

Book Review: The Ashgate Research Companion to Fan Cultures edited by Linda Duits, Koos Zwaan and Stijn Reijnders

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2014-10-27

The Ashgate Research Companion to Fan Cultures details a range of approaches to fan studies, and examines a range of fan communities, fan texts and definitions of fandom. The questions asked and examples provided makes it an essential read for students of fan studies, academics, and those who are interested in what fandom can tell us about ourselves and the world we engage with, writes **Bethan Jones**.

The Ashgate Research Companion to Fan Cultures. Linda Duits, Koos Zwaan and Stijn Reijnders (eds.). Ashgate. 2014.

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Early work on fan studies from academics such as Henry Jenkins, writing in the 1992, focussed on the positive aspects of fandom and the active role which fans play in the consumption and (re)production of texts. Rather than seeing fans as fanatics who needed to 'get a life', scholars viewed fans as "textual poachers [...] actively assert[ing] their mastery over the mass-produced texts which provide the raw materials for their own cultural productions" (see pp.23-24 of [Textual Poachers by Jenkins](#)). This early work did a great deal to move the field of fan studies on, away from its roots in audience and reception studies into an area of research in its own right. As Suzanne Scott notes in her introduction to the [twentieth anniversary edition of Textual Poachers](#), "It supplied my generation of fan scholars with a methodology that embraced our hybrid scholarly identities, and our ties to the texts and communities we study".

Many of the contributors to *The Ashgate Research Companion to Fan Cultures* are likewise scholars working in the aftermath of *Textual Poachers*, and the book owes something to the early work of Jenkins, Camille Bacon-Smith, Joli Jenson and others. The editors note in their introduction the importance of this early work, as well as the role that the internet has played in the creation of the active audience and the participatory fan. But just as this early work was important in encouraging 'participation culture' (p.2) it is equally important to examine this scholarship critically and ask whether the same questions can be applied to fan studies, and indeed fandom, now. The *Companion* sets out to do this, collecting chapters from a range of academics across a variety of fan cultures. The book itself is divided into three sections: Re-defining the Fan; Fans and Producers; and Localities of Fandom. Each of these address topics concerning contemporary fandom as well as contemporary fan studies, asking questions of both.

Section one opens with a chapter by Matt Hills on the emergence of fandom. Hills notes that fan studies has "much to say about fan cultures and communities, but rather less to say about how people become fans in the first place" (p.9). Hills thus draws on psychoanalytic theory to examine the transformative moments of becoming-a-fan, while simultaneously acknowledging the problems inherent in a purely psychoanalytic analysis. Examining the becoming-a-fan stories of adolescent *Kiss* fans, Hills demonstrates that fan studies focusses on, and indeed reifies, fixed models of what it means to be a fan, and important questions are thus missed about the ways in which people engage with the favourites texts (the plural being of import), and what this means in relation to a narrative of the self. This narrative continues, however, in fans' movement between fandoms and beyond fandoms, and Hills draws on accounts of anti-fans to examine the access points and exit points of fandom: "Fandom's emergence [...] can thus involve frustration as well as satisfaction, and hate as well as love. Indeed, it is striking that at least one of Steve Bailey's respondents recounted hating *Kiss* when he first heard them" (p.15).

Hills' work sets the tone for much of the rest of the section, asking how fandom changes over time and events, and how fans may move between, as well as beyond, fandoms. The following chapter by Kristen N. Bryant, Denise D. Bielby and C. Lee Harrington, for example, examines toy collecting and its relevance to adult fans, and becoming-a-fan stories are in abundance here: "One collector described how he was introduced as a child to adult play toys by his father, while another discussed how he is now passing on *his* interest to his own children" (p.26). This continuation of themes permeates the book, with Section Two examining the ways in which fans and producers interact.



Kiera Knightley on the red carpet. Credit: [Holly Hayes](#) CC BY-NC 2.0

Lucy Bennett's chapter on Lady Gaga's interactions with her fans through social media examines the ways in which social media affects the fan/producer relationship rather than simply that of fan/fan or fan/text. Bennett notes that many studies on the role that the internet has played in fandom examine the change in relation to fans and producers rather than fans and celebrities. Indeed, while media fandom is becoming considered more 'normal', celebrity fandom is still often seen as fanatical (Jones 2012; Mark Duffett also examines the lack of work on celebrity in fan studies in Chapter 12 of the *Companion*). Bennett begins to dispel this notion by examining the presentation of the celebrity online, and the ways in which Lady Gaga encourages interaction on social media with her fans. She notes that "Posting frequent updates and photographs on Twitter and Facebook, and countless videos on YouTube, [Lady Gaga] skilfully uses these means to speak directly to her online audiences" (p.111). Conducting a survey with this audience, Bennett demonstrates that the star's use of social media positions herself in a more personal relationship with her fans and reveals the ways in which fans respond to these more intimate connections with their fan object.

Connections to celebrities, fan objects and other fans are not solely limited to the digital, however, and the final section of the *Companion* details the various on- and off-line locations in which fandom can be found. Nicolle Lamerichs' analysis of cosplay – an area understudied in the field of fan research – in particular is an insightful ethnographic examination. Lamerichs opens the chapter by detailing her own introduction to cosplaying at an anime convention and theorises her own experiences through her affective relationship with both the text and her fellow fans. She asserts that the space of the fan convention is structured in three ways: as an imaginative space, a social space and a space of intimacy (p.264), and repurposes Grossberg's understanding of affect to be "a broader process of meaning-making, in which emotions do play a part as they show how the subject experiences the convention site" (p.265). The concepts of love and attachment are utilised here to detail the various spaces of the

convention (Lamerichs notes that “fans go to a convention to experience the stories that they love again” (p.268) echoing Hills’ transformative becoming-a-fan experiences), and Lamerichs’ focus on YAYCon as a con which emphasizes homosexual and lesbian romance stories allows space for examining the importance of fandom to queer relationships (Frederik Dhaenens and Sofie Van Bauwel’s chapter on the online fandom of gay TV representation also deals specifically with the way in which gay and lesbian fans negotiate texts). Lamerichs focus on queer fiction and the convention space thus opens up the scope of fan studies.

Comprising 21 chapters, the *Companion* is a hefty collection and some chapters are weaker than others, but there is still much to find of interest within it. Detailing a range of approaches to fan studies, and examining a range of fan communities, fan texts and, indeed, definitions of fandom, the book reiterates fan studies’ position as an innovative, engaging field. Fan studies research has progressed from the ‘first wave’, which focussed on fans as resistant, to the ‘third wave’, which sees fandom as a “taken-for-granted aspect of modern communication and consumption” (see p.7 of [Fandom by Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington](#)) and *The Ashgate Research Companion to Fan Cultures* builds upon this body of work. The questions asked and examples provided in the collection makes it an essential read for students of fan studies, academics, and those who are interested in what fandom can tell us about ourselves and the world we engage with.

Bethan Jones is a PhD candidate in the Department of Theatre, Film and Television Studies at [Aberystwyth University](#), where she is researching the relationship between anti-fandom, celebrity, gender and transformative works. She has been published in the journals *Transformative Works and Culture*, *Participations*, *Sexualities*, *Intensities: The Journal of Cult Media* and the *Journal of Adaptation in Film & Performance*, as well as in edited collections on gender, fan studies and new media. She is a board member of the Fan Studies Network and has recently co-edited a special issue of *New Media & Society* on crowdfunding with Lucy Bennett and Bertha Chin. [Read more reviews by Bethan.](#)

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