

## **Review: Briony Hannell, *Feminist Fandom. Media Fandom, Digital Feminisms, and Tumblr*, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024.**

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In *Feminist Fandom*, qualitative feminist researcher and sociologist Briony Hannell offers an accessible, refreshing and much-needed account of the entwinement between media fandom and feminist identities. Hannell centres her study on the microblogging website Tumblr, demonstrating its role in the production and circulation of feminist thinking and highlighting how media fandom more broadly constitutes an ‘under-theorized site of young people’s engagement with media feminism’ (Hannell, 2024: 1). Drawing together feminist cultural studies and fan studies, Hannell manages to give the attention long due to regarding fandom as a critical site where affective investments in both feminism and popular culture unfold in deeply interrelated ways. The book is organised into four chapters, each addressing a distinct thematic focus. It is grounded in digital ethnography and draws on a qualitative narrative survey of 342 participants who articulate connections between their fannish activities and feminist stances. While each chapter can stand alone, they resonate most fully when read together, allowing recurring themes and tensions to develop cumulatively across the text.

The first chapter is built around entries into feminist fandom: how one ‘falls into’ feminist identity through fandom. Particularly insightful is Hannell’s consideration of self-narratives and how these illuminate how fans perform who they are, which succeeds in highlighting the processual nature of both identity and cultural meaning. Through this lens, ‘feminist becoming’ appears as an ongoing negotiation between continuity and change, serving as the book’s powerful through-line. That said, the exclusive focus on respondents who already self-identify as feminists necessarily limits the scope of the study. The more everyday, informal, or even unconscious feminist engagements, which equally constitute a significant part of the intersection between feminist practice and media fandom, are not addressed therein. While Hannell expresses awareness of this limitation, it still leaves open the question of how feminist fandom operates for those not explicitly politicised.

Chapter Two examines the affective and spatial dynamics of belonging in feminist fandom, highlighting what makes Tumblr as a platform distinctive. Hannell’s discussion of Tumblr’s affordances, particularly its high scalability and nonlinear temporality, is especially compelling. Drawing sensitively on her respondents’ testimonies, she demonstrates how platform-specific features such as reblogging, which allows users to ongoingly recirculate

media texts for their personalised tumblr blogs, and tagging, which serves both to organise content and to express affective responses to these media texts, enable the channelling of shared emotional investments in media texts and foster communal identification as well as a safe(r) space. This spatiality of Tumblr, with its asynchronous, nested, and generally pseudonymous architecture, proves central to the imagined communities generated through these affective practices.

The chapter that stands out most for its critical bite, is the third chapter. In a necessary counterweight to the previous chapters, Hannell foregrounds counter-narratives of non-belonging and the reproduction of inequalities within feminist fandom. One striking insight concerns the author's consideration of exclusion in relation to not being 'textually productive' (Fiske, 1992), which points to the critical value of turning towards latent hierarchies of visibility, voice, and labour inherent to participatory practice in media fandom. Most importantly, Hannell does not shy away from addressing how whiteness, cisnormativity, and class privilege often underpin dominant feminist fan narratives. This intersectional lens prevents the book from lapsing into celebratory accounts and makes a critical intervention into the broader discourse of digital feminist politics. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the research underpinning this book appears to be largely focused on character-driven fandoms, which inevitably shapes the wider applicability of Hannell's analysis. While engagement with fictional characters is a quintessential locus for feminist sense-making, fandom also coalesces around the personae of, for instance, celebrities, musicians, and influencers, where the dynamics of visibility, embodiment, and feminist critique acquire a different kind of complexity.

The fourth and final chapter examines the explicitly pedagogical dimensions of feminist fandom. Drawing on Gee and Hayes' (2011) notion of 'passionate affinity spaces', Hannell demonstrates how fan affect can guide critical learning and create out-of-school spaces for feminist reflection and education. Particularly insightful is the author's focus on 'lurking as a form of listening' (Hannell, 2024: 152), emphasising that participation need not be vocal or visible to be meaningful. This attention to passive or silent engagement provides a necessary corrective to the overemphasis on active production in audience studies, highlighting the value of listening as a feminist method. Relatedly, across the chapters, the notion of paratexts emerges as a point of conceptual tension. Hannell follows Jonathan Gray (2010) in defining fan works as paratextual, yet this framing risks reinforcing a potentially superfluous distinction between the supposedly 'finished' media text and the fan practices that it spawns. When fan texts are understood as generative, constitutive parts of the media text itself, such a separation becomes less tenable. Hannell later gestures toward this complexity by invoking the notion of the 'fantext' as encompassing fan-created interpretations, analyses, and narratives; yet, although Abigail De Kosnik's (2016: 7) work is cited, her ideas on 'archontic production', which could significantly intervene in this context, are not taken up. This theoretical ambiguity between paratext and text could be explored more fully, particularly given the feminist stakes of recognising fannish labour as productive rather than merely supplementary.

Throughout the book, the focus is primarily on the 'who' of feminist fans rather than the 'what' of their fannish practices, that is, the concrete actions through which they engage with media texts. From an audience studies perspective, this focus is understandable and arguably necessary to sustain a coherent line of inquiry, yet it also signals a fruitful avenue for further research. The book leaves the reader wanting even more concrete illustrations of feminist fandom in action: posts, reblogs, fan works, conflicts, and negotiations. Greater use

of screenshots or thick description could further firmly anchor the theoretical discussions in the lived realities of fandom. That said, this does not diminish the book's essential contribution of propelling audience studies research into the heart of Tumblr affect, a move that had yet to be undertaken with regard to feminism as a matter of media fandom. Hannell manages to offer a nuanced account of Tumblr's distinct cultural moment and its role in shaping feminist discourse among young people. Her focus on a specific generation, with its attendant limitations and often privileged positionality, is careful and deliberate, ensuring the book neither overstates nor universalizes the significance of this moment while still capturing its unique dynamics. For those unfamiliar with Tumblr, Hannell's expertise remains accessible without flattening its nuances; for those who vicariously lived through its moment, as I once did, it manages to convey a certain tenderness in appreciating its significance through a nostalgic lens, without automatically shutting down the possibility for critical reflection.

*Feminist Fandom* makes a thoughtful, rigorous, and essential contribution to scholarship at the intersection of fan studies, feminist media studies, and audience research. By tracing how self-identified feminist fans actively interpret, negotiate, and produce meaning within the idiosyncratic online space of Tumblr, the book also offers valuable methodological and conceptual insights for audience studies, placing what I consider a vital emphasis on the participatory and co-creative dimensions of media engagement. Its core insight, that media fandom is not merely a site of consumption but a processual space where feminisms are continually negotiated, has wide-reaching implications. Through this continued consolidation of fandom as a form of cultural labour, Hannell prompts us to think differently about what constitutes media texts, who gets to speak, and how feminist meaning is ongoingly made and remade in connection to fannish modes of production and meaning-making. One hopes this will not only spark further scholarly attention to feminist fandom but also invite continued reflection on the platforms, practices, and affective investments that shape how we read, watch, and interrogate imaginatively together, and therein perform feminism—setting the stage for further exploration of Tumblr's distinctive dynamics and peculiarities.

## Biographical Note

Tessa Vannieuwenhuyze is a researcher and guest professor affiliated with S:PAM (Studies in Performing Arts and Media) at Ghent University, Belgium. Her PhD project *Staging the Musical Self(ie)* investigated the concept of persona across popular music and contemporary performing arts through the methodological lens of fandom. She currently carries this work forward by researching pop concert-like formats migrating into a performance context. Her research interests further extend to media fandom, fan studies, and autotheory, which frequently intersect with and deepen her main research focus. As a dramaturge, she collaborates with oester, a music-based transdisciplinary platform for encounters across sound, performance, and visual arts.

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