

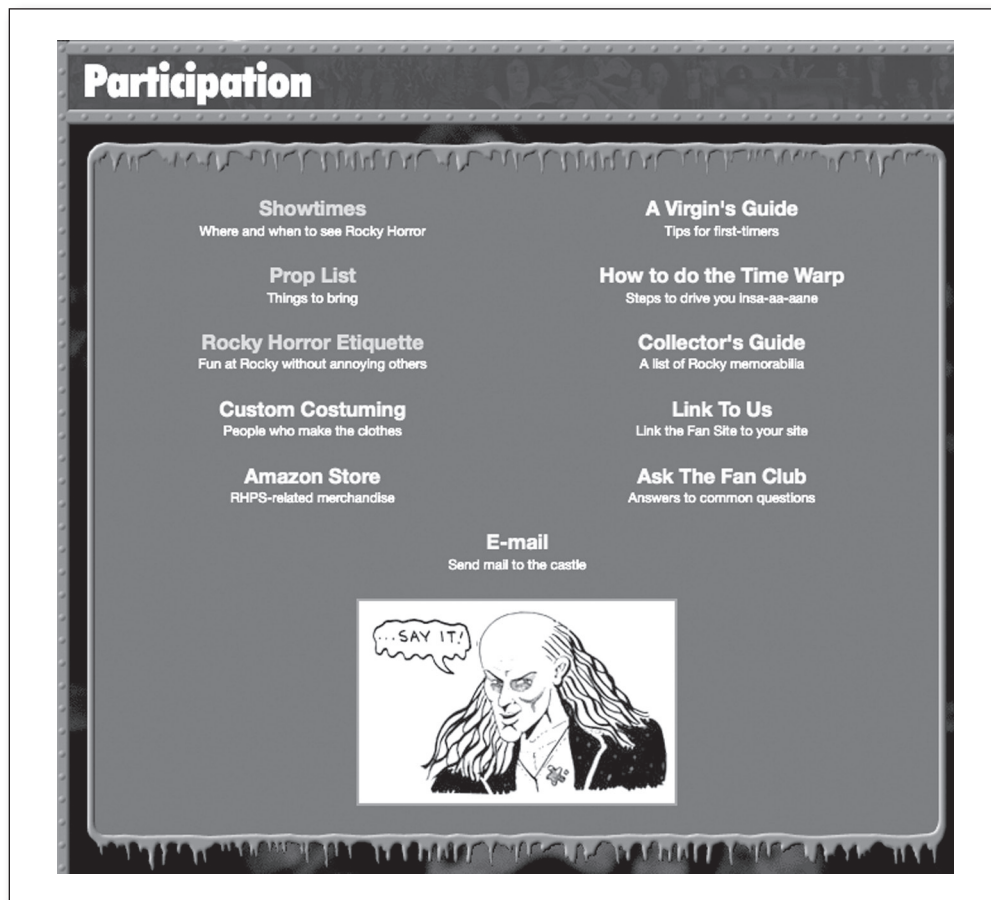
## Media Fandom and Audience Subcultures

On April Fool's Day in 1976 at the Waverly Theater in Greenwich Village, New York City, a new film opened to audiences at a special midnight screening. *The Rocky Horror Picture Show (RHPS)* was a motion picture version of a low-budget science-fiction/horror musical. The stage show had been successful in London, and had been brought to the United States for a theatrical run in Los Angeles. The musical theater production featured a campy, cabaret-style narrative in which an innocent, conservative suburban couple is stranded in a haunted house full of cross-dressing transvestites, aliens, and a Frankenstein-style mad scientist. The initial rollout of the film in the United States was far from auspicious. Critics in Los Angeles had widely panned the stage version. Influential New York commentator Rex Reed, for example, wrote that "the rock score is beneath contempt, the acting is a disgrace, and the entire evening gave me a headache for which suicide seemed the only possible relief" (Hoberman & Rosenbaum, 1983, p. 11). The movie version attracted sizable crowds in Los Angeles when it opened in September 1975, most likely due to the press surrounding the stage performance. However, the film was bombing everywhere else that it appeared around the country. Local theater exhibitors complained to 20th Century Fox (the distributor of *Rocky Horror*) that perhaps only 50 seats out of 800 were occupied for each showing of the film. Fox, already nervous about the negative reviews and wary of the film's campy transgressions of gender roles, yanked the film from nationwide circulation. That might have been the end of the story for *Rocky Horror*, but it wasn't.

Movie theater owners failed to realize that the consistently small audiences for the film were made up of largely the *same* 50 people, who attended the screenings again and again. A young publicist named Bill Quigley, who worked for a theater chain in New York City, noticed this trend and convinced Fox to release the film in one theater at a time as a midnight movie in order to slowly build an audience (Weinstock, 2007, p. 18). What happened following the film's midnight opening in Manhattan was startling. Groups of young people in their twenties attended the movie in droves, many of them paying to see the film repeatedly. The viewing experience began to play a large role in the film's appeal. A dedicated core of regular viewers began dressing up as the characters in the film, interacting with the film by shouting out raunchy lines of dialogue (which they knew by heart), throwing rice

at the screen during a wedding scene, and dancing in the aisles during key musical sequences. A scholarly study of *Rocky Horror* audiences conducted in Rochester, New York, found that roughly two thirds of the people waiting in line to see the film had already seen it once. The research also noted that the biggest draw for repeat viewings, aside from the film itself, was the audience participation that occurred in the theater (Austin, 1981). Fan clubs dedicated to *RHPS* began sprouting up all over the country, educating new fans about the etiquette of audience response to various scenes in the film (see Figure 8.1 for a list of expected interactive practices for each showing of *Rocky Horror*). The film became a “cult” phenomenon through midnight showings in the United States and around the world, grossing over \$100 million thus far. The primary draw for fans continues to be the social

**Figure 8.1** Forms of Expected Audience Participation for *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*



Source: The Rocky Horror Picture Show Official Fan Site. <http://www.rockyhorror.com/participation>.

experience of the film, which allows participants to interact with the screen and with each other. The unique social environment surrounding *Rocky Horror* points to some of the fascinating ways in which fandom alters and even creates new cultural experiences out of popular media texts. These unique interactions between fans and media place theories of fandom squarely in the sights of audience scholars.

As we explored in Chapter 6, audiences actively interpret media content by producing meaning out of the signs and symbols that make up the media text. These interpretations are also closely connected to both the immediate and larger social contexts of audiences. The “transaction” (for lack of a better term) between the medium and the audience goes beyond a single interaction with a television program, movie, or book. Imagine that you have just finished reading a fiction book that you have found fascinating or inspiring. You might subsequently turn on your computer and find a fan website dedicated to the book, or perhaps an online chat room frequented by other readers who are as enthusiastic about the book as you are. On one of these websites, you may even find that some fans enjoyed the narrative so much that they inserted its characters into their own “fan fiction” writings. These short stories would be posted on online bulletin boards and websites for other fans to read and discuss. This hypothetical but common scenario demonstrates that our interactions with media texts today rarely have any clear boundaries. The expansive, malleable nature of the Internet and the declining cost of computers have allowed audiences to easily extend their media experiences beyond the reception of the original text. Texts can be reinterpreted in many new and contrary ways: through connections to other audiences online, creation of new media texts based upon the source material, and—thanks to the power of inexpensive computers to achieve professional-quality video and audio editing—even alteration of the original media text. As we will see later in Chapter 9, the latter activity often runs afoul of copyright law, and can pit even the most ardent media fans against the creators and media organizations that produced the media product in the first place.

## Overview of the Chapter

This chapter builds upon the audience interpretation and decoding theories presented in Chapter 6, and explores the ways in which media audiences use their interpretive power to actively subvert, distort, and even reimagine mainstream media content to suit their own needs and desires. We begin with the concept of media fandom: exploring how fan communities extend their interactions with media texts by logging on to discussions on the Internet, collecting artifacts associated with their media interests, and even by participating in fan conventions and other related social activities. Fans are emotionally invested in their favorite media by thinking deeply about the plots, characters, and messages of those texts. They also reach out to other fans to discuss their mutual objects of affection, building “interpretive communities” around a particular media programming. Beyond activities designed to more fully appreciate the original texts (a television program or a film, for instance), some fans go even further by modifying their favorite texts to suit their needs and interests. Fans of science fiction television programs such as *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, and *Battlestar Galactica* have even translated their enthusiasm into elaborate social and textual subcultures, producing their own media texts and challenging the interpretive authority of

media institutions in the process. Although there are numerous examples of these kinds of fan activities in relation to soap operas, mystery novels, and musical artists (just to name a few), this chapter explores previous research primarily on science fiction television programs. Do all of these fan activities mean that the balance of power between media and the audience has been tipped in the favor of individual audience members who can reinterpret and even alter media texts to suit themselves? At the conclusion of the chapter, we will explore more recent scholarship on fandom, which revisits the concept of a “fan” and calls into question the emancipation of audiences from media and cultural hierarchies in our society.

## DEFINING FAN CULTURES

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What is a *fan*? You might call yourself a fan of something such as a TV program, a sports team, a particular book, or a popular music group. We use the term in everyday parlance, but what does it really mean? Images of fans are ubiquitous in our popular media, and often reveal a conflicting picture of the fan. For instance, there is the image of the geeky, socially challenged, but ultimately benign and lovable fan. We see this common stereotype in recent Hollywood films such as 2005’s *Fever Pitch* (with Jimmy Fallon portraying an obsessed but ultimately reformed Red Sox fan) and in the fictionalizations of science fiction fandom such as 1999’s *GalaxyQuest* (centered on fans of a pseudo-*Star Trek* television program) and 2008’s *Fanboys* (the fictionalized exploits of a group of hardcore *Star Wars* fans and their adventures in pursuing an advance screening of *Star Wars I: The Phantom Menace*). This notion of the sweet but socially awkward fan exists alongside a much darker view offered in films such as *The Fan* (1996), in which a baseball player is stalked and threatened by a violent sports enthusiast. Negative fan connotations are also associated with figures in the news such as Mark David Chapman (a Beatles fan who murdered singer John Lennon in 1980, which some suggest was an outgrowth of his fanatical devotion to J.D. Salinger’s book *The Catcher in the Rye*) and John Hinckley Jr. (who attempted to murder President Ronald Reagan in 1981, reportedly in a bid to impress movie actress Jodie Foster).

This somewhat shadowy, sinister image of **the fan** captures a fair amount of the essence of the original etymology of the word. Short for “fanatic,” the term originally referred to religious membership “of or belonging to the temple, a temple servant, a devotee” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 12). It later turned toward much more negative connotations. Beginning in the 17th century, the word described “an action or speech: Such as might result from possession by a deity or demon; frantic, furious” and later “characterized, influenced, or prompted by excessive and mistaken enthusiasm, especially in religious matters” (Oxford English Dictionary Online, 2000). The connections between fandom and religion are particularly notable, as the usage of “fanatic” generally referred to an unwavering, uncritical belief in (usually religious) dogma. In Britain, the term “cult” media is often used to describe media fan cultures. “Cult” also conjures up religious imagery, in an extreme and negative sense of the word. The Oxford English Dictionary describes “cult” as “a relatively small group of people having religious beliefs or practices regarded by others as strange or sinister” (2000).

The etymological roots of the word “fanatic,” particularly the connections to religious fundamentalism, fueled early negative stereotypes about fandom, portraying individuals as misguided at best and delusional at worst.

## Fan Stereotypes

Negative notions of fans, seen through the lens of extremism and psycho-pathology, dominated the popular consciousness when scholars began to examine the phenomenon of fandom. In the early 1990s, media scholars such as Henry Jenkins (1992) and Camille Bacon-Smith (1992) attempted to correct this imbalance with their own ethnographic research into fans of the popular 1960s television series *Star Trek*. Jenkins, himself an avowed *Trek* fan, knew from his own experiences with other fans that the negative stereotypes with which they were associated were gross distortions of their attitudes and behaviors. For example, media fans are often portrayed as brainless consumers, willing to buy anything with a logo or image of their favorite media program or star. The popular cultural materials that fans tend to spend their time thinking carefully about are also seen by many to be culturally worthless or simply there for entertainment purposes. Jenkins also discovered that media fans were often tagged as social misfits, intellectually immature, and feminized. Concern has also been raised about the inability of fans to separate the fantasy of media texts from the reality of their everyday lives. In his touchstone book *Textual Poachers*, Jenkins looked beyond the popular stereotypes of fans by letting fans speak for themselves, conducting interviews, and examining fan textual productions. The range of fan activities and interpretations uncovered by Jenkins and later scholars demonstrates that fan audiences are deeply engaged in their favorite media texts. Fans often reinterpret media content and create their own cultural productions in response.

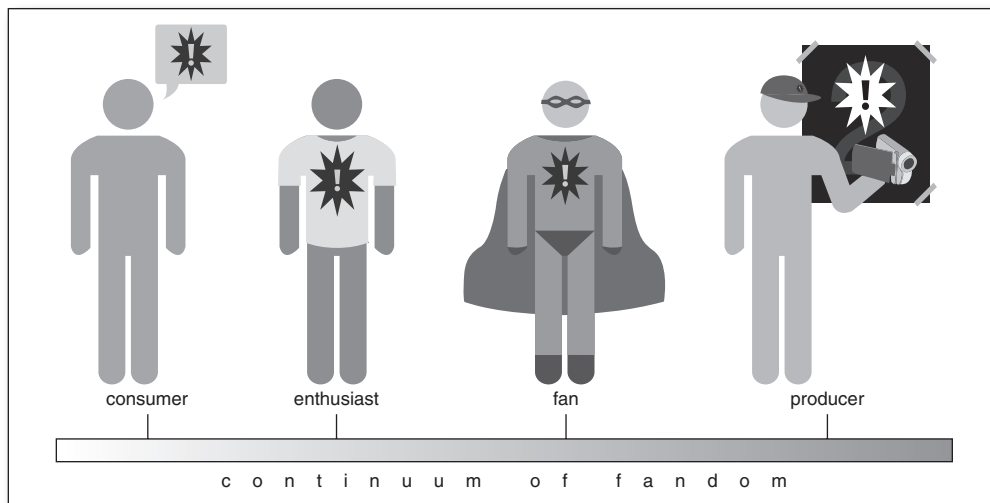
## Defining Fan Studies: Why Study Fans?

Before launching into any research project, scholars must define the subject under consideration, and studies of fandom are no different. However, the definition of fandom has been disputed among researchers who approached the field with competing agendas. Early fan studies set out explicitly to debunk many of the negative stereotypes that had been associated with fan activities. For example, John Fiske noted that fandom is “associated with the cultural tastes of subordinated formations of the people, particularly those disempowered by any combination of gender, age, class, and race (1992, p. 30). Following the same line of reasoning that he presented in *Television Culture* (1987, see Chapter 6 for a full discussion), Fiske claimed that fans resisted their negative characterizations in popular culture by establishing a sense of ownership over their favorite media texts, and engaging in interpretive play with those texts. The fact that fandom appealed to “subordinated” groups transformed fan participation into a kind of political resistance. Early scholars of media fandom were drawn to this notion because it challenged the idea of the “commodity audience” that we explored in Chapter 4. Instead of audiences’ viewing choices being totally determined by institutional constructions, fans develop their own sense of self-identity around their media consumption. This challenges the perceived

negative stereotypes of the passive, unimaginative, or uneducated mass audience. The activities of media fans were envisioned as a corrective to the seemingly bleak top-down picture of media power that emerged out of the political economic critique of audiences. Fandom was more than simple enthusiasm for a TV program or film; it was a form of collective interpretation of popular culture that created a powerful sense of group cohesion. For these scholars, “fan studies therefore constituted a purposeful political intervention that sided with the tactics of fan audiences in their evasion of dominant ideologies, and that set out to rigorously defend fan communities against their ridicule in the mass media and by nonfans” (Gray, Sandvoss, & Harrington, 2007, p. 2).

Scholars in the later, so-called “second wave” of fan studies questioned the normative conceptualization of fandom, because it seemed to be at odds with a great deal of mainstream enthusiasm across different sociodemographic groups for television programs, movies, and popular music. The category of “fan” has dramatically expanded as a result of the even smaller niche media products and platforms available today (such as cell phone games and media, cable and satellite television channels, YouTube channels, and other forms of micro-media). Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998, p. 141), recognizing that there are perhaps different levels of passion and involvement in fan activities, developed a continuum of audience experiences. Levels of engagement with popular media ranged from “consumer” on one end to “petty producer” (people who turn their fan activity into a profession and market their productions back to fans) on the other, with “enthusiast” and “fan” as levels of fan involvement in the middle of the continuum (see Figure 8.2). Sandvoss (2005, p. 8) offered a more inclusive definition of fandom, taking into account both dedicated and casual fans. He defined fandom as “the regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular

**Figure 8.2** Continuum of Fandom



Source: Stephanie Plumeri.



narrative or text in the form of books, television shows, films, or music, as well as popular texts in a broader sense such as sports teams and popular icons and stars ranging from athletes and musicians to actors.” As Sandvoss’s definition demonstrates, we are all fans of something in today’s media-saturated environment, which makes the cultural and sociological study of fandom all the more important for understanding media audiences.

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## FAN CULTURES AND INTERPRETIVE ACTIVITY

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Although all audiences bring their own interpretive frameworks to popular media, the deep interest and involvement in media content demonstrated specifically by fans has attracted the close attention of scholars. Two aspects of media fandom have emerged as central to theorists in this tradition. The first element is the **social aspect**, where media fans band together in either informal or more formally structured groups (such as fan clubs) to share their mutual interest with others. Second, fans act as interpreters and producers of media content, which we will call the **interpretive aspect** of media fandom. In this section of the chapter, we will explore some of the early systematic analyses of media fans, focusing on the social and interpretive aspects of fan cultures.

### The Social Aspect of Media Fandom: Developing Communities and Subcultures

Fans occupy an interesting position in society. They participate in many of the same types of social and textual activities that most media audiences engage in, but they have traditionally existed more on the fringe of mainstream culture. Fan-related activities are built largely around a close affiliation with the popular texts at the center of the enthusiasm. Fans of popular television programs, movies, or books will often spend a great deal of time with their favorite texts, reading them closely and often repeatedly, looking for greater nuance and detail. However, audiences who are initially quite enthusiastic about their chosen media text want to do much more than simply consume the text. They want to share their passion with others, debate the finer points of the text, integrate elements of the media text into their own lives, and critique the text for any perceived deficiencies. Fans spread their enthusiasm by interacting with their peers in Internet chat groups, fan websites, and even informal and formal social gatherings. The more formal types of gathering include elaborate conventions of fans held in hotel ballrooms and (increasingly) convention centers designed to accommodate thousands of people. Harrington and Bielby’s (1995) survey of 706 TV soap opera fans demonstrates the prevalence of this social element. They found that 96% of those surveyed talked with other soap fans on a regular basis, and that 37% of that large segment talked with four or more fans about their favorite program. Similarly, Bacon-Smith’s (1992) early study of women fans of the TV science fiction program *Star Trek* focused heavily on the kinds of social community that were established through their mutual affiliation with the program.

The emergence of social groupings around a particular interest or activity is quite common. What distinguishes fans from other kinds of social groups (like stamp

collectors or golf enthusiasts, for instance) are the subjects of their admiring gaze. Fans are not maligned due to the type of individual and collective activities in which they engage (after all, sports fans are by and large celebrated in our popular media). Rather, negative perceptions arise because the materials that fans have selected to rally around are typically found on the low end of the **cultural hierarchy**. Therefore, the “ ‘scandal’ stems from the perceived merits and cultural status of these particular works rather than anything intrinsic to the fans’ behavior” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 53). The selection and fan internalization of these mainstream cultural materials into their own personal lives (by dressing up as characters from their favorite TV shows or decorating their homes or places of work with paraphernalia from popular texts) distinguishes these individuals as a unique **subculture**. Fans who outwardly and proudly claim their affiliation with their favorite popular culture texts, particularly when those media are generally considered to be “fluff” or mindless distractions from reality, may be challenging the status quo through their activities.

The notion of subcultures came into academic vogue following the 1979 publication of Dick Hebdige’s book *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. Hebdige argued that communities of punks, mods, hipsters, Rastafarians, and other groups dedicated to the specific musical genres were distinctive cultural entities unto themselves. These groups challenged the authority of traditional mainstream British culture—not through any overt political demonstrations or violent clashes with authority, per se, but through their clothing, pierced ears and noses, and other publicly visible signs (their *style*). These signs were ultimately unsettling and disruptive to the status quo. Hebdige noted that these symbolic transgressions “briefly expose the arbitrary nature of the codes which underlie and shape all forms of discourse” (Hebdige, 1979, pp. 90–91). Media fans are members of subcultures in the sense that they adopt their own linguistic codes (specialized ways of talk, unique forms of greeting and address, and the use of codenames or titles, for example) and symbolic forms (including styles of dress) that delineate them from the rest of the population. For Hebdige and other British scholars who observed and analyzed sub-cultural groups in Britain (McRobbie & Nava, 1984; Willis, 1981), such forms of cultural expression not only established a sense of self-identity for these groups, but also functioned as acts of emancipation from traditional authority. Early scholars of media fandom suggested that fans, while not necessarily posing the kind of threat to traditional cultural authority that punk music did in the 1970s and ’80s, still challenge existing hierarchies by redeeming “trashy” cultural forms like TV soap operas, science fiction programs, horror films, and mystery novels.

### **Fan Activism: Challenging Institutional Producers**

As Hebdige’s analysis suggests, the function of social interaction among fans is not merely to spur a deeper appreciation of the original text. Close-knit communities of fans can also offer direct challenges to existing authority. Fans can be mobilized to press producers and media corporations for change (or, as is more often the case, to prevent changes from coming about in a favorite media text). This kind of activism often serves as a rallying point for fan movements. The groups solidify a sense of mission and purpose



for themselves, which can have the mutually reinforcing effect of expanding their ranks. One of the clearest examples of fan activism centered on the 1960s science fiction television series *Star Trek*. The original *Star Trek* television series, which premiered on NBC on September 8, 1966, followed the exploits of the crew aboard a quasi-military spaceship called the Enterprise. The series, conceived by creator Gene Roddenberry, was designed to be a kind of western in space (Roddenberry once claimed that the program was designed to be a “*Wagon Train* to the stars,” referencing the title of a popular western program on NBC at the time) with a moral message at the end of each show. Although the program dealt with interesting groundbreaking themes and won accolades among some science fiction audiences, it was in danger of cancellation almost from the outset due to lackluster ratings.

The threat of cancellation of this new outer space TV series galvanized what was to become one of the largest and most enduring media fan movements in the world. When word of the impending cancellation of the series leaked out in 1967, both Roddenberry and a group of science fiction fans began to organize an extensive letter-writing campaign to help save the program. Two fans, John and Bjo Trimble, even wrote an advice sheet for would-be fan petitioners called “How to write Effective Letters to Save *Star Trek*.” They directed fans to send these letters to the president of NBC, to NBC affiliate TV stations, to TV columnists, and to *TV Guide* (Messenger-Davies & Pearson, 2007, p. 218). According to an NBC press release, the network received over 115,893 letters in response to the cancellation announcement—a surprisingly large response for such a small program—and NBC renewed the program for a third season. The fans were elated, with Bjo Trimble proclaiming, “And so a major triumph of the consumer public over the network and over the stupid Nielsen ratings was accomplished through advocacy letter-writing” (Trimble, 1982, p. 36). However, the fans’ victory was short-lived. In January 1969, a 50% drop-off in viewer ratings led NBC to again cancel the program, this time for good.

Despite the disappearance of the original media text from American television screens (and, indeed, because of it), the community of fans devoted to Roddenberry’s space adventure series expanded dramatically in the years following its cancellation. In February 1972, fans organized the first formal convention of *Star Trek* enthusiasts in the ballroom of New York’s Statler-Hilton Hotel. They expected several hundred attendees, and were astonished when more than 3,000 actually showed up to see many of the original cast members from the now-defunct series in person (Tulloch & Jenkins, 1995, pp. 10–11). More than 6,000 people attended the New York convention the following year, and many similar *Star Trek* conventions emerged in other cities around the country (Tulloch & Jenkins, 1995, p. 11). The success of the fan-as-activist model in the case of *Star Trek* spurred passionate followers of other television programs, including soap operas (see, for example, Baym, 2000; Harrington & Bielby, 1995; Scardaville, 2005), to form fan organizations in response to the threat of cancellation due to a program’s lack of commercial viability. However, most attempts to alter media producers’ decision making have been failures. For this reason, Tulloch and Jenkins refer to fans as a “powerless elite.” This phrase defines fans as “structurally situated between producers they have little control over and the ‘wider public’ whose continued following of the show can never be assured, but on whom the survival of the show depends” (1995, p. 145).

## Fans and Media Texts: Protecting Continuity and Canon

When fans connect to other enthusiasts through face-to-face or online interactions, they immediately share a common bond of fascination with, and knowledge of, a particular media text. Fans abandon any sort of critical distance from their favorite media. They experience these texts in a much deeper way by integrating them into their lives.<sup>1</sup> As Jenkins (1992, p. 56) notes, “The difference between watching a [television] series and becoming a fan lies in the intensity of their emotional and intellectual involvement.” Through close interpretation and re-reading of the text and spirited debates and discussions with others, fans develop an extensive repertoire of knowledge about their favorite media. Although these “trivia” details about popular media are not necessary for casual audiences to obtain entertainment from popular media, the utilization and trading of these extensive volumes of knowledge about popular texts are key sources of fan pleasure. Fan audiences may feel so connected to the narrative that they revere that they develop a sense of *ownership* over the text. This places these audience members on a head-on collision course with the producers and copyright holders, who have a vested interest in developing the characters and storylines in particular ways. When the interests of fans and media creators diverge, controversy and struggle emerge as important aspects of the media-audience relationship.

Fan audiences pay special attention to the details and nuances of their favorite texts, dissecting them with care and discussing them at length with other fans. Science fiction television, in particular, demands from viewers a willingness to understand and accept how a particular universe operates (whether it is futuristic or in another part of the galaxy with alien species) and how the characters in that universe interact with one another. Fans revel in the details of the workings of the fictional world and amass a storehouse of knowledge about the program. This information is collected from external sources like fan magazines, general interest media, blogs, chat rooms, and fan websites. Viewing favorite television programs over and over again is therefore an important aspect of fan cultures. It helps not only to internalize details about the narrative but allows individuals to experience the thrill of seeing the narrative for the first time all over again. It also allows those viewers to discuss ideas about the narrative with other fans. As Jenkins notes, “rereading is central to the fan’s aesthetic pleasure. Much of fan culture facilitates repeated encounters with favored texts” (1992, p. 69).

The result of intense fan interest in popular television shows is that the producers of those programs have to tread carefully whenever they decide to alter the fundamental outlines of the narrative or to develop characters in specific ways. An awareness of the character and plot development of a particular program is called **continuity**. Whenever the narrative introduces a new plot or character element that is somehow inconsistent with earlier stories, fans’ ire is inevitably raised. This is mostly because “the fans’ particular competence is their intimate and detailed knowledge of the show; consequently any producer or script editor who needlessly

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<sup>1</sup>There is much discussion among scholars of media fandom about what degree of involvement with media texts constitutes a “fan” of a particular text. As Hills (2002) and Sandvoss (2005) have argued, for example, the category of ‘fan’ should be expanded to include those more casual enthusiasts for particular media. Those casual fans, while not nearly as invested as the fans Jenkins (1992) outlined, nevertheless comprise the dominant share of the fan audience for popular media texts.

breaches the continuity and coherence of that knowledge is ‘insulting their intelligence’” (Tulloch & Jenkins, 1995, p. 147). In their research on fans of the long-running British science fiction series *Doctor Who*, Tulloch and Jenkins found that avid viewers were particularly critical of one episode of the program entitled “Destiny of the Daleks,” in which a Time Lord character named Romana changes her form (“regenerates”) six different times before deciding upon a new body. This regeneration of the character was prompted by a sudden shift in the casting of the program: The previous actress to play Romana had quit the production suddenly, and the producers had to scramble to find her replacement. As one fan commented,

I could never forgive Graham Williams [the executive producer] for the regeneration scene. . . . It has been clearly established that a Time Lord can only have twelve regenerations, clearly established. In many stories that fact has been stated. So how can they have some supposedly responsible female Time Lord in the TARDIS trying on about six different faces before she decides which one she wants?—which is obviously wasting six regenerations. It is just ludicrous. (Tulloch & Jenkins, 1995, p. 148)

In this case, fans’ close attention to the detail of the program quickly revealed the inconsistency in the narrative, resulting in a fan backlash against the producers of the program (see Box 8.1 for another example of fan-producer conflict due to continuity issues). Conversely, television episodes that pay homage to earlier ones or make reference to earlier plots or character histories are particularly rewarding for fans. These types of narratives encourage fans to use their extensive knowledge of the program to extract extra meaning from the text, which for them is a source of particular satisfaction and pleasure.

### Box 8.1 The Battle for *Battlestar Galactica*: A Producer-Fan Continuity Struggle

The importance of narrative continuity for fans is readily apparent in the story of the recent resurrection of the 1978 science fiction television series *Battlestar Galactica*. *Battlestar* premiered in the shadow of *Star Wars*. It was generally panned by critics at the time as an imitator, designed to benefit from the gargantuan profits being generated by the *Star Wars* franchise. The series followed the exploits of a group of human galactic wanderers, who were fleeing from hostile robots called Cylons that they had themselves created. Although the premiere of the show drew a huge audience of 65 million viewers, its popularity quickly waned, and it was canceled after only eight months on the air.

As with the series demise of the original *Star Trek*, the cancellation of *Battlestar Galactica* catalyzed the creation of fan clubs and an entire fan convention (dubbed “Galacticon”) dedicated to the program, though the size and scale of these fan efforts paled in comparison to the much larger communities connected with *Trek* and with *Star*

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*Wars*. Richard Hatch, an actor who played one of the lead roles on the series, attended his first fan convention in 1995, and was astonished by the warm reception he received from fans there. Hatch became the public face of a fan-centered movement to return *Battlestar* to the small screen. Using roughly \$30,000 of his own money and the help of other actors and cinematographers he knew (as well as some fans), he created a short promotional entitled *Battlestar Galactica: The Second Coming*. The film was meant to spark interest among television producers for a continuation of the 1970s series. The short film, featuring Hatch reprising his role as Lee Adama, premiered to wide acclaim at the 1999 Comic Convention in San Diego. Two separate productions were begun on a continuation series, but both failed to materialize, much to Hatch's dismay.

What Hatch and the *Battlestar* fans did not know was that Universal Studios had commissioned former *Star Trek: The Next Generation* writer Ron Moore to draft a completely new concept for the series in preparation for a *Battlestar* miniseries that would be broadcast on cable's SyFy Channel. The fans' triumph about the show's return was overshadowed by their gall at the fact that Richard Hatch had not been asked to participate in the project. Even worse, one of the key roles in the original series (a hot-shot, womanizing star pilot named "Starbuck") was being recast as a woman.

Fans were outraged that the characters they knew and loved from the old series were being radically redrawn by Moore and his writing staff. One New York fan started an Internet chat group called "Ron Moore Sucks" and fans participating in the forum insisted on referring to him as "MooreRon." In 2003, shortly before the premiere of the miniseries, Moore was invited to appear at the 25th Anniversary Galacticon convention to talk about the new program. Surprisingly, he accepted the invitation and the stage was set for a public showdown with the fans. According to reports, a tense and angry crowd began to boo and hiss when Moore was introduced and took the stage. They calmed only when Hatch himself stood up and praised Moore for the courage to defend his vision of the program and address fans' concerns. Eventually, Hatch accepted an invitation from Moore to appear as a recurring character on the new incarnation of *Battlestar Galactica*. Fittingly, Hatch played a former terrorist who clashes with the crew.

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Source: Hodgman, J. (2005, July17). Ron Moore's deep space journey, *The New York Times Magazine*, 32.

The notion of a **canon** is closely related to the concept of continuity. "Canon" is a term used in the study of literature to describe a group of texts that are considered significant or valuable. These works are deemed worthy due to their level of quality or because they are part of a larger corpus of work from a respected author or artist. The word was originally associated with religion, referring to a "collection or list of books of the Bible accepted by the Christian Church as genuine and inspired" (Oxford English Dictionary).

Which authors, artists, and musicians should be included in the “canon” of culturally valued material? The definition of canon is subject to debate and alteration by scholars and experts. Author and literary critic Harold Bloom generated controversy over the notion of canon when he published *The Western Canon* (1994). In this work, Bloom created a list of the most significant literary works from antiquity to the present day. Similar to scholars of historical literature and art historians, media fans engage in lively debates over which texts should be included in a canon. Fans demonstrate types of attention to detail and logic similar to that of their academic counterparts; the only difference is that fans focus on popular culture.

### Canon Wars: *Star Wars* Fans Define the Popular Text

The case of fan discussions about *Star Wars*, the successful multibillion-dollar science-fiction film franchise, demonstrates the importance of canon to those devotees. The explosion of fan enthusiasm for director George Lucas’s space saga *Star Wars* began almost immediately following the release of the first film (subtitled “A New Hope”) in 1977. As fan-turned-academic Will Brooker notes in his analysis of the *Star Wars* fan phenomenon (2002), the question of what counts as “official” or canonic *Star Wars* texts is sometimes a thorny one. Clearly, he argues, the films themselves (beginning with Episodes 4, 5, and 6 in the 1980s and continuing with the prequels in 1999) represent the official texts, against which all other films should be compared. The films form the backbone of George Lucas’s vision for the *Star Wars* universe. However, the films represent only one aspect of the larger *Star Wars* textual universe. They are supplemented by “authorized” book adaptations of the films (called “novelizations”), a series of radio dramas broadcast on NPR in the 1980s (featuring actors from the films reprising their roles), a TV special featuring the lovable furry Ewok creatures (introduced in *Return of the Jedi*), and many new novels featuring many of the same characters and situations from the films but written by outside authors (these are called the “Expanded Universe” of *Star Wars*, or EU for short). Which of these media texts, all commercially available to fans, represents the “true” story of Luke Skywalker and his intrepid band of rebels as they battle against galactic domination by the Empire? More importantly, why would fans care to answer this question?

Brooker’s analysis of online discussions among *Star Wars* fans demonstrates the importance of canon in their ongoing interpretations of the text. The specific online fan debate that Brooker examines concerns what to outsiders might seem a trivial point: Some fans wonder who coined the name of the Imperial planet-city Coruscant that appears in the *Star Wars* prequel films. Was it the brainchild of *Star Wars* creator George Lucas, or did Timothy Zahn (science fiction writer and author of the 1991 *Star Wars*-themed novel entitled *Heir to the Empire*, a part of the EU) use the name first? Fans posting to the online forums that Brooker studies take the debate quite seriously because the original creator of this story detail matters. The fact that George Lucas did not dream up “Coruscant,” if true, would imply that the name of the city might have been coined by an EU author (with no connection to the production of the films themselves) and subsequently featured in a film created by Lucas. This would in turn necessitate the elevation of Zahn’s novel to the level of canon equal to that of the films. The debate about the origin of the name was finally settled when

one fan cited an extract from a book *Star Wars: The Annotated Screenplays* (Bouzereau, 1997) which featured a quote from Lucas himself:

Of course I had a million different names for the home planet of the Empire, but Coruscant came out of publishing. Definitive proof . . . what does this say? That Coruscant was not George Lucas's name for the Imperial Homeworld? Who created the name Coruscant? Timothy Zahn! Sorry, guys, I know you take every shot you can at the EU, but you really should think before you post (Brooker, 2002, p. 110).

This exchange among *Star Wars* fans on an online bulletin board demonstrates the critical importance of both continuity and canon to media fans. First, these fans demand continuity from the *Star Wars* narrative in its many textual forms by assuming that the Imperial home planet has one official name. If there was a discrepancy in the name between the books and the films, that continuity error would certainly be a cause for reflection and debate. The issue of canon here is important because George Lucas is regarded as the most important creative force in the larger group of texts. Therefore, his input about the series all trumps others.' Clearly, fan communities thrive on interaction, discussion, and close attention to the nuances of the text itself. These interpretive activities clearly distinguish fans from more casual viewers of the *Star Wars* films.

## FANS AND TEXTUAL PRODUCTIONS

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The previous section outlined two important aspects of media fandom. First, fan audiences gather together to form communities based upon mutual interest and appreciation of their favorite media texts. Secondly, fans employ a number of deeper interpretive strategies while engaging with their favorite texts, paying close attention to continuity details in the narrative and protecting the original canon of the program against unauthorized encroachment and alteration. Many fans, however, go beyond even the close reading and interpretation of the original text. As Jenkins and many other fan culture scholars have uncovered, some audience members become inspired enough to create their own media texts using situations, settings, and characters provided by their favorite TV shows, movies, and books.

### De Certeau and Textual Poaching

Early fan scholars (particularly Jenkins, 1992; Bacon-Smith, 1992) were fascinated not only by the complex ways in which fans interpret their favorite media texts but also by the ability of these audiences to become textually *productive* in their reception practices. This productivity comes in the form of both close readings of the primary text and the material production of creative texts that use the original as "raw material" for brand-new narratives. These fans begin to transcend the traditional boundary between media production and consumption, the classic binary that distinguishes the creator or originator of a media message (the producer) from the receiver of the message (the audience).

Jenkins' early work on *Star Trek* fans utilized the theories of French scholar Michel de Certeau. In his book *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), de Certeau argued that the act of



reading a book or other literary work was akin to the practice of **poaching**. Readers temporarily inhabit the intellectual space of whatever text they are encountering, making that space their own for that brief moment. De Certeau explained that when a reader encounters a book narrative, he “insinuates into another person’s text the ruses of pleasure and appropriation: he poaches on it, is transported into it, pluralizes himself in it like the internal rumblings of one’s body. . . . A different world (the reader’s) slips into the author’s place. This mutation makes the text habitable, like a rented apartment. It transforms another person’s property into a space borrowed for a moment by a transient. . . . Reading thus introduces an ‘art’ which is anything but passive” (de Certeau, 1984, p. xxi–xxii). Like John Fiske’s notion of semiotic productivity, de Certeau’s conceptualization of the act of reading is as an inherently creative and imaginative process, full of play and “invention” within the mind of the reader. Additionally, de Certeau argued that readers are essentially “nomads” who move from one idea or text to another, continually appropriating the information and synthesizing it into new meanings. Media fans, argued Jenkins (1992, p. 37), also look across different media to construct their own creative understandings of their favorite texts since “their pleasure comes through the particular juxtapositions that they create between specific program content and other cultural materials.” For example, fans of a popular television soap opera may not limit their textual engagement to watching the program religiously every week. They might also read ancillary magazines, such as *Soap Opera Digest* or *People* magazine for insights on the characters and the actors, or even log on to chat groups and websites for more in-depth information about the show. All of these actions contribute to a deeper and more sophisticated understanding of the original text.

In his initial fan-based study, *Textual Poachers*, Jenkins (1992) also sympathized with de Certeau’s insistence that the cultural practices of one’s everyday life—including our encounters with and interpretations of popular media—could be active sites of resistance to the dominant linguistic codes built into the message. Audiences of popular texts are at an inherent disadvantage vis-à-vis institutional producers. Fans have neither access to the funds and technical resources for professional media production nor the legal control over the narratives and characters that are near and dear to their hearts (due to the often fierce protection of copyrights by producers). As Jenkins noted, “Like the poachers of old, fans operate from a position of cultural marginality and social weakness” (1992, p. 26). The repossession of the text by fans from the producers allows the former party to explore their own self-identities and to play with many of the textual elements found in their favorite popular narratives. This creates a new avenue for expanded audience autonomy vis-à-vis media texts. As Jenkins argued, fans “possess not simply borrowed remnants snatched from mass culture, but their own culture built from the semiotic raw materials the media provides” (1992, p. 49).

### Fanzines, Fanfic, and Filking: Textual Poaching in Action

The textual poaching of media fans takes many different forms. Fans in the pre-Internet age kept themselves updated on the latest developments in their media texts by producing newsletters or magazines (called “fanzines”) that were mailed by subscription to fan club members. Most of these early fanzines were primitive by today’s standards. They were typically typeset using typewriters and then photocopied and stapled together. These makeshift periodicals contained a variety of different types of content, including updates

on the activities of fan organizations, news, and other information about the original fan media text (whether it be a television program, film, or music group, to name a few), profiles of people connected with the media text, interviews, fan-created artwork, and even original fictional stories written by fans themselves. Today, these paper-and-ink fan connections have been largely supplanted by the Internet, which allows individual fans and fan organizations to easily create websites with news, information, creative content, and links to a myriad of other content choices related to the primary media text.

One aspect of fans' creativity that scholars find most interesting is the original stories written by fans about their favorite media texts. Called **fan fiction** or **fanfic**, these short stories often feature existing characters from favorite fan texts, or are written in the creative universe of the original text. There are numerous fanfic genres, all of which are extensions of the original. For example, some fans choose to "fill in" existing gaps in the narrative of their favorite TV shows or movies by writing extensive backstories of characters, or describing encounters between characters that were not seen on the screen. Alternatively, some fanfic expands the timeline of the original text by suggesting what happened to some of the main characters before or after the events that transpired within the existing narrative. Fans enjoy expanding the plot or rewriting endings of their favorite media texts, particularly when they are dissatisfied with the choices of the official writers or producers of the text (Jenkins, 1992, pp. 164–165; see Figure 8.3 for a complete list of narrative styles in fan fiction).

Two genres of fan fiction exist on the margins of fan communities due to their rather controversial nature. First, some fans enjoy breaking down the wall between the narrative and the audience by inserting themselves (or a character who is clearly similar to the fan-author) into the story to interact with figures from the popular text. In her research on women *Star Trek* fans in the 1980s, Bacon-Smith (1992, p. 53) described these fanfics as "**Mary Sue**" stories, "in which a very young heroine, often in her teens and possessing genius, intelligence, great beauty, and a charmingly impish personality, joins the heroes either on the bridge of the starship or on the streets with the spies or police. She generally resolves the conflict of the story, saves the lives of the protagonists who have grown to love her, but dies heroically in the process." Although these types of personalized stories fulfill fan desires, this particular fanfic genre has been the subject of fierce backlash within fan communities, who consider these writings to be hackneyed and juvenile. Even more controversial is "**slash**" fiction, or fan stories that explore sexual relationships among the main characters that fall well beyond the purview of mainstream popular cultural texts. In the *Star Trek* fan universe, "slash" fiction refers to stories that detail an intense emotional and sexual relationship between the two primary male characters in the program, Captain James Kirk and Vulcan Science Officer Spock. These Kirk/Spock romances (or "K/S" for short) are written largely by women for women audiences. "Slash" fiction such as K/S stories challenge the existing gender boundaries of the popular text itself by introducing the notion of homosexuality into a mainstream, heterosexual narrative.

Another common form of fan textual production is **filking**, the process of fan music-making. Fans write poems or lyrics, which are then either left in textual form or set to original music. The subjects of filk music are similar to the narrative styles of fanfic outlined in Figure 8.3, with many lyrics expanding the narrative timeline or focusing on minor characters of the existing text. Jenkins (1992) describes filking sessions at *Star Trek* conventions, in which fans perform original songs for one another. The *Star Trek* fans also sing

**Figure 8.3** Narrative Styles in Fan Fiction

<i>Fan Fiction Type</i>	<i>Definition</i>
1. Recontextualization	Short stories or “missing scenes” that fill in gaps in the existing media text (TV program, film, etc.)
2. Expanding the series timeline	Explores characters’ backgrounds or rewrites unpopular endings to the existing media narrative
3. Refocalization	Shifts the focus away from central characters to focus on secondary, minor, or one-off characters (often women and minorities)
4. Moral realignment	Inverts the moral universe of the original narrative; villains are transformed into protagonists with their own narratives
5. Genre shifting	Changing the primary genre of the narrative (transforming science fiction into mystery or romance, for example)
6. Crossovers	Blurring boundaries between distinct media texts; introducing characters from one media narrative into another
7. Character dislocation	Main characters are removed from their original situations and given alternative names, identities, and milieus
8. Personalization	Fan writers write themselves into their favorite media narratives; “Mary Sue” stories
9. Emotional intensification	Explore psychological motivations of main characters, focusing on moments of crisis; “hurt-comfort” stories
10. Eroticization	Explore characters’ sexuality and sexual encounters not seen in the primary narrative; K/S stories or “slash” fiction

Source: Adapted from Jenkins, H. (1992). *Textual poachers: Television fans and participatory culture*. London: Routledge.

together “classic” filk tunes that have achieved renown within the fan community and form the basis of a shared filking culture. Following performances, filk singers may ask the audience if the lyrics need to be explained, thereby cementing the role of filking as both an individual creative and community-building fan activity.

The purposes of fanfic and filking are not simply to allow fans to expand their experiences with their favorite texts beyond the initial reception. Rather, the circulation of stories between fan authors allows them to give supportive feedback and critiques to one another, cementing a strong sense of community. The goal of writing original fan stories and music is altogether distinct from mainstream publishing. Instead of selling stories to audiences (something anathema within fan cultures), fans freely distribute their creative efforts to others in order to (1) support the larger fan community and (2) to exercise their own imaginations regarding their favorite characters and situations from media texts. Bacon-Smith (1992), writing about

groups of women *Star Trek* fans who circulate stories among themselves, noted that traditional notions of proprietary authorship found in literary communities are not operative among these fan groups. Instead, she argued, these women fan-writers “value their workmanship in the community but place little or no emphasis on the concept of ‘auteur’ as solitary creator of an aesthetically unique piece of art. In the fan community, fiction creates the community” (Bacon-Smith, 1992, p. 57). In this sense, popular cultural texts allow fans not only to exchange ideas and explore alternative character and narrative developments, but also to develop a unique sense of community around the distribution and consumption of these texts. The women that Bacon-Smith interviewed in her research reported that the expressive potential of their fan productions also gave them an increased sense of autonomy in a society that often pushes concerns of women to the margins. As we can see from the numerous examples in this section, the first wave of fan studies catalogued and celebrated the potential of fan production to transcend existing social hierarchies and boundaries.

## **FANS AND CULTURAL HIERARCHY: THE LIMITS OF TEXTUAL REINTERPRETATION**

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Let’s pause for a moment and take stock of the various notions of fandom that we have been exploring thus far in this chapter. First, fans are distinguished from the rest of the audience through their intense interest and dedication to specific popular media. Fans expend extra time and interpretive energy on popular or “throwaway” media and seek out others who are like them to form social bonds of community via their shared enthusiasm for a particular television program, film, music group, or sport. Scholarship on fans in the late 1980s and early 1990s made special note of the ways in which fans turned their media consumption into the creative *production* of new texts, based upon audience members’ intense admiration for popular media. Scholars such as Henry Jenkins and Camille Bacon-Smith discovered that fans of popular TV programs like *Star Trek* were far from being passive consumers of media. These active individuals produced their own newsletters, fictional stories, artwork, poems, and songs and shared them with other fans at local meet-ups, conventions, and other social gatherings. These scholars viewed fan participation as more than a simple pastime or hobby; it was a kind of liberation from the traditionally passive role played by the audience. This overview of fan audiences can be described as the first wave of fan scholarship.

The second wave of fan studies in the late 1990s looked back somewhat critically at initial claims by Jenkins, Bacon-Smith, Fiske and other scholars that deep engagement with popular culture constituted a fundamental challenge to the existing status quo. These early scholars, themselves fans of specific popular cultural forms, were intent on rehabilitating the notion of fandom from negative stereotypes by aesthetic “elites.” However, scholars in the mid-1990s began to train a critical eye back on the notion of fandom itself, looking specifically at the ways in which the attitudes and behaviors of fans may be unwittingly reproducing many of the same cultural, gender, and economic hierarchies that they were attempting to escape from in the mainstream. The second wave moved beyond the “incorporation/resistance” dichotomy and focused more on the “sociology of consumption” of popular texts by audiences (Gray et al., 2007, p. 6).

## Pierre Bourdieu and the Sociology of Cultural Consumption

The theoretical touchstone for many of these scholars was the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. In his most well-known work, entitled *Distinction* (translated into English in 1984), Bourdieu played on the notion of his book's title to make a specific argument about class positions in modern societies. Bourdieu (1984) observed that class "distinctions" among individuals were not only linked to their economic capital (as Marxist scholars had argued), but were also connected to their social, educational, and cultural capital. Individuals place their class status on display, he wrote, via their *taste* or consumption patterns (in essence, what makes us individually "distinct" from other individuals in society). Taste, in turn, is a function of the **habitus**, which is a complex function of an individual's social, cultural, and economic capital. The habitus "includes the notion of a habitat, the habitants and the processes of inhabiting it, and the habituating ways of thinking that go with it. It encompasses our position within the social space, the ways of living that go with it and what Bourdieu calls the associated 'dispositions' of mind, cultural tastes and ways of thinking and feeling" (Fiske, 1992, p. 32). For instance, a college-educated, middle-class individual might purchase tickets to the opera rather than a vaudeville show because doing so is a clear distinct reminder of that person's social status. It serves as a tool of self-identity and also provides a visible indicator to others of one's place in the social hierarchy. Bourdieu (1984) proposed that consumption behaviors, rather than comprising a statement of emancipation from social norms, were inextricably linked to the habitus. Bourdieu sought to connect those sociological variables to the consumption of specific cultural products (such styles of furniture or types of music).

How might Bourdieu's theories map onto our discussion of fans and their activities? The second wave of fan research used Bourdieu's analysis as the theoretical backbone to understand the specific cultural consumption patterns of popular media fans and to explore the extent to which those patterns challenged or reaffirmed existing cultural hierarchies in society. Early studies of fans detailed the ways in which fan celebrations of popular media were potentially liberating, in that these activities distanced fans from the more commercial aspects of popular culture. Rather than regarding the TV program *Bewitched* (for example) as filler fluff to keep viewers tuned in between commercial breaks, fans treated TV texts with the same level of interpretive thoughtfulness and reverence that one might assign to a Proust novel or the plays of Shakespeare. However, as second wave fan scholars argue, enthusiasm for popular media is not universal. Fans actively choose and discriminate (in the neutral sense of the term) among and between different types of popular media. These audience subsets can be some of the harshest critics of their favorite programs and movies, particularly when they are disappointed by a popular text or its creators. Questions asked by second wave fan studies scholars address the social positioning of fans vis-à-vis mainstream or "official" culture, and whether the potential of fan cultures to challenge the existing status quo is realized in specific settings.

### Second Wave Fan Studies: The Reproduction of Economic and Social Hierarchies

The enthusiasm and care with which fans interpret popular texts suggests a challenge to the consumer-oriented nature of TV shows, movies, and music. How much do fans truly

extricate themselves from the capitalist orientation of popular media through their interpretive activities? Recent fan scholarship has reexamined fan practices in light of Bourdieu's theories. Contrary to earlier fan research, later studies have found some close parallels between the distinct cultural world of fans and those of mainstream or "official" culture. Although popular media fans may occupy the lower end of the economic capital spectrum, these individuals may nevertheless mimic aspects of official culture by adopting many similar practices. As Fiske (1992, p. 45) notes, "Capitalist societies are built upon accumulation and investment, and this is as true of their cultural as well as financial economies. The shadow economy of fan culture in many ways parallels the workings of the official culture, but it adapts them to the habitus of the subordinate." **Collecting**, for example, is a prominent pastime for both wealthy art patrons and comic book aficionados. The primary difference is that oil paintings are quite expensive and valued according to the perceived talents of the artist (hence, uniqueness and originality are key), while popular cultural materials are comparatively cheap to procure and are not valued for their uniqueness. You might imagine that fan collecting is all about amassing the largest possible collection, rather than focusing on the distinctiveness of each piece (Fiske, 1992).

The case of comic book collectors demonstrates the partial falsehood of the "more is better" theory of fan collectors. In a 1997 in-depth study of comic book collectors, Jeffrey Brown discovered that these individuals had a highly sophisticated system for "valuing" comic books that often directly mimicked the appraisal practices found among official or "high culture" art critics. Rather than wantonly purchasing as many comic books as their pocketbooks will allow, serious comic book collectors developed the "ability to distinguish between objects of worth and worthlessness, a knowledge of important canonical features, and a substantiation of 'good taste'" (Brown, 1997, p. 23). For comic book fans, acquiring a taste for "good" comics involved discriminating between individual authors, comic artists, and characters (and different versions of the characters), as well as developing an awareness of the history of a specific character or title. Serious collectors also made it a point to acquire "canonical texts," or rare and significant comic strips such as the first issue of *Action Comics* (in which the character of Superman was introduced). This particular issue has been recently valued at \$100,000 or more, which shows how the economic hierarchies of comic fandom can closely mirror those of official or "high" cultural artifacts like painting or sculpture. Comic collectors also perform the role of "experts" in their field and distinguish among themselves according to both their level of knowledge about comics and their personal collections of rare and unique comic books. This again calls into question the independence of fan cultures from existing economic hierarchies in society.

Another key aspect of fan cultures outlined in the early research of Jenkins and Bacon-Smith was the sense of camaraderie and cohesion among groups of fans. Brought together by their common interests in a TV program or music group, fan communities were viewed as socially "safe" spaces where individuals could celebrate culturally devalued texts without fear of social reprisals or ridicule. No fan at a *Star Trek* convention would raise an eyebrow at another fan who chose to dress in a costume from the program or to spend time writing fan fiction for the consumption of only a small circle of interested readers. However, as the traditional boundaries of media fandom expanded dramatically with the rise of the Internet in the 1990s, scholars began to "explode" the definition of a fan to include a wide variety of activities that occupy a much larger proportion of the



population (see, for example, Hills, 2002; Sandvoss, 2005). Far from the image of the socially awkward, marginalized *Star Trek* fans of the late 1980s, 21st century fandom is becoming a much more common phenomenon.<sup>2</sup> The new age of audience engagement and enthusiasm requires a scholarly analysis to take a somewhat different approach. While Bourdieu isolated class as the central dividing line between different strata of the population (and thus, their habitus and cultural consumption habits), some scholars have questioned this premise, arguing that notions of gender, race (Fiske, 1992), and social network (Erickson, 1996) play a more central role in structuring fans' social position in society.

More recent fan scholarship, pushing aside the sense of community that early fan scholars found so compelling, takes note of the darker side of **fan identity and group cohesion**. A group will create exclusivity and difference in order to enhance its self-definition and to give it purpose and coherence. In this respect, fan cultures are no different from the mainstream in the sense that fan groups will often create clear boundaries between casual fans or enthusiasts and “real” fans. As Fiske (1992, p. 35) noted, “Textual and social discrimination are part and parcel of the same cultural activity.” Jancovich (2002), for example, focused on “cult” film fans, closely examining their self-identity in contrast to the mainstream. He found that the “subcultural identity which underpins cult movies fandom not only celebrates the unwatchable and/or unobtainable—that which is by definition usually unpleasurable or inaccessible to most viewers—but how this emerges from a need to produce and protect a sense of rarity and exclusivity” (Jancovich, 2002, p. 309). By creating an artificial boundary and castigating others who chose to spend their time watching mainstream Hollywood films, cult film fans carved out a specific group identity for themselves. Sarah Thornton (1996) noticed in her influential study of club culture in the early 1990s that even among members of the young “counterculture” who frequented raves and other dance clubs, those with higher discretionary incomes (often identified as “hip” or “authentic” due to the specific styles of clothing they were wearing) more easily gained entrée into these establishments. The club scene was not immune to racial hierarchies and discrimination, either. Some clubs, for example, made it a consistent practice to limit the number of Black males that were allowed in. As these second wave fan scholars have demonstrated, “escaping” into the world of popular media often does not mean that individuals are escaping the systems of discrimination and power that define the society at large. Instead, these systems of hierarchy are re-created or reconstituted in slightly different forms by fan cultures.

## CONCLUSION: FANS, CREATIVITY, AND CULTURAL HIERARCHY

In this chapter, we have extended the notion of audience interpretations of media to focus on fan cultures. Unlike more casual audiences for popular media, fans invest extraordinary amounts of time and interpretive energy in their media consumption. In doing so, they blur the traditional boundary between media producers and audiences. Fans of science fiction

<sup>2</sup>Indeed, it is likely you may consider yourself a “fan” of multiple types of popular culture, whether it be a musical group, a sports team, a TV show, or a particular actor or actress. The phrase “being a fan of . . .” has even been integrated into the prominent social networking website Facebook, which allows users to publicly display their fandom(s) for each of their online friends.

television programs like *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* carefully interpret the original texts in the same way as a scholar might examine ancient manuscripts for nuance and detail, take possession of the texts, and integrate them into their own lives. For some scholars, the very act of taking television, movies, and popular music seriously is evidence that fan cultures are challenging the dominant message of the original text by liberating themselves from the commercial nature of mass culture. Fans also develop social networks through their mutual interest in popular media and become involved in their own cultural productions such as newsletters, fan fictional writing, online websites, and other types of creativity. This suggests a level of intelligence and playfulness with popular media, which belies the passivity that is often associated with media audiences.

We have also explored some of the scholarly debates about the role of popular media fans in our understanding of the mass media audience. Early fan research centered on legitimizing both the scholarship of fandom and fandom itself by destigmatizing fans' activities and emphasizing the autonomy of fans over the popular media. The second wave of research critically examined these initial assumptions. As one scholar argued recently, "Cultural analyses of fandom may have erred in too readily accepting fans' individualist self-conception as the price to be paid for dislodging prevailing negative stereotypes and for establishing fandom as a legitimate topic for academic inquiry" (Murray, 2004, p. 20). The second wave used the theories of Pierre Bourdieu to focus on the ways in which fan cultures mimic or reproduce existing class, gender, racial, and cultural hierarchies that exist in mainstream culture. Although these debates continue in scholarly circles, it is clear that the Internet and newer forms of technology are rapidly altering the landscape for media audiences by expanding their ability to interact both with popular texts and one another. In the next chapter, we will concentrate on the future of media audiences in a world where continual, recursive forms of feedback have become commonplace. In this new online, interactive world, where does the text end and the audience begin?

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## DISCUSSION ACTIVITIES

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1. To get an up close look at fan communities, you need look no further than the Internet. Try logging on to one or more of the fan-based forums and chat groups listed below. As you read through the bulletin board postings from users, think about the following questions:
  - Do you see examples of fan textual interpretations here? (Think about continuity, canon, reinterpretations of the content, or expressions of textual competency)
  - Do you see examples of the integration of popular texts into fans' everyday lives? (Think about meeting for fan conventions, group meetings, website development, or even fan fiction)
  - Do you see evidence of any discussions that touch upon social hierarchies or issues of race, gender, or class?

*Star Trek* Fan Forums: <http://www.startrek.com/boards>

<http://www.fanforum.com/f89/>

*Star Wars* Fan Forums: <http://boards.theforce.net/>

2. To access another good source of fan discourse, tune in to a local sports talk radio station in your community or log on to a website that allows fans to play fantasy football or fantasy baseball. In the discourse among sports fans, do you hear or see any similarities to or differences from what you read in this chapter about fans of science fiction television? Write down some of your observations and discuss them with the class.
3. As the chapter outlined, comic book fans sometimes reproduce cultural and economic hierarchies through their comic book collecting activities. Head down to a local comic book store and take a look at the types of comics being sold, paying special attention to those comic book issues that may be found behind locked glass window cases. You might also engage the proprietor or owner of the store in conversation about why certain issues of a comic book are more expensive than others. What kinds of fan knowledge about comic books are on display and how is the business of comic collecting similar to the collecting of other artifacts in society?

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