities, studies that explicitly address comic book fans remain few and far between (notable exemptions are Pustz's *Comic Book Culture. Fanboys and True Believers* [1999], Schelly's *The Golden Age of Comic Book Fandom* [1999] and Brown's *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans* [2001]). Hills

further connects the question about fan studies as a (neglected) part of comics studies to his earlier discussions of scholarly identity. In particular, he describes the hybrid identity of 'aca-fans' who are often thought to lack 'proper distance' to the objects they study (Hills 2012). He concludes, however, that in the age of increasing transmediatization, it is difficult to uphold a notion of medium specific fandom. This poses new challenges to comics and fan studies while it harbors a potential for new synergies.

From Niche to Mainstream: Comics Franchises

As Hills suggests (and our introductory example of the presidential re-election campaign video confirms this observation), comic book narratives are increasingly becoming part of a mainstream cultural repertoire that is easily accessible, even if one has never read a single comic book. One aspect of this development is the distribution of knowledge about comic book characters through wikis or commentaries on video platforms; another is the popularity of comic-based media franchises that dominate contemporary pop culture (Perren and Felschow 2018). This becomes apparent in Liam Burke's (2015) research, where he describes people who self-identify as comic book fans without ever reading a comic (see also Matt Hills's article in this section). The comic-based superhero movies and TV shows that became a phenomenon at the turn of the current century play a vital part in this development. Early box office successes such as Marvel's *Spider-Man* (2002–07) and *X-Men* (2000–06)[2] movie series and DC's successful *Batman* trilogy (2005–12) paved the way for transmedia franchises such as Marvel's Cinematic Universe (2008–present) and DC's Extended Universe (2012–present). Both include a wide range of media: animated and live-action feature films, (partly) interconnected television shows, tie-in comic books, and other media such as video games and webisodes. Comic conventions play an important role in this transmedia cultural economy; they showcase new comic books and serve as platforms for previewing new film and TV content (Bolling and Smith 2014; Gilbert 2018; Hanna 2020).

Uncertainty about economic performance, for the longest time a crucial aspect of the cultural economy, no longer seems to haunt producers in this transmediatized franchise economy. At the time of writing, Marvel's feature film *Avengers: Endgame* holds the title as the most successful box office hit of all time, with a global gross of $2,797,800,564 (boxofficemoji.com). However, the comic book transmedia machinery's efficiency has also been criticized for its all-too-successful creative resource management, as Aaron Taylor (2014, 20–21) has noted:

> The aim of this contemporary industrial practice is to harness and regulate the creative energies of both film-makers and fans. In short, blockbuster transmediality is not only indicative of the economics of postcinematic adaptation, but it also exemplifies a corporate strategy that aims for the strategic co-option of potentially unruly niche audiences. The transmedia circulation of comic properties thus bespeaks a fundamental ambivalence involving the use-value of postcinematic adaptations in the age of new media:

while they serve as catalyzers for fannish mechanisms of reply, they simultaneously serve as dominant channels by which the culture industry co-opts and regulates subcultural energies.

Despite their 'postcinematic' logics, it remains important that these blockbuster franchises originate from comic books, since the comic book industry, with its fast and relatively cheap production circle, often serves as a cultural testing ground for future media trends (Jenkins 2006). Comic conventions – especially San Diego Comic-Con (SDCC) with its closeness to Hollywood – are crucial connectors between fans and the industry. This is where, ideally, community membership and consumption interest 'collude in the fan identity' (Gilbert 2018, 321).

Gendered Demarcations Within Comics/Fandom

It is important to note that in the industry's eyes, a 'good fan' (Gilbert 2018, 320) is mainly a good consumer, one who collects comic books, follows expanded storylines over multiple comic book series, writes letters (providing product feedback) to the publishers, and attends social meetings in places of commerce.

However, the line between wanted and unwanted forms of fandom seems to be economic as well as gendered. Subversive and transformative fan practices such as the production of fan art and fanfiction – and the gift culture that often underlies them – differ significantly from those of the more consumption-oriented comic book or 'geek' culture. In the past, the majority of comic book fans were thought to be male (Brown 2001, 62). But independent of demographic numbers which suggest that women are indeed increasingly represented among comic fans, comic book fans remain strongly *coded* as male (Orme 2016). This gender bias positions comic book fandom relatively high within the cultural hierarchy of fan practices, as Busse (2017) suggests. Citing a number of examples from TV representations of fans, she concludes that in popular narratives, male fanboys grow 'from pimply, geeky parental basement dwellers into heroes (or, translated into nonfictional examples, into producers and successful academics)' while 'the fate of the fangirl is more complicated' (Busse 2017, 188).

Busse also refers to an underlying fan cultural differentiation between *affirmational* and *transformational* fans, the affirmational 'playing within the source text's boundaries by analyzing, illustrating collecting and cosplaying' while transformational fans bring their 'own ideas, relationships, and [...] characters' into their practices (188, referring to a blog by obsession_inc). She observes that 'these two forms of fan interaction are also heavily gendered' (189). It has often been noted that, within industrial hierarchies and popular narratives, the practices and behavior of female fans are valued less, and that the growing presence of female fans in places such as comic conventions might even cause conflicts (see Busker 2013; Hanna 2020). Benjamin Woo warns us, however, that the fact that 'mainstream media have now begun celebrating the male, geeky fan as the ideal consuming

subject of contemporary transmedia franchises' (2018, 17) may have prompted us to draw skewed conclusions:

> academic efforts to 'twist the stick in the other direction' perhaps inadvertently reified distinctions among fan practices into an almost ontological divide: good, transformational, and therefore resistive fans who are mostly women, on the one hand; bad, affirmational, and therefore complicit fans who are mostly men, on the other. (Woo 2018, 17)

This is an important point. Without accusing anyone of complicity or making moral judgments, we consider it crucial to stress that the underrepresentation of female (or *queer,* we might add: in fact, any *marginalized*) perspectives in mainstream media is still a reality. Busse (2017, 189) confirms that beyond the

> 'men collect and women connect' fan gender stereotype, there may be deeper reasons as to why women are more eager to change the existing media narratives we are offered. After all, most TV programs, especially science fiction and crime dramas, are geared at the eighteen- to thirty-five-year-old white male heterosexual demographic. (Busse 2017, 189)

This observation seems even more apt in the context of the traditional comic book readership, since exclusive distribution through specialized comic book stores had provided the publishers with a very specific target audience (Perren and Felschow 2018). Woo (2011) and Swafford (2012) describe how comic book stores used to function as community gatekeepers that prevented female fans from joining.

However, the current popularity of comic book narratives, new distribution channels such as online platforms, and the growing relevance of female customers for comic book stores are beginning to weaken male dominance in comic book fandom; big comic conventions in New York and San Diego even report an even number of female and male attendees (Asselin 2015; Orme 2016; Pustz 2017). Yet, as Susan Scott (2019) argues in *Fake Geek Girls. Fandom, Gender, and the Convergence Culture Industry,* the growing influence of (formerly) marginalized audience groups creates conflicts between fans and the media industry, and also along gender lines in fan groups. Famous pop cultural examples in these 'cultural wars' include entire franchises such as the latest additions to the *Star Wars* saga, as well as remakes and continuations of successful blockbuster movies and video games like the all-female *Ghostbusters* (2016) and *The Last of Us Part II* (2020) (see also Woo 2018). All these examples experienced public backlash against their integration of female protagonists and/or their portrayal of characters from historically marginalized groups. In comic book culture, a conservative backlash against the increased integration of female, ethnically diverse, and queer characters in Marvel comic books found expression in the hashtag #comicsgate. Several incidents of online harassment and calls for boycotts created open

conflicts amongst fans, amongst artists, and between fans and the industry (Einwächter and Ossa 2021).

The above-mentioned power divide along gender lines is another potential key to understanding the distance between fan and comics studies. While comics studies might have neglected the analysis of fannish behavior in order to elevate and legitimize the medium's reputation, fan studies may indeed have foregrounded subversive or transformational fan cultures, fan activism and cultural spaces for traditionally marginalized groups. John Fiske (2003, 30) made it quite clear that for the longest time, fandom was

> associated with cultural forms that the dominant value system denigrates – pop music, romance novels, comics, Hollywood mass-appeal stars (sport, probably because of its appeal to masculinity, is an exception). It is thus associated with the cultural tastes of subordinated formations of the people, particularly with those disempowered by any combination of gender, age, class and race.

Harmonious interactions between comic books readers and creators – described by Jeffrey Brown (2001, 11) as 'potentially collaborative and mutually satisfying' – and a predominantly male fan base do not fit easily into this trajectory. Quite in accordance with observations in our fields of study, fan studies (with a considerable focus on fanfiction) often seem to have a large female base, whereas comics studies seem to be frequented more often by male scholars, at least in Germany (Sina 2020, 2021). We assume that there are indeed conflicts and even acts of subversive appropriation in male fan' practices. But, as Brown remarked in 2001 (and this still holds true), much more empirical work is needed for us to understand how male fans' practices and popular, patriarchal media relate to one another.

Comics/Fandom: A Themed Section

The articles in this Themed Section, like Matt Hills's contribution (which we discussed and 'teased' earlier on), relate to several of the arguments that we address in this introduction. They cover everything from the comic book industry-centric creation of the 'good fan' (Brinker), to new forms of collaboration between fans and the industry (Lamerichs), the playful reframing of comic book material by fans and academics (Andersen and Jensen), and industry-independent or even resistive fandoms (Hart; Hülsmann; and Thelen).

The obvious, though still often neglected, interconnection of comics studies and fan studies as addressed in the following articles both provides us with an opportunity and presents us with the challenge of combining approaches from sociology, audience studies, industry and production studies, literary studies, and historical research. The methodologies used thus range from classical textual analysis and close readings to discourse analysis, qualitative interviews and participant observations.

'Tintin and the adventure of transformative and critical fandom' by Tem Frank Andersen and Thessa Jensen engages with the notion of academic fandom, comparing how scholars and fans engage with *The Adventures of Tintin* comic books in different ways. Expanding on Roland Barthes's and John Fiske's concept of *writerly*, *readerly*, and *producerly* texts, they compare transformative elements in academic writing, fan-made albums on specific fan sites, fanworks on common fan platforms such as Archiveofourown.org, and images on non-fan-specific sites such as Instagram and Pinterest. The article questions the extent to which elements of the academic discourse on racial stereotypes in *The Adventures of Tintin* have been transferred into fan-made artefacts.

Nicolle Lamerichs advances an argument similar to Hills's conclusion that transmediatization brings the subject of comics studies and fan studies even closer together. Her article 'Scrolling, swiping, selling: Understanding Webtoons and the data-driven participatory culture around comics' analyzes how the form, social meaning, technology, and economics of comic books are increasingly influenced by digital formats and the platformization of the internet. Lamerichs discusses virtual spaces for digital comics such as Webtoons, and considers new opportunities for pushing into the industry via crowdfunding on platforms such as Patreon, Kickstarter and Kofi. The possibility of commenting on and even financing individual comic books turns audiences into investors and co-creators. Contrary to a common notion in classical fan studies, Lamerichs (p. 215) argues that '[f]andom is not counter-cultural, subversive, or detached from the creative industries, but an integral part of it.'

One prominent example of the incorporation of more female protagonists and heroes from traditionally marginalized groups into Marvel comic books is *Ms. Marvel*. Danielle Hart's article '"A War for a Better Tomorrow": Ms. Marvel fanworks as protest art' discusses Ms. Marvel as the first South Asian American Muslim superhero and the main protagonist in a Marvel comic book series. Hart shows how the *Ms. Marvel* comic books encourage political engagement or activism among their readership and how *Ms. Marvel* fans used their favorite character to protest against the so-called 'Muslim ban' that was initiated by the Trump administration in 2016. Hart demonstrates, on the one hand, the classical appropriation of *Ms. Marvel* to transmit a political message and, on the other hand, the embrace of a political stance that was already initiated by the comic books.

The close collaborative relationship between Marvel comic book producers and readers is in keeping with a long tradition. Felix Brinker argues in 'Reader mobilization and the courting of fannish consumption practices in 1970s Marvel Superhero comic books' that this relationship between comic book producers and readers was established during the 1970s, when comic books turned from being a mainstream cultural commodity to a product for a specialized fan audience. Brinker shows how the seriality, 'ergodicity,' and sociability of comic books as periodic media encouraged fannish modes of interaction with comic books. His article investigates the roles of paratextual content in comic books such as advertisements, value stamps, editorial content, and letter pages.

In contrast to Brinker's analysis of fannish behavior that was explicitly encouraged by Marvel, Katharina Hülsmann's 'Navigating the visibility and spreadability of the Japanese fan comic – Protective practices in the *dōjinshi* community' describes Japanese fan practices that are inspired by Western media franchises. Through participant observation and ethnographic interviews, Hülsmann gains insight into a fan community that is anxious to keep its activities hidden since its members fear a negative response from global copyright holders like Marvel. Hülsmann observes and describes a number of protective practices, from websites that post only in Japanese, to password protection and secret codes for fan art and fanfiction, to the publication of fan artefacts exclusively on paper.

The second article on Japanese fan culture in this volume, 'Transnational comic franchise tourism and fan cultural capital: Japanese *Attack on Titan* Fans traveling to Germany' by Timo Thelen, describes fan practices that work mostly independently of official producers. Thelen analyzes a surprising case of fan pilgrimage in which fans of *Attack on Titan* made a connection between the Japanese manga's setting and the German town of Nördlingen (based on a rather superficial resemblance), turning Nördlingen into a tourist attraction. Drawing on Azuma's concept of the database, Thelen investigates fans' justification of their fascination with the town, arguing that their pilgrimage there produces social capital in the fan community.

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Notes:

[1] For information regarding the committees' activities and members, see: https://agcomic.net/; https://partizipafans.wordpress.com/.

[2] Several additional *Spiderman* and *X-Men* movies have been released. Though we cite only the first trilogy since it sparked the renewed superhero boom, one could easily cite both as 2000–present or 2002–present.