

# When ‘What are You a Fan of?’ is the Wrong Question

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## Abstract

In fan studies, the term fan is made to carry a heavy semiotic burden, and part of this burden is often shifted on to the fan object, which is used as a defining term. Examination of various types of fan activity, however, reveals that these can be arbitrarily excluded by such definitions and their attendant assumptions. Academic agendas derived from media studies and audience theory have shaped understandings of fans that suit the discipline, rather than matching the experience of fans themselves. By understanding that the fan object is partly constituted by fan activity itself it is possible to frame a wider definition that restores agency to fans, and better accommodates the array of activities by which fans reveal themselves.

## 1. Introduction

Fan studies is a new field of investigation. It appears, on the surface, a relatively straightforward prospect, involving studying fans. As with any new field of study, however, we can run into problems with definitional boundaries. Take for example “cultural studies.” Eagleton (2000) claims that culture is one of the most complex words in English, perhaps second only to “nature,” with which it is often contrasted. As a result, cultural studies is an entanglement of academic and ideological agendas.

So it may be, too, with fan studies. The search for a definition can end up obstructing the very purpose of the activity, for a definition suggests a fixed level of knowledge that is at odds with the spirit of open enquiry. On the other hand, at its most basic level, fan studies entails considering the answer to the question “What are fans?” So approaching some form of definition is useful, if only as a means of triggering a wider view. As Hellekson (2009) comments, however,

defining the meaning of the word is “fraught.” Nevertheless she bravely offers:

... a fan is taken to be someone who engages within a subculture organized around a specific object of study, be it *Star Trek*, science fiction literature, Sherlock Holmes, anime, comics, gaming, or sports. Fans engage in a range of activities related to their passion: they write derivative literature called *fan fiction*, they create artworks, they write what’s known as meta (analyses of fandom itself, or analysis of analysis), they play role-playing games, they blog, they make fan vids, and they organize and attend conventions. (Hellekson, 2009)

There are two important elements to this definition, which develops on the work of Bacon-Smith (1992): the fan object, and fan activity. In this paper I will take this definition as a starting point in order to examine these two elements and their relationship. I would like to explore what we mean by the “fan object,” and suggest that it is possible for this part of the definition to decline to

the point where a fan can be defined—or at least identified—purely in terms of activity.

A tangential point is the meaning of the term “fandom.” This has generally been understood to refer to a community of fans. Problematically, however, the emphasis on media in fan studies has led to alternatives. Sandvoss (2005) “define[s] fandom as the regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text.” There is no community in Sandvoss’s definition, only an emotionally-involved activity.

## 2. A general theory of fandom

In the introduction to *Fan Cultures* (2002), Hills describes how his book is an attempt to redress the fracturing of fan studies, which was produced “... through the institutional agendas of university departments.” His book is an attempt to sketch out ideas on which to base a general theory of fan studies. However, there is one notable omission from the introduction: a definition of what a fan is. In some ways, this is inevitable. After all, we already know what a fan is. There is a danger that, as suggested above, a definition is reductive, and Hills is clearly striving in the book to avoid that particular pitfall. The definition of “fan” emerges implicitly in the course of the elaboration of theory in the book. And yet, this is an example of “common sense,” which Hills tackles as part of his epistemological critique. Hills’s agenda may not be institutional, but he is, nevertheless, coming from a clear media-related position.

One problem with deriving a highly specific definition from a “common sense” or inferred understanding of what it entails to be a fan, as well as with Hellekson’s use of examples in her definition, is that there are *lacunae*. Precisely the institutional agendas that Hills alludes to in his book will direct its readers’ understanding of the key term at its core, and this may leave “holes” in the general theory. No one has experience of every variety of fandom, and our imaginations can be limited by our experience, as some of

the prior work in the field has demonstrated. Hellekson doesn’t *limit* fandom to the examples she provides, but nevertheless we must infer from them, in combination with the phrase “a specific object of study,” the possibilities that constitute fan identity.

Given this definitional problem, just how should we identify fans and fandom in our studies? Should we search for a theory-based definition, perhaps derived from our particular field(s)? Or could we simply recognize as fans those who “self-identify”? Each of these possibilities carries its own problems. In the former case, we risk the arbitrary exclusion of areas which might otherwise have a legitimate claim to be studied—the “holes” alluded to above—the study of which might enlarge our understanding of the phenomenon. Such would be the case, for example, with a definition of fans deriving from audience and reception studies, and which strictly regarded fans as members of “fan audiences” (Gray, Sandvoss, & Harrington, 2007, p. 9), or as in Sandvoss’s definition cited earlier, as consumers. A definition which derives from a theoretical perspective also carries the risk noted by Hills that it is agenda-setting. This is especially true of the early work on fandom which saw it, after de Certeau, as an oppositional strategy of the disempowered, or after Fish, as an “interpretive community” (Jenkins, 1992). These approaches were ground-breaking in their own time, but have subsequently been subject to critique (not least by their own author, as we will see later).

Similarly, accepting self-identification as a definition of fan carries with it the danger of excluding legitimate subjects based on essentially linguistic criteria. Consider fan studies on a global scale. How are we to deal with the issue of self-identification when examining non-English-speaking cultures? Translation is fraught with problems; to take a specific example, the Japanese term *otaku* may be taken as corresponding to the English word “fan,” but carries with it a cornucopia of socio-cultural

associations which render it impossible to simply substitute the one for the other. Japanese fans *cannot* self-identify as fans, because their language prevents it; even if they use the English word “fan,” it is connotatively different for them than it is for an English-speaker. Conversely, Jenkins (2006) uses the word *otaku* in the rather specific sense of a Western fan of *manga* and *animé*. In Japan, the dominant usage was for a long time an external, negative-valuing label, akin to the way “anorak” is used in the UK (The Guardian, n.d.). In recent years it has been somewhat reclaimed, and the extent to which this is connected to the mainstreaming of fans across the world might be a fruitful direction for further study. Nevertheless, *otaku* in Japan does not have the same connotation as the word used by Jenkins, nor does it correspond precisely to fan.

The criteria by which subjects may be excluded if self-labeling is accepted as a definition are not only linguistic. Use of the term fan may well be an accident related to the manner in which the particular branch of fandom arises. For example, role-playing game (RPG) fandom derives from wargaming (Mason, 2012), yet wargamers do not generally use the term fan. I hypothesize that this is because of the influence on the development of RPGs of science fiction fandom (see the quotation from Gold, below), and that self-identification as a fan, and a part of fandom, derives from two factors: a connection made with an established fandom, and the adoption of one or other form of established fan practice.

Over and above all this, however, lie social and psychological reasons why some people may prefer not to self-identify as fans even though they are virtually identical in behavior and attitudes to others who do.

### 3. A fan history

It is rarely useful to try to find the modern meaning of a word by going back to its origins. Shifts in meaning occur so often as to make early meanings unreliable indicators. For example,

Wierzbicka (2006) describes in detail the way in which the meaning of the English word “reasonable” has shifted, and how this is a process of interaction with the culture in which the word is used. Indeed, it is not entirely clear that the word fan derives from “fanatical” rather than “fancy.” Other than recognizing that both of these possibilities suggest strong affect, we can say little. More useful is to search for early uses of the word fan in senses that are indisputably congruent with its current usage. This is easier to do, and more productive, for meanings are culturally transmitted, and I would suggest that the use of the word fan in many contexts is a direct result of its diachronic transmission.

Shulman (1996) traces the use of fan to 1887 in the context of baseball, in the magazine *Sporting Life*. It is interesting that this precedes by several decades the use of the term in the context of more narrowly defined “media,” namely the science fiction fandom which arose in the 1930s (Bacon-Smith, 2000). On the other hand, it was the media-inflected usage which was imported first to the UK, where aficionados of sports were more commonly referred to until relatively recently as “supporters.”

Although it is often ignored by Fan Studies scholars, the history of science fiction fandom has been quite comprehensively studied. The connections between it and other fandoms—indeed the whole “web” of interacting fandoms—is a fruitful area for further research (see for example Mason, 2013). It is clear that science fiction fandom established a model for fan practice which was knowingly picked up and applied in other cases. For example:

Comic book conventions began as an outgrowth of comics fandom in the early 1960s. Since many fans had been active in science fiction fandom and its regular gatherings of fans, professionals, and dealers, the development of a comics-specific convention was natural. (Pustz, 1999)

Similarly, tabletop RPG fandom in both the US and UK developed from connections with science fiction fandom. Lee Gold, editor of the seminal APA (“amateur press association,” a fanzine compiled from unedited contributions by multiple authors) *Alarums & Excursions* since mid-1975, explained how she started role-playing:

Barry and I learned about *D&D* from old friends (met at LASFS, but they’d moved on to San Francisco by then) Owen & Eclare Hannifen, who gave us photocopies of the *D&D* rules when we showed them we were mailing a check to TSR to buy our own copy of *D&D* and *Chainmail*. I then drew up a dungeon and started running games in LA, recruiting players from fannish friends: Ted Johnstone (who wrote SF and UNCLE stories professionally under his real name of David McDaniel) and many others. (Gold, personal communication, March 6, 2012)

In the UK, RPG fanzines were connected not only with science fiction fandom, but also with the hobby of postal *Diplomacy*. This was epitomized by the fanzine *Apocalypse/The Acolyte*, edited by Pete Tamlyn between 1979 and 1984 (Agar, n.d.), which combined *Diplomacy*, role-playing and reviews (including science fiction). As Cheryl Morgan, its editor went on to win the Hugo Award for best (science fiction) fanzine, *Emerald City*, in 2004 (World Science Fiction Society, 2004).

Some RPG fans attended science fiction conventions, and modeled their own conventions on what they experienced. Indeed, they still do: in 2012 the convention Congenial was held in Cambridge UK, jointly organized by the Unicon SF con-running organization, and the British Roleplaying Society (Langford, 2012). The *Diplomacy* players with whom RPG fans interacted, however, did not refer to themselves as fans, nor to what they were doing as fandom (even the word fanzine was generally abbreviated to “zine”). In the UK at least they called themselves (postal) gamers, and what they were

doing, The Hobby. Both of these terms were also used by players of RPGs. The role-playing gamers who called themselves fans were those who participated in SF fandom-like activities: specifically fanzines and conventions.

It seems likely that specific use of the term fan is a relatively arbitrary characteristic, based on interaction with other fandoms, especially in the formative years of the activity. It may be that, like Siuda (2010), we should simply use fan “interchangeably with the term[s] admirer and aficionado.” In this case, a Polish writer is writing (originally in Polish, but then translated into English) for a Polish journal. We find ourselves back in the problematic linguistic area previously explored with “reasonable” and *otaku*. While these terms may indeed share denotations, I would argue that there are important connotative distinctions, just as there are connotative distinctions between translations. In order for us, as scholars of fan studies, to be able to observe and make use of the terminology used by fans to self-describe, we need to keep the term “fan,” used in an academic sense, distinct.

Thus we do need to find a definition of fan which is not limited by self-labeling or linguistic usage. Siuda is concerned to address the problem of clearly establishing what fans actually are, from an academic point of view. Unlike Hellekson, cited earlier, he opts for the Sandvoss reductionist approach: “... fans are specific recipients of popular culture, a unique audience for various media texts” (Siuda, 2010). To this basic formula, as in so much other work on fandom, are appended two additional characteristics: being “an author of texts based on the original” and being “socially minded people, they often create and join fan communities with those with the same interests in a particular media product.”

The additional two characteristics do not dilute the specificity of the initial definition, however. Indeed, formulating fan creativity in terms of being based on some original text (the “fan

object”), and expressing the social aspect in terms of “media product” reinforces the dominance here of a conception of fans as audiences and consumers. It also excludes from consideration the first recorded usage of the word fan, which we should remember was in sport, rather than media. Sport can be considered a media text; I will later suggest that this can be unhelpful.

Even those who are aware of the breadth of fandom(s), and are careful not to fall into the reductionist trap demonstrated by Sandvoss and Siuda, frequently cannot help but support this position implicitly. Hills, in *Fan Cultures* (2002), goes through considerable contortions to avoid simplistic analyses. Yet his book implicitly presents a media-only definition of fans, by excluding sports, games and other areas. Similarly, Busse and Gray (2011) write that:

Whereas a decade ago, fans were easily identified and defined as those more intense and invested media audiences who engaged and connected with one another, media convergence, new technologies, and transmedia marketing have all created new types of fans who exhibit many similarities and yet may not be quite the same. (Busse & Gray, 2011)

Is it not also likely that the definition of a decade ago was limited not only by the factors noted here, but also by the academic agendas of its proponents?

This is not to criticize these analyses in themselves. But cannot the wider view of fans advocated by Busse and Gray as a result of recent developments also be taken as an opportunity to take a wider view of what fans were in the past? Indeed, there has been work of this nature relating to women and sport (see for example: Gosling, 2007; Pope & Williams, 2011), as well as in other fields.

#### 4. Approaching a definition

Clearly it is possible, for academic purposes, to adopt a narrow definition of fan. The practice

is quite common in other areas. For example, although in everyday parlance, “classical music” refers to a wide range of music played with a certain set of instruments, strictly speaking it is a type of music produced in the Western world between the 18th and 19th centuries (The new Harvard dictionary of music, 1986). While most people consider, for example, Johann Pachelbel to have been a classical composer, to the music academic he was baroque. However, Pachelbel did not describe *himself* as a classical composer—not least because the term wasn’t used until the nineteenth century.

Arbitrarily excluding people who describe themselves as fans, as well as those who, while not self-identifying, nevertheless behave like fans, invites the accusation that language is being framed for the convenience of the researcher—supporting institutional agendas—rather than the utility of its meaning. Such arbitrary exclusions are especially baffling when the definition of fan is then opened out to include those “who merely love a show” (Gray, Sandvoss, & Harrington, 2007, p. 3).

The institutional agendas identified by Hills as fracturing fan studies, and therefore encouraging narrower, media-based definitions of fan, are an inevitable consequence of the scale of the topic. There is no shortage of material to study, so when Busse and Gray (2011) write “Discussing what fans are and are not is important not only for the developing field of fan studies but also for audience studies in general,” we can perhaps forgive the implicit suggestion that fan studies is a mere subset of audience studies (made explicit in a note explaining that this is a result of the agenda of the book in which the piece appears), especially because, after carefully acknowledging “other forms of fan engagement,” Busse and Gray offer a means of categorizing levels of “fannishness” along two axes, involvement and investment. The first point here is that this immediately suggests that a useful definition of “fan” should not be either/or, but a matter of degree. A second point

is that these axes, representing the intensity of affect, and degree of interaction with a fan community respectively, do not require a “fan object” in the narrow sense. Certainly, one can ask “Affect toward *what?*” But that *what?* is not necessarily limited to a text, and certainly not a media text, as we will see later when considering furry fandom.

These two axes suggest a theoretical definition of fan which takes as its starting point not some *object* of affect, but the force of the affect itself; not some *object* which stimulates community involvement, but the force of the involvement itself. In short, such a definition reclaims the key element of *fan identity* from some external factor, and relocates it with the fan her or himself.

Sandvoss defines fandom in terms of the consumption of a fan object, but such a definition is clearly inadequate: at the very least, the transformational aspect of fandom must be taken into account. Ironically, a more practical definition is actually provided by a source which might be expected to stress the “consumption” aspect. Thorne and Bruner (2006), examining the topic from a marketing perspective, define a fan as:

A person with a[n] overwhelming liking or interest in a particular person, group, trend, artwork or idea. Behavior is typically viewed by others as unusual or unconventional but does not violate prevailing social norms. (Thorne & Bruner, 2006)

Aspects of this definition are questionable, of course, but it nevertheless succeeds in taking a very wide view of the fan object. In researching the topic, Thorne and Bruner cite sources concerned with a range of fandoms, including sports and role-playing games. Moreover, they supplement their definition with a set of four characteristics of fans (though they use the term “fanaticism” to refer to these, which is perhaps unfortunate). These are: internal involvement (deriving pleasure from the area of interest);

desire for external involvement (a wish to participate in activities related to the area of interest); a wish to acquire objects related to the area of interest; and a desire to share involvement with others.

This set of characteristics entails aspects missing or under-represented in the earlier definitions, enlarging on Busse and Gray’s axes. The fan object aspect of the definition is framed so widely as to include “idea,” which allows for the fans of academic fields identified by McKee (2007). It is also much easier to consider sports and role-playing games based on this definition. The present author has expanded this way of considering fans in terms of their characteristic activities (Mason, 2013).

## 5. Specific examples

The question arises whether a definition of fan based on involvement with a media text is really so heinous? Is it not possible to fit all fans within that definition, one way or another? The original definition of fans deriving from sport, for example, may at first sight seem an exception, but sport in the modern world functions so similarly to entertainment media, it is hardly surprising that the one can be conflated with the other. This reductionist approach is mistaken, however.

Sport originated as a participatory activity. Unlike literature, performance arts, and their modern implementations such as TV and movies, its audience was a side-effect, an afterthought. It may be a coincidence, but while baseball is thought of as the quintessential American sport, this predominance actually dates from the time in the late nineteenth century when the sport went professional, and acquired a large popular audience—the very time the word fan was coined. Cricket was the sport played by George Washington and others during the War of Independence, and the first international cricket match was between the US and Canada. Baseball’s turn to professionalism coincided with its rise as a popular spectator sport.

To argue that a sports fan is primarily a member of an audience is to put the cart before the horse. Certainly, sport has a large audience, and many of the members of this audience who can be described as fans do not participate in the sport. But does this entail a definition of fan, or is this merely one of a number of dimensions of fan involvement?

An even stronger example of this can be found in the aforementioned RPGs. Like sport, they are participatory activities. It is true that one can characterize role-players as simultaneously performer and audience (Mackay, 2001), and this is a useful way of looking at the activity, but the very simultaneity shows that the “text” of which RPGers constitute an audience is neither a prior text, nor any subsequent recording or recollection—which are merely derivatives—but the game itself.

The original *Dungeons & Dragons* rules offered no background setting, rather leaving it implicit as “fantasy.” Underwood (2009) productively coins the term “genre farming” to refer to this characteristic of tabletop role-playing games.

Genre farming in gaming varies among several different types, a display of personal agency and individual creativity that extends past Jenkins’s application of the textual poaching to fan fiction writing. As role-players reach intertextually across genres, they rework narratives and create new worlds out of old ideas. (Underwood, 2009)

Indeed, the approach that would now be the norm—a licensed product based on an established intellectual property, such as *Star Trek*—was considered something of an exciting innovation when it started to happen at the end of the 1970s and into the 1980s. The “ideas” that are used by Underwood’s genre farmers might fit better into Thorne and Bruner’s definition, but we need to ask whether RPG fans are really fans of those ideas. Surely they genre farm with a view to using

their ideas in the real “object” of their fandom, which is the activity of role-playing itself?

The true text or fan object of a role-playing game is what emerges during play. It is “consumed” (if we must use that word) coterminously as it is produced. Thus the paraphernalia of role-playing—the rules, miniature figurines and so on—do not constitute the fan object. They structure and shape the experience, but they do not constitute it. The game may be a transformation of an existing fan object, but it may equally be based on an original synthesis of sources, as in the *Exalted* game reported by Underwood (2009).

Moreover, as noted earlier, most role-playing gamers don’t describe themselves as fans. Those who do tend to be those involved in other activities: the desire for external involvement noted by Thorne and Bruner (clearly there is also a desire for sharing with others, though the shared nature of role-playing games means this is always present anyway). RPG fans are fans of their own activity:

One becomes a “fan” not by being a regular viewer of a particular program but by translating that viewing into some kind of cultural activity, by sharing feelings and thoughts about the program content with friends, by joining a “community” of other fans who spark production, reading generates writing, until the terms seem logically inseparable ... (Jenkins, 2006)

In the case of fan-created role-playing games (Mason, 2012), the terms truly are logically inseparable, because “the program content” has been completely replaced by the fan activity itself. “Role-playing games, like other forms of interactive narrative, represent a fundamental blurring of the distinction between creator and consumer, between story-teller and listener” (Rilstone, 1994).

There is an even stronger example than role-playing games: furry fandom. “Furries,” as the members of this fandom are called, are

interested in anthropomorphic animals, and many wear “fursuits”—animal costumes—in order to enact their “fursonas,” or animal personas (Plante, Reysen, Roberts, & Gerbasi, 2016). Samuel Conway, chairman of the world’s largest furry convention Anthrocon, is quoted as saying, “Furry fandom is unique among fan cultures in that we are not consumers, but rather creators” (Wall, 2016). The claim to uniqueness is exaggerated, but nevertheless draws attention to the absence of a fan object, unless the term “object” is broadened to the ridiculously wide context of “anthropomorphic animals in general.”

A report on the 2007 Anthrocon furry convention cites a revealing conversation between two of the guests of honour. Neither are furies: Rob Paulsen is a respected voice artist, while Mark Evanier is a comic and TV writer. To Paulsen’s question “What exactly are these people fans of? Comics? Animation?” Evanier responds “Actually, they’re fans of each other” (Wikinews, 2007). This comment might equally be applied to role-playing gamers.

If this is true in the case of furies and role-playing games, can we not apply the insight to fan activity in other fields? The most obvious candidate is science fiction fandom. Although on the surface it appears that this is a fandom based on fan appreciation for literary science fiction, there are two issues that should be considered. The first is that literary science fiction is a very general category. Secondly, closer examination of fan practice suggests that a large proportion of fan activity is actually devoted to fan works—not limited to fan transformations of existing texts, but extending to new forms. Filking, fan fiction, costuming and other fannish activities—these may be conducted as derivative works, but they may equally be wholly original. The “object” in which the fan has an “overwhelming liking or interest” is the fan activity itself, rather than merely the “source material” (Bacon-Smith, 1992) which may have stimulated their interest in the first place.

Fanzines are a case in point. The example was raised earlier of RPG fandom in the UK, and its links with both the postal *Diplomacy* hobby and science fiction fandom. From this heady mixture emerged, during the 1980s, a number of fanzines that owed affiliation to all and none of the components. Dubbed “personal zines,” they included such titles as *Atu XVIII*, *Daughters of Dool*, *Now Eat The Rabbit*, *Swansea With Me* (actually there were two personal zines of this name, produced at the same time by two former students of Warwick University), *Tobacco Road*, and *The Year of the Rat*. The zines concerned any subject that was of interest to their editors, including, but far from limited to, games, science fiction, music, food, politics, religion, current affairs, comics and philosophy. In the case of these zines, it is clear that there was no fan object in the generally understood sense; rather, the “fanship” (Schroy, Plante, Reysen, Roberts, & Gerbasi, 2016) was the zine itself, and the activity associated with it. At the time, such zines did cause some consternation, but were comprehensible by being compared to science fiction zines. Indeed, despite originating from the gaming hobby, they were sometimes claimed to be science fiction zines. Nowadays, in the age of blogs and Twitter, these personal zines are readily comprehensible.

Lest I be accused of raising a straw man of passive audience reception, we must take into account that since Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) it has become almost a given that audiences are active: indeed that being an audience is inherently performative, and constructive of identity. Yet this is a statement about audiences. If we take it as defining fans, then in what way do fans differ from audiences in general? In the extreme cases of the media-inflected definition, it appears that the sole difference inheres in the characteristics of the objects. Sandvoss, whose reductionist view of the definition of fan has been challenged by this paper, writes: “Fan objects thus form a *field of gravity*, which may or may

not have an *urtext* in its epicenter [sic]” (2007), after Barthes, noting that a text is essentially constituted in its audience rather than its creator. Yet the attribution of a field of gravity to the fan object suggests that fans are not defined by their own attributes or activity, but by characteristics of the specific media they watch. One person watches the news, the other watches *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. The former is not a fan, because the news is not a fan object; the latter is a fan. Phrased in this extreme way, it would be rejected by fan researchers (I hope), and yet it is a logical consequence of externally situating the defining characteristic of a fan.

An alternative way of viewing this is suggested by Reysen *et al.* (2015) who discuss fan identities in terms of the effect they have on personalities. From this perspective, the Sandvoss field of gravity derives not from the fan object, but from the phenomenon whereby “individuals self-stereotype to the group’s content” (Reysen, Plante, Roberts, & Gerbasi, 2015, p. 96). In other words, fans’ identities display personality differences reflecting a shift in self to be in line with the perceived norms of the fandom.

## 6. The fan object: a synthesis

As the research cited earlier suggests, “fan” can be taken as a role identity, particularly in those strands of theory which take a performative view of identity construction (McCall & Simmons, 1978; Butler, 1990). It is useful at this point to consider how terms such as “individual,” “identity,” “subjectivity,” and “role,” are manipulated in order to suit the agenda of the researcher. Anderson and Schoening (1996), examine the models used to support various forms of inquiry, and note that no single model is capable of accommodating all of the ways in which we formulate an *a priori* theory of the self. “It would be folly, postmodern as we are, to sound some reconciliatory note,” they warn. We can see that the development of ways of viewing fandom has moved among these models,

from a sociological conjunctive model in which the individual is essentially a product of social factors, through more critical forms of the same approach (such as de Certeau) in which subjects can deploy self-reflexivity or practical knowledge to create spaces of opposition within the system, and through the situated and activative models, which bring individual agency more to the fore.

It is clear that the particular model being used for such terms depends on the specific orientation of the researcher. Yet if a performative view is being taken—which is the defense offered against the accusation that describing fans as a “media audience” renders them passive—then the fans’ role identity needs to be modeled in such a way as to emphasize agency. Which is to say that the *nature* of fans’ active engagement as fans needs to be addressed, rather than being parceled up as “media consumption.”

One way in which this becomes possible is to step back into history and consider the term “object” in the sense that it is expressed by Mead (1938). In simple terms, a “thing” (which is to say an objective physical or social reality) is converted into an “object” by an act. In a sense, this is the imposition of grammar on to reality: in grammar, an object is something acted on by a subject; it is the result of a verb. All this is to say that the act is an integral part of the meaning of an object. Fans clearly subject their fan objects to a variety of acts, a variety of transformations: indeed, following Meads’ line of reasoning, the objects are constituted by the transformations. In order to differentiate fans from non-fans, therefore, we need to identify those acts which are distinctive to fans. In the case of media, consumption is not distinctive to fans. Indeed, in the case of other fan interests such as role-playing and furry fandom, consumption becomes a contested term at best. Thus to define fans in terms of their consumption of media is a worthless definition, which fails to adequately distinguish fans from audiences in general. And this is precisely what we find: definitions of fans which position them

as audiences, and attempt to locate the distinctive nature of the fan in the “object” rather than in the fan themselves. A *Star Trek* fan is a fan because they consume *Star Trek*, not because of what they actually do, it seems. And yet deep down we know, in the starkest possible terms, that although many people watched and continue to watch *Star Trek*, what differentiates the fans from the non-fans is what they *do about it*.

## 7. Conclusion

In Fan Studies, fans have been defined in terms of their relationship with a fan object. This definition is problematic, however, because of the way in which the meaning of fan object has itself been framed by assumptions and institutional agendas. Defining fans exclusively in terms of their consumption of media objects (whether directly, or by using this as an analogy to define fans outside media fields) is to privilege the discipline over the subject. Even formulations which acknowledge other dimensions to fan activity—transformation of the fan object—fail to adequately account for some fans, because the essential attribute of a fan is being located externally to the fan.

The one element common to all definitions of a fan is that of activity; moreover it is by activity that fans can be differentiated from non-fans. Even the case of a shy fan who repeatedly listens to his or her favourite singer, while keeping this love secret, can be identified as a fan by the action of repeated listening (a high degree of internal involvement, to use Thorne and Bruner’s terms; or spectating, to use my own “topography”).

In defining a fan, therefore, the activity should become the focus, in place of specification of the fan object. The extent to which someone is a fan is determined by that person’s internal involvement (affect) with something, as well as their external involvement, which may be manifested in transformative activity, accumulative activity and social activity.

A definition based on these principles identifies

the fan as a self-constructed entity, rather than defined in terms of some external object. The fan object can be determined from the fan: it is the object of the fan’s activity (and is constituted thereby). Scholars who wish to set limits to the scope of their enquiry need to specify the fan object rather than, as they so often do at present, writing about “fans” in an apparently general manner, when what is actually intended is, for example, fans of certain media.

Although fan studies has gone far beyond its origins in countering the pathological view of fan activity, retaining some of its early sense of advocacy—or at least transforming it into a willingness to be inclusive—might help counter some of the fracturing that Matt Hills complained of more than 10 years ago.

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