

Introduction: Seeing Fans

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Who are fans? To many of the people reading this book—the fans and scholars who have more than a passing interest in fandom—media fans have been analyzed, discussed, debated, and defined for over thirty years within scholarly literature. A fan may be creative, productive, transformative, influential, affirmational, antagonistic, or any other of the hundreds of ways that media fans have been described since the first scholarship on them was written. Although scholars and fans themselves may disagree about the specifics of what constitutes a fan, and the types of meanings that fans can and do generate, the general image of a fan as central to the media environment has held constant for decades.

To many others, however—including media creators, general audiences, and popular press writers—fandom remains a pathologized and stereotyped identity: the geek, the nerd, the dweeb, the loser. Such characterizations are often inaccurate but still common in popular culture. As the chapters in this collection point out, the stigma of fandom has yet to disappear—and, in fact, for some (female/non-white/non-cis-gendered) fans, the stigma of fandom compounds with the antipathy toward other nonnormative identities as a complex nexus of pathologization. For many in popular culture, the stereotyping of fans comes across not as a problem to solve or an issue to address, but as yet another cliché that can garner laughs or sympathy. Both scholars and fans focus on representations of fans as a way of encompassing multiple issues within studies of fans and understanding fan cultures. As Mel Stanfill (2013) notes:

if representations of fans by non-fans in popular and news media have typically framed fandom as a practice of uncontrolled, socially unacceptable desire, scholarship has equally tended to understand fans as empowered through their fandom to have more control over their media experience, either by fighting the media industry or by being courted by it. What the two have in common is a tendency to consider fans as subjects with no history—both assume from the outset that these individuals or communities are already fully formed. (p. 118)

This book seeks to explore where these identities and communities come from, and what they mean to the contemporary media environment.

Fans are a compelling, ever-changing audience with multiple layers that are often more dimensional than the overarching and limited ways they have been historically represented in media and popular culture. This book is intended as an endeavor to

initiate a reflection on how these individuals and their practices have been portrayed—an important factor when considering how media and popular culture can both critically shape and reflect societal and cultural values. As Roger Silverstone (1999) has argued, media operate at the center of human experience and understanding, since they exist “at the heart of our capacity or incapacity to make sense of the world in which we live” (p. ix). This book, then, works toward unraveling the range and breadth of these representations, and how these representations may inform understandings, and “making sense of” fandom, by fans and nonfans. It seeks to question and trace, through chapters from academics and interviews with industry practitioners, how we understand the current landscape. Ultimately, these contributions articulate that fans are multifaceted, complex, and sometimes contradictory—prospects which have not always been visible in the representations they have received in the media and popular culture—but are beginning to evolve in tandem with the burgeoning growth of their visibility to the wider public and industry producers. We hope that this book will beckon future scholarship and tease the way for a broader vista of seeing fans.

To date, there has not been a book-length study of how media fans have been depicted in mass media.¹ This is particularly unusual considering how common references to depictions of fans are in scholarly literature. Henry Jenkins’s influential *Textual Poachers* (1992) starts with a description of William Shatner’s “Get a Life” skit on *Saturday Night Live* as the quintessential interpretation of stereotypical fandom, and this particular depiction has become a *sine qua non* for fan studies, having been mentioned in scores of articles and books. More recently, representation of *Twilight* fans has become a focus of scholarly analysis, perhaps motivated by the boon in professionalized fan fiction heralded by the publication of *Fifty Shades of Grey* (Hills 2012c). The centrality of fannish media audiences in the media environment and the prominence of fans as a key demographic for both marketing and advertising, however, would seem to indicate a need for the study of fans’ representations. *Seeing Fans: Representations of Fandom in Media and Popular Culture* sets out to form a new reference for the field of fan studies by connecting the mass mediated representation of fans with the burgeoning “fandom industry” of the mass media.

As fandom becomes a more mainstream identity, representations of fans are becoming more visible in the mass media (see Duffett 2013). The power and influence of the mass media to impact the interpretation of representation has been a major concern of media studies more generally, especially as this interpretation relates to subcultural groups like fans. In this edited book, we bring together over twenty international fan scholars to discuss how both fannish and mass media representations of fandom can have both empowering and disciplinary functions. Fans often participate in their own disciplinary activity, either specifically identifying and drawing out what they perceive as “negative” stereotypical traits or highlighting what they see as the more positive. This edited book connects fan representation to the economic, cultural, and ideological practices of fan culture, looking through the lens of scholarship, media creation, and fan work.

The popularity of fandom has exploded. It is no longer considered “weird” to be a fan. Hundreds of thousands of people descend on San Diego, CA, each year for Comic-Con;

millions tune in to “cult” programs on television; billions of dollars are made on comic book movies. Yet fandom sits in an uneasy position in the media industries. Both courted and held at arms’ length, fans are still seen as deviant and pathological, even as their enthusiasm is channeled into more “authorized” avenues. From popular television series like *The Big Bang Theory* to cult ones like *Supernatural*, from the thousands of *Twilight* fans at Comic-Con to scores of *Harry Potter* fans at LeakyCon, fandom is more than just a particular subculture: it has become a major economic force in its own right. In an effort to connect the academic study of fans to the larger world of fandom itself, this book also includes interviews with media producers and fans who have created works about fans or representations of fans in their own work. It is our hope that the variety of topics in the book will speak to the variety of representations—and *interpretations* of representations—in both fan culture and academic culture.

In terms of fandom, the parodic representation of fans has a relatively well-established history. As mentioned, William Shatner’s famous “Get a Life!” *Saturday Night Live* sketch becomes a concrete representation of the prejudice and antipathy surrounding fans and fan cultures in the 1980s and 1990s (Jenkins 1992). In her chapter for *The Adoring Audience*, which many of the contributors to this volume cite, Joli Jensen (1992) notes that two common representations of fans in the media are “the obsessed individual and the hysterical crowd” (p. 9). Although representations of fans are becoming more normalized in the media, there are still hints of this familiar pathologization. Take, for example, *The Big Bang Theory* (2007–), one of the most popular television series in the United States. In what Booth (2015b) has called a “hyperfan” representation, the show illustrates multiple types of fans at the same time in order to develop a greater fluency with modern audiences. That is, the representation of Sheldon Cooper as an exponentially more “geeky” fan than the others essentially hides the pathologization of the other fans within the show. As Jenkins (2012d) notes in an interview with Suzanne Scott for the reprint of *Textual Poachers*, however, *The Big Bang Theory* is more complicated than that initially appears. The show “starts with the same core clichés,” but audiences are also encouraged “to see the world from the fan characters’ perspectives... [who] value their friendship and intellectual mastery,” and ultimately see them as “more complex than the stereotypes upon which they were based” (p. xvi). Yet, the hyperfandom of the representation within *The Big Bang Theory*, as Scott (2012a) argues, “seems to perfectly encapsulate the industry’s conflicted desire to acknowledge fans’ growing culture influence, while still containing them through sitcom conventions” (p. xvii). Ultimately, as Kristina Busse (2013a) describes, “the show isn’t certain whether it is ‘laughing with or at the geeks’” (p. 81, citing Heather Hendershot).

Beyond individual portrayals of fans, however, whole fan groups have been subject to media interpretation and representation. The classic fan film *Galaxy Quest* (1999) features a parody of *Star Trek*, complete with a group of “Questarians”—fans of this fictional show. Both Matt Hills (2003) and Lincoln Geraghty (2007) have written about Questerian fandom and its analogue to contemporary fan audiences. More recently, one of the editors of this volume (Booth 2013b; 2015b) has written about *Fanboys* (2009) and the comparison between *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* fan audiences in that film.

By overly emphasizing the traditionally pathologized characteristics of *Star Trek* fans, the film makes the *Star Wars* fans seem more “normal.”

Using all of these characteristics, today’s media industries are representing fans that more “normal” (re: more disciplined) audiences can safely mock. For Matt Hills (2012c), writing about *Twilight* fans, this type of representation occurs at two levels: the intertextual and the intratextual. On the one hand, representations of fandom on extra material, like official DVDs, can discipline “proper” fan behaviors by highlighting particular fan practices and identities as more valid than others. This type of “fandom as pedagogy” teaches “proper” fandom. On the other hand, the stereotyping of *Twilight* fans by other fan groups, such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* fans, can create its own disciplinary functions for fandom. By creating their own stereotypes of *Twilight* fans, these other fan groups attempt to pathologize *Twilight* fans into particular images, what Hills calls “fandom as stereotyping” (p. 114). As Booth (2015b) notes, “both types of fan disciplining regulate audience activity, creating particular interpretations of fan identities” (p. 80). This same type of stereotyping within fan groups has been discussed by Mel Stanfill (2013) as well, regarding *Xena: The Warrior Princess* (1995–2001) fandom and the stereotypes some fans of the series make regarding other fans of the series; and an intertextual fan stereotyping has been documented by Rebecca Williams (2013) in her exploration of how interconnected *Twilight* fans and Muse fans became, given the use of the band’s music in the films.

This collection intends to expand the range of texts and fandoms analyzed in terms of their representation. Rather than focus on the most popular types of fan representations—the Trekkies, the Whovians, or the Twi-hards—this volume proposes to look deeper at some of the more underexplored fandoms, such as wrestling fans, international fan audiences, and Otaku fans, to name just a few. In short, this collection will expand the range of fan scholarship by turning an analytical lens onto the media itself to develop new ways of seeing the disciplinary and self-disciplinary mechanisms surrounding fan texts, the media industries, and fans themselves.

Chapter summaries

This book is split into four main sections, with some shorter sections interspersed throughout. We hope that this organization of the book—and the special “Spotlight on” sections in particular—will be of use for instructors hoping to explore key concepts in fan studies in the classroom. Each full-length section includes chapters by fan scholars and at least one interview with a media creator or professional whose work has focused on fandom and has used representations of fandom in that work. We open the book with four chapters about documenting fans in nonfiction and real-world events. Mark Duffett’s chapter “Beyond Exploitation Cinema” opens the book, exploring the connections between disability and fandom in the documentary *Mission to Lars* (2012). He argues that the film draws on some notions of exploitation cinema to frame its subject matter and that while the film reflects a genuine attempt to please the fans within the film, it also utilizes markers of the exploitation genre to reconsider both

disability and music fandom as interrelated subject matters. Rebecca Williams follows up in Chapter 2 with her analysis of the fans represented in the music documentary *Pulp: A Film About Life, Death & Supermarkets* (2014). Although a documentary ostensibly about a band, Williams argues that the film represents both fans and forms of celebrity and considers how these portrayals of fans and local characters have much to tell us about the contemporary mediation of both. Documenting fandom presents a range of fan identities which offer more progressive and positive portrayals than have often been present, and in depicting different types of fan, *Pulp: The Film* offers a space for fan voices and for a diversity of representation across gender, age, and class. Sam Ford's Chapter 3, in a discussion of the representation of fans within pro wrestling story worlds, shows how the realism of fandom is concomitant with how much belief goes into fandom's construction of the self. By examining how mainstream media accounts of wrestling fan behavior have traditionally demonstrated a strong lack of understanding and a concern about the performative nature of participating in an immersive story world, Ford discusses both the motivations, pleasures, and creativity involved in performing the role of wrestling fan and the "always on stage" and traditional lack of separation between actor and character in the world of pro wrestling. We conclude this section with an interview with Roger Nygard, the director of the documentaries *Trekkies* (1997) and *Trekkies 2* (2004). Both films depict *Star Trek* fan communities, and in this interview we ask Nygard about his responsibility to the communities he depicts in the films.

Our first "Spotlight On" section focuses, in particular, on the documentary *Crazy About One Direction*, which aired in 2013 on the British Channel Four television station. *Crazy About One Direction* explored fandom surrounding the band One Direction and was controversial within fan communities for its depiction both of the "extreme" fan audiences as well as for its focus on "Larry shippers" (or "Stylinson")—those fans who posited a homosexual relationship between Harry Styles and Louis Tomlinson, two members of the band. Chapter 5, the first chapter of this "Spotlight On" section, is by Bethan Jones, who describes the controversy and contextualizes its place within the history of fan representations in documentaries, including *Wacko about Jacko* (2005) and *Bronies* (2012). Jones examines the depiction of Stylinson and fandom responses to this following the film's airing, drawing on discussions of interfandom hate, as well as discussions around the ethics of real person fiction. Following this, Chapter 6 is from William Proctor, who delves more deeply into the role that social media played in the development of the *Larry shippers* as well as the antagonism experienced by those in the documentary. We conclude this first "Spotlight On" section with a piece by the director of *Crazy About One Direction*, Daisy Asquith, who explores the reaction of One Direction fandom to the release of her film in more depth. Asquith further analyzes the factions that divide the fandom and fan the flames of rage when there is a contested representation of either the band or their fans. She explores the ethics of television documentary and the representation of teenage girls in particular.

Our next section explores what is probably the most common type of fan representation—that seen in fictional programs. Fans have been present within media texts for decades; today, however, the representation has shifted to take into account

newer fan practices and the way that fandom has been mainstreamed. We open the section with our interview with Robert Burnett, the writer and director of the film *Free Enterprise* (1998), a film that takes a humorous look at the lives of two grown-up *Star Trek* friends who encounter their hero, William Shatner. In this interview, we ask him about his fandom of *Star Trek* and how he balanced his fandom with his directives as a filmmaker. We then move to Lincoln Geraghty's exploration of "Fans on Primetime"—a historical analysis of fan representations on American primetime television since the infamous *Saturday Night Live* "Get a Life" sketch to examine to what extent fans have been stereotyped and how far those stereotypes go in perpetuating myths surrounding fandom and the affective relationship with media texts. Geraghty charts a history of network drama and sitcom series that were not specifically about fans but would often use fandom as the basis for stories in certain episodes. He argues that television series that play up and focus on the multiple practices that make being a fan so attractive are instructive in the processes that fans go through to create, build, and maintain their fan identity. In Chapter 10, Karen Hellekson examines an underdiscussed television series, *Stargate SG-1* (1997–2007). While known as being friendly to fans, with fans granted access to the set, early breaking information, walk-ons, and interviews, *Stargate* displaces the fan onto characters with fannish markers, including detailed canonical knowledge and obsession. Through these humorous characters, *SG-1* portrays the fan as an ultimately lovable nut whose obsessions end up being vindicated and validated. Moving to more contemporary media texts, Melissa A. Click and Nettie Brock's Chapter 11 explores the liminal line between producers and fans in *Doctor Who* (1963–1989, 1996, 2005–) and *Sherlock* (2010–). Both British series have featured depictions of fans within episodes, and although these representations are brief when set within their larger stories, Click and Brock use them to explore the producers' conceptualizations of the series' real-life fans through producers' public comments about the *Doctor Who* and *Sherlock* fandoms. Chapter 12, by Ellen Kirkpatrick, explores representations of superheroes and comic book fans within comics themselves. The superhero genre, the comic book medium, and their fans and scholars all have a complicated relationship with representation. Fans are represented within long-established cultural and social categories and stereotypes, now subsumed under the often pejorative *fanboy* and *fangirl* monikers. Kirkpatrick analyzes these cultural codes about comic book fans within the superhero genre and illuminates the ways in which these representations do not speak to the nature of their fandoms, or to the diverse and ranging actuality of their fans. The final two chapters of this section focus on the US television series *Supernatural* (2005–) specifically—*Supernatural* has been much discussed in scholarship on fandom for its continual in-text depiction of its fan audiences. Chapter 13, by Katherine Larsen and Lynn Zubernis, unpacks the multiple representations of fandom within *Supernatural* to chart a history of the show's understanding of, and interaction with, its own fan audience. We follow this, and conclude this section with an interview with Emily Perkins, the actress who plays super-fan Becky Rosen in *Supernatural*. Perkins describes her time on the show and how she prepared for her role, as well as her views on being and playing a fan.

We follow our discussion of representations of fictional fans with another special "Spotlight On" section; this one focusing on representations of fandom within fan

works. Fans are not immune to representational and disciplinary mechanisms, and within texts, like fan fiction, fan videos, and transmedia franchises, fandom itself can become stereotyped by fans themselves. We open this section with Chapter 15 by Kristina Busse, who explores and revalues the infamous “Mary Sue” genre of fanfic writing. In Mary Sue fic, fan authors (who are mostly women) write themselves into contemporary media by creating alter egos they insert into their expanded fan worlds or by creating characters with fannish perspectives. Such stories allow the fans to project self-inserts into the show universes to experience its characters and worlds. Fan writers effectively feminize hypermasculine characters, give them geeky interests and writerly preoccupations, and, in so doing revert the voyeuristic gaze while projecting their actions and emotions onto the characters. Busse suggests that fan fiction not only offers particular modes of interpreting the source texts but also ways to discuss and analyze theories of audience reception, especially as they relate to gender and the insufficient representation of women. Following this analysis, Louisa Stein’s Chapter 16 examines transmedia web series like *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* (2012–13) as both the product and representation of fan audiences. These web series transforms iconic female characters into fangirls, lending verisimilitude and relatability to the characters and the series’ narratives. Moreover, by casting these characters as fans, these web series take female figures who were limited to private sphere, and recast them as public figures speaking in and for a culture that insistently undermines long-standing divides between intimate and public, individual and collective. Finally, we conclude this special “Spotlight On” section with an interview with noted fan vidder Luminosity, who discusses her role as a fan and the ways in which fandom itself can represent fan audiences in work as diverse as fan videos.

The next section opens up our discussion of fan representations to take into account a greater variety of cultural issues. Fandom is of course not free of larger cultural issues of diversity and privilege, and in Chapter 18, Mel Stanfill explores how the proliferation and diversification of representations of fans in the age of the Internet continues to be constructed as involving failed masculinity and whiteness through failed adulthood and heterosexuality. What is new in the contemporary era is that this narrative of failure now comes along with a path to redemption for white male fan bodies. Through an analysis of fictional and nonfictional representations of fans in television, film, and news, and statements made by industry workers, Stanfill considers the ongoing equation of fandom to normatively inadequate masculinity, maturity, heterosexuality, and whiteness. Ruth A Deller’s analysis of newspaper narratives of music fans in Chapter 19 explores newspaper coverage of mature female fans of male singers such as Tom Jones, Barry Manilow, and Daniel O’Donnell. A recurring series of narratives of mature female fandom (50+) is constructed across national and local English language newspapers that position these women as excessive, immature curiosities, while also often offering a “feel-good” account of fan practices that allow readers to “humor” the fans. These accounts, all position the fans as “other” to the author and reader, yet unthreateningly so—they may be a neighbor, an aunt, or parent—a seemingly “ordinary” person whose “unusual” devotion to a star allows for a humorous human interest narrative to be constructed around their curious fandom. Rukmini Pandé’s

Chapter 20 focuses on racial, cultural, and ethnic identity in fan communities and fan studies. Fan communities are increasingly being theorized as functioning as a highly dynamic interlinked interpretative matrix, constantly reforming internal conventions in response to newer theorization about norms and practices produced by participants. These theories often concern depiction of minority groups (LGBTQ communities in the case of slash fandom). However, only very recently has scholarship acknowledged that the community has significant demographic representation of fans from racial and ethnic backgrounds other than white and middle-class Americans. Pande explores these engagements and the possibility of resistance and containment they display through fan interviews and case studies. We conclude this section with an interview with Laurent Malaquais, the director of the documentary *Bronies: The Extremely Unexpected Adult Fans of My Little Pony* (2012). *Bronies* explores cultural issues in the representation of fans, including gender, ethnic, and national identities. We spoke with Malaquais about his responsibility in representing *Bronies* with care and the result of focusing on cross-cultural fandom.

Our final section of *Seeing Fans* opens up the focus of the book onto global fan audiences. In Chapter 22, Darlene Hampton explores transcultural representation of *Sherlock* slash fans and the politics of pathologization within Chinese audiences. She argues that the body of the fangirl has become a discursive site for the enactment of not only cultural but also geopolitical anxieties—deployed alternately to police the “unruly” fangirl and promote national interests. Lori Morimoto extends this argument in Chapter 23 by exploring representations of Hong Kong star fans in Japanese cinema and the discursive construction of the female fan audience in two Japanese-Hong Kong film coproductions, *Moonlight Express* (1999) and *Moumantai* (1999), as well as the Japanese made-for-television film, *Hong Kong Star Fans* (2002). She situates these films’ depictions of female fans against a historical backdrop of Japanese female fan pathologization within mass media in order to foreground their uses of fans to sociopolitical and economic ends. Nicolle Lamerichs, in Chapter 24, turns the analytic lens toward Japanese popular culture to examine how particular anime and manga include the figure of the otaku. Otaku are often stereotyped as obsessive adult fans who are unable to connect with reality. She provides a close reading of several exemplary manga and anime in order to illustrate multiple meanings of “otaku” culture. Finally, we conclude this section with a short interview with Jeanie Finlay, director of the British documentary *Sound It Out* (2011). We ask Jeanie about music fan culture and the particularly unique elements that make it different from, but also similar to, other types of fan audiences. We conclude the book with an afterword by noted fan scholar Matt Hills, who explores the future of fan representations.

Ultimately, it is our hope that readers of this volume will not find *one* particular representation of fandom as dominant, but rather that representations of fandom become a multilayered portrait of an ever-changing audience. Fandom is constantly evolving, and to stay beholden to any particular image is limiting for the fan and fan scholar. Seeing fans involves more than just observation; it is a constant process of critique and comparison. The authors in this volume illustrate that fandom is not just an image, but a prism.

Notes

- 1 We use the term “media fans” here largely to differentiate our study from those of sports fans—a related field of study, but one that reflects a different set of methodologies, research questions, and analyses. Sports fandom is understudied in what has come to be a body of literature called “fan studies,” and far too little crossover research has occurred. That being said, the chapter from Sam Ford on depictions of wrestling fandom within and outside of wrestling proper is an example of how sports and media fandom can be analyzed together.