

## **Introduction to the FSN Australasia 2017 Themed Section**

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The Fan Studies Network was formed in the United Kingdom in March 2012, with the intention to cultivate a friendly space for international scholars of fan cultures at different stages of their careers to forge connections for discussion and collaboration. This spirit of collaboration was also partly realised through a 2013 special themed section in this very journal dedicated to the Fan Studies Network, edited by the co-chairs Lucy Bennett and Tom Phillips. The themed section featured co-authored pieces and conversations between established scholars and early career researchers, cultivating the kinds of dialogue and supportive spirit the network wanted to foster, as scholars came together to reflect on, at the time, the concerns and debates for fan studies moving forward.

Since then, the Fan Studies Network has organised six successful annual conferences across different universities in the UK, with the latest one taking place at Cardiff University in June 2018. As fan studies often draws from various disciplines such as media, film, English and cultural studies – and scholars working in the field are often working independently or scattered across different faculties, schools and departments in higher education institutions – the conference enables fan studies scholars to meet up annually. This not only encourages networking, but also enables scholars to participate in dialogues on issues that the field as a whole, is contemplating (for instance, workshops and roundtables on ethics and research methodology in fan studies). The conference also provides opportunities for scholars from other disciplines (e.g. business, marketing, fashion) to explore how fan culture has had an impact in their fields of study, opening up discourse that crosses interdisciplinary fields. As fan studies scholars continue to work closely with the media industry and fans, the conference has also incorporated industry participation (e.g. American actor-comedian-producer, Orlando Jones, star of *Sleepy Hollow* and *American Gods* held a Q&A session over Skype during the 2014 conference in Regent's University, London) and fan tours for participating conference delegates (e.g. *Dr Who* location tours in Cardiff during the 2018 conference).

Another feature of the Fan Studies Network conference is the speed-geeking session. A staple since the first conference held in University of East Anglia in 2012, the session – while open to scholars at all stages of their career – was, and remains, a great space for

postgraduate students to receive feedback from other scholars in a less formal manner. While popular with postgraduate students, it has also seen pitches from scholars testing out and developing research projects, or working through research roadblocks and receiving feedback on research design.

With the increasing global reach and interest in the study of fan cultures, the Fan Studies Network established its international chapters with the Australasian conference in 2017, held in University of Wollongong, New South Wales, Australia, and most recently (October 2018) in North America, with its inaugural conference held in DePaul University, Chicago, USA. The Australasia conference was the first Fan Studies Network conference to be held outside the UK, as a way of offering scholars in the region working in fan (as well as audience and reception) studies to network, as well as to share their findings and observations. The success of the conference – its ability to attract scholars from various interdisciplinary fields – signals an important moment in our field. It shows the increasing importance of the fan, and academic studies around fans' practices, behavioural patterns (both online and off) and how fans construct their own identities and carve their own spaces.

A recent talk at Swinburne University of Technology's international campus in Sarawak, Malaysia by an advertising practitioner, for instance, reflected on the increasing importance of fans, placing them at the centre of advertising campaigns: where fans are not just important as end users or consumers anymore, but also in providing insights into their loyalty to brands or content they love. Fans' often global reach and the strength of their word-of-mouth through their communities provide an invaluable advantage to observant practitioners and industry insiders, who are now starting to incorporate fans into their marketing and advertising strategies (often to the reservations of some in the academic field of research). This, however, does not negate the increasing visibility of fans, as well as their consumption and production practices, to the commercial media and marketing industries.

This increasing importance is also somewhat in contrast to the ways in which fans are conceptualised in the region, especially in East/Southeast Asia. In Australia, fan studies are often conducted within the context of reception studies, as Willis' research featured in this issue, and her recent book *Reception* (2018) skilfully demonstrate. This is contrary to the British and American tradition, which tends to focus on fan textual production as a form of resistance rather than a (textual) reaction to media texts. In Asia, fans are often regarded – or, perhaps more fittingly, disregarded and depoliticised – as being mere consumers, falling to stereotypical media representations of the fan as indiscriminate consumer even as K-Pop bands are creating global impact in the American music industry. Similarly, scholarly works are also starting to look at how fans are challenging gender norms in China (for example, see Jamie Zhao's work on androgynous celebrities on Chinese TV, and their influence on the construction and performance of the Chinese fan identity) while scholars like Rukmini Pande, using a postcolonial lens, are calling for a re-examination of how fan studies is itself framed and constructed.

With increasing interest in fan studies in the Australasian region, and more importantly, a geographically accessible conference, it is hoped that the 2017 Australasian Fan Studies Network conference will signal the beginnings of more fan studies-focused scholarship in the region. The Australasian branch has the potential not only to reflect on the transcultural aspects of how texts – and fan practices – cross global borders, but can also provide a more culturally and racially diverse lens to study, reflect and comment on the practice of fans, bringing these discourses and dialogues away from its often American/Eurocentric focus.

Our Themed Section is structured into three sets of variously paired or interlinked articles. The first two pieces share a common point of departure, namely hyperdiegetic and transmedial worlds viewed as ‘sandboxes’ for fan playfulness, and both, whether explicitly or implicitly, offer alternative perspectives to this ‘sandbox’ notion. Ika Willis moves directly away from the idea to think instead about how fans engage with the aesthetics of worlds, appreciating stylisation rather than wanting to manipulate characters as play-pieces in a ‘sandbox’ mode. Chris Comerford likewise re-orientates analysis by thinking of the ‘participatory toolbox’ that specific kinds of fan-generated paratexts can offer, not just to fans but also to the industry and official producers. Comerford’s focus is less on ‘play’ than on fan labour and its appropriate acknowledgement.

The Section then moves on to study contemporary genre categories and, in turn, transformative female fandom, with each of the next two articles creatively and productively deploying Linda Williams’ work on ‘body genres’. Firstly, Jessica Balanzategui, Liam Burke and Dan Golding use the concept in their empirical audience analysis to set out how genre discourses may be in the process of transforming from ‘objective’ categories into emotionally-driven and subjectively felt classifications. And secondly, Naja Later uses ‘body genres’ and their low-cultural devaluation or pathologization, as in the case of the horror genre, to theorize how fangirls and transformative fandom have been represented (in journalism and scholarship) as abject ‘monsters’ or as progressive variants of monstrosity. Genre is central to both these two articles, whether as an emergent set of new audience discourses, or as a pattern of meaning through which transformative fandom has been stigmatised as culturally horrifying, excessive and improper. Consequently, Later draws innovatively on horror studies and horror theory to confront these fan representations.

Lastly, this Themed Section tackles two different kinds of television audience investment – in ‘authentic’ romance in *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette* reality TV shows, and in the nostalgia posited (or frustrated) by continuations such as *Twin Peaks: The Return*. Jodi McAlister compares the US and Australian *Bachelor/ette* television series, arguing that the ‘glocal’ re-versioning of these shows, and their audience responses as evidenced through multiple recapping sources, can be articulated with different national communities of emotion and different discursive weightings of romance/intimacy. Relatedly, Jason Bainbridge examines shifting meanings, this time of nostalgia rather than romance, that are played out as *Twin Peaks* imagines its fan audiences across different orders of fandom

(*Peaks fans*/David Lynch fans), and as *The Return* both offers up fan service and frustrations of nostalgia conceptualised as a form of malady.

To move from a sketch of the outline of what follows through to a more detailed sense of the individual articles, we begin with a piece developed from one of FSN Australasia 2017's keynote talks, 'Beyond Immersion: World as Style' by Ika Willis of the University of Wollongong. Willis suggests that we need to break with, or complicate, approaches that (perhaps spuriously) seek to separate out our actual cultural and social world and allegedly 'immersive' fictional worlds, of the kind frequently embraced by fans. Acknowledging that aspects of her argument stem, provisionally, from her own experiences, Willis goes on to build a convincing case for the non-trivial permeability of fictional worlds, and for 'immersion' that is hence never wholly immersive. Linked to this argument, 'Beyond Immersion: World as Style' moves on to the final word of its title, considering how the worlds revisited and beloved by fans may not only act as incitements to creativity and/or continuity 'fixes' in terms of a desired coherence, but may also be valued precisely for their *style* of worldness – whether this is how characters dress and self-present, how actors perform these characters, or how a world *looks* (via production and set design as much as *mise-en-scene*) and consequently feels for the fan. There is a possibility here, speculatively explored by Willis and which could also lead to much further research, of worlds functioning for audiences as objects of fascination (or even attachment) quite apart from their stories and characters. For example, perhaps *Doctor Who* fans are just as fascinated by the style of space represented by the near-infinite and reconfigurable TARDIS time-machine, or the pomp of officially non-interventionist yet hypocritical Gallifrey (the home world of the Doctor's race, the Time Lords), as they are by the character of the Doctor or the programme's many stories. For Willis, it is *Agatha Christie's Poirot*, starring David Suchet, that she persuasively discusses in terms of an aesthetic world and style, offering an innovative way for empirical audience/fan studies, as well as reception analysis and a range of narratological stances, to engage with issues of world-building.

By contrast, Chris Comerford from the University of Technology Sydney looks in greater depth at what might be termed *world-documenting*. His focus in 'Participatory Toolboxes: Franchise Fan Wikis as Tools of Textual Production' is on the ways in which fans collectively and collaboratively compile vast online databases of narrative information involving their favoured hyperdiegetic worlds. More than this, however, Comerford makes the case for such wikis to be treated as a very specific kind of fan-generated paratext, operating in a grey area between fandom and official production since fans are not creating new or transformative fanworks but are rather collating and curating canonical storyworld material. As a result, and Comerford shows how the writing process for *Star Trek Beyond* illustrates this, fan wikis can represent more complete, up-to-date and industrially exploitable repositories of franchise back-story and history than much official production data, although perhaps Lucasfilm got somewhat ahead of this fan game by installing an official 'keeper' of its wiki-style database called 'The Holocron'. There are arguments here for a greater industrial recognition of the fan labour underpinning wikis as sources of detail

and narrative history that can be valuable to new writers/producers. Comerford makes the case that fan wikis deserve official acknowledgement and enhanced social capital, at the very least, from producers, even if fan labour remains a matter of 'gifting' material not only to fellow fans but also to professional media creators. Indeed, one could argue that professionalised fan writers hired to produce tie-in novels similarly make use of communal fan knowledge by seeking advice from fellow fans when making sure that their new works are properly and rigorously placed in continuity.

Switching from world styles and fans' world curating/compiling, the Themed Section next addresses genre categories in 'Recommending a New System: An audience-based approach to film categorisation in the digital age' by Jessica Balanzategui, Liam Burke and Dan Golding, all from Swinburne University of Technology. This piece draws on early findings from an audience studies project carried out in collaboration with the Australian media company Village Roadshow, analyzing how audiences evaluate and classify a range of media texts in the era of 'on-demand' consumption. Its authors challenge previous work on film genre, in particular by demonstrating how audience discourses tend to work through 'affectual experiences' of films, categorizing titles according to their emotional impact rather than classical genre terms, i.e. categorizing *Moonlight* (Jenkins, 2016) as 'beautiful,' 'moving', and 'powerful' rather than as 'arthouse' cinema. The implication is that in an era of media personalization and customization, emotivism linked to self-experience may have become more discursively significant than supposedly external or 'objective', conventional genre categories. Given their provocative findings, Balanzategui, Burke and Golding ponder, following Linda Williams' work on 'body genres' such as weepies or thrillers, whether all traditional film genres may be in the process of becoming 'body genres' defined by their (subjectively felt) impact on audiences' bodies. By contrast, Williams argued in the 1990s that it was low-cultural genres such as horror and porn that were most emphatically aligned with (discourses of) bodily affect and mimesis, whereas more reputable film genres were, at that time, supposedly dis-articulated from strong notions of embodiment. Like Willis's opening article, there is again scope for much further research following this intervention in the field, particularly given that film studies' focus on genre has relatively rarely intersected with audience and reception studies, having been a predominantly textualist enterprise despite the philosophical and conceptual flaws inherent in this.

Naja Later, again from Swinburne University of Technology, continues the engagement with Linda Williams' work on 'body genres', this time to explore 'The Monstrous Narratives of Transformative Fandom'. Drawing on associated theories of horror and monstrosity ranging from Julia Kristeva's 'abjection' to Barbara Creed's 'monstrous-feminine' to Robin Wood's focus on the cultural politics of monstrosity, Later also builds on prior work in fan studies to argue that female-oriented and typically female-produced transformative fanworks have been stigmatized and represented as 'other'. Later demonstrates how figures of monstrosity – such as Robin Wood's understanding of progressive monsters attacking hegemonic norms – can still come into play even where transformative fandom has become relatively mainstreamed. Perhaps surprisingly, the

feminized, abjected shadow of fan ‘monstrosity’ is never far from the cultural anxieties that still surround transformative female fandom, and Later’s use of horror studies and horror theory productively illuminates how this very much remains a contemporary issue, for instance via widely circulated blog entries such as Devin Faraci’s ‘Fandom is Broken’ from 2016, which rather than focusing on toxic geek masculinity instead stereotyped fandom through the figure of actress Kathy Bates in the film *Misery* (Reiner, 1990).

In ‘Bachelor Nation(s): The Construction of Romantic Love and Audience Investment in *The Bachelor/ette* in Australia and the United States’, Jodi McAlister of Deakin University places different national versions of reality TV under analysis, using a select number of Australian and American recaps as a way into thinking about audience reception. McAlister argues that although *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette* can be interpreted as giving rise to ‘ironic’ audience readings, in fact the shows’ receptions indicate that specific storylines and representations of ‘love’ are felt by audiences to be genuine, and are markedly invested in via their authenticity. Indeed, these particular representations are not guaranteed to end well, with the reality TV formats aimed at creating romantic couples also being marked by performative ‘heartbreak’ in audience responses when favoured pairings split up. McAlister argues for differing Australian and American cultures of romantic love which are shown to correspond to very different weightings of ‘ineffable’ love that instantaneously befalls contestants almost against their will or outside of their control (in US versions of the shows), as opposed to an ‘intimacy’ of love which can slowly emerge and hence can be worked on by contestants (in the Australian context).

And if we start our Themed Section with one of FSN Australasia 2017’s keynotes, we end by looking at the processes and possibilities of audiences looking back, addressing how the commissioning of *Twin Peaks: The Return* spoke to its imagined, projected fan audience as nostalgic. In ‘Peak Fandom: Nostalgia, Frustration and the Shifting Orders of Fandom in *Twin Peaks: The Return*’, the University of South Australia’s Jason Bainbridge examines three different ways of conceptualising nostalgia, aiming to understand *The Return* as a mixture of approaches to imagined fan audiences. This 18-episode continuation of the infamous 1990s ‘quality’ TV series from David Lynch and Mark Frost offers an ambivalent combination of fan service and fan frustration, simultaneously rewarding and challenging nostalgic investments in *Twin Peaks’* world. Bainbridge argues that *The Return* shares the original *Twin Peaks’* focus on deconstructive excesses that confuse and derail linear narrative – with episode eight of the continuation arguably playing out more as an address to Lynchian fandom rather than *Peaks* fandom – yet at the same time, it contains enough nostalgic repetition (and even elements of narrative resolution) to work in far more conventional ways for one version of the fandom that its writer-creators anticipate and project.

The pieces collected together here from scholars based at five different Australian universities variously reflect on Australian fans and audiences, as well as international (e.g. US) audiences (McAlister), and representations/figures of the fan audience (Later and Bainbridge). New audience research projects in collaboration with industry partners (Balanzategui, Burke and Golding) sit alongside more personal, individual audience

reflections (Willis) and analyses of fans' digital labour (Comerford). This interplay between a broadly Australasian focus and an array of approaches and methods certainly characterised the first Fan Studies Network event on the continent in 2017, and as editors we are pleased and proud to be able to offer up a (partial) record of it in this issue of *Participations*.

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