

temporary filk recordings and required further studio work to conform to audience expectations. Firebird is actively seeking a "break-through" tape to attract a broader audience for filk and sees such professionalism as necessary for expanding the market for their releases. The semiprofessional concerns have been far less willing than the original fan producers to risk violations of copyright law, refusing to allow direct references to media characters or the use of songs not in the public domain. Some filkers have reworded their original media-related songs to give them a more generic quality. Others have written new songs, songs which borrow generic features from science fiction without directly evoking specific copyrighted texts. Filk, built from fragments borrowed nomadically from other media commodities, now runs the risk of itself becoming another commodity as segments of the filk community feud over the proprietorship of songs and the percentage of return each artist will receive.

While criticized by some, others stress the degree to which these semiprofessional concerns remain deeply rooted within the fan community. As Leslie Fish explains, "There is no distinct division between 'professional' and 'amateur' filksinging, since the only way to advertize filk music tapes is to print ads in fan magazines and to go to the convention filksings and sing the songs before live audiences" (Personal Correspondence, 1990). Filk's chances of reaching a large audience is limited both by its subject matter, which appeals to the specialized knowledge of the fan community, and its musical conventions, which emphasize spirited singing over refined voices. Most filkers stress that filk will necessarily remain somewhat tied to its folk cultural origins, even as the development of semiprofessional filk companies may alter its economic base. The future of filk will, thus, like its history, be a complex one, torn between its roots in folk cultural traditions and its ties to commercial cultural materials, originating within the fan community and yet sold back to that community as a commodity.

## CONCLUSION

### "In My Weekend-Only World . . .": Reconsidering Fandom

In an hour of make-believe  
In these warm convention halls  
My mind is free to think  
And feels so deeply  
An intimacy never found  
Inside their silent walls  
In a year or more  
Of what they call reality.

In my weekend-only world,  
That they call make-believe,  
Are those who share  
The visions that I see.  
In their real-time life  
That they tell me is real,  
The things they care about  
Aren't real to me.

(T. J. Burnside Clapp  
"Weekend-Only World" 1987,  
Fesarius Publications)

"Get a life," William Shatner told *Star Trek* fans. "I already have a life," the fans responded, a life which was understood both in terms of its normality by the standards of middle-class culture and by its difference from that culture. This book maps some major dimensions of that "life." If fans are often represented as antisocial, simple-minded, and obsessive, I wanted to show the complexity and diversity of fandom as a subcultural community.

This account offers a conception of fandom that encompasses at least five levels of activity:

a. Fandom involves a particular mode of reception. Fan viewers watch television texts with close and undivided attention, with

a mixture of emotional proximity and critical distance. They view them multiple times, using their videotape players to scrutinize meaningful details and to bring more and more of the series narrative under their control. They translate the reception process into social interaction with other fans. John Fiske (1991) distinguishes between semiotic productivity (the popular construction of meanings at the moment of reception) and enunciative productivity (the articulation of meaning through dress, display, and gossip). For the fan, this otherwise theoretically useful distinction breaks down since the moment of reception is often also the moment of enunciation (as is literally true within the group viewing situations described here). Making meanings involves sharing, enunciating, and debating meanings. For the fan, watching the series is the beginning, not the end, of the process of media consumption.

b. Fandom involves a particular set of critical and interpretive practices. Part of the process of becoming a fan involves learning the community's preferred reading practices. Fan criticism is playful, speculative, subjective. Fans are concerned with the particularity of textual detail and with the need for internal consistency across the program episodes. They create strong parallels between their own lives and the events of the series. Fan critics work to resolve gaps, to explore excess details and undeveloped potentials. This mode of interpretation draws them far beyond the information explicitly present and toward the construction of a meta-text that is larger, richer, more complex and interesting than the original series. The meta-text is a collaborative enterprise; its construction effaces the distinction between reader and writer, opening the program to appropriation by its audience.

c. Fandom constitutes a base for consumer activism. Fans are viewers who speak back to the networks and the producers, who assert their right to make judgments and to express opinions about the development of favorite programs. Fans know how to organize to lobby on behalf of endangered series, be they *Twin Peaks* fans exploiting the computer networks to rally support for a show on the verge of cancellation or *Beauty and the Beast* fans directing anger against a producer who violated their basic assumptions about the program. Fandom originates, at least in part, as a response to the relative powerlessness of the consumer in relation to powerful institutions of cultural production and circulation. Critics claim that fans are little more than an extension of the market logic of commercial broadcasting, a commodity audience created and courted

by the culture industries (Tulloch and Jenkins, forthcoming). Such a position is false to the reality fans experience when they come into contact with systems of cultural production: media corporations do indeed market to fans, target them for program merchandizing, create official fan organizations that work to regularize audience responses, and send speakers to conventions to promote new works or to squash unwanted speculations. Yet network executives and producers are often indifferent, if not overtly hostile, to fan opinion and distrustful of their input into the production process. Fan response is assumed to be unrepresentative of general public sentiment and therefore unreliable as a basis for decisions. The media conglomerates do not want fans who make demands, second-guess creative decisions and assert opinions; they want regular viewers who accept what they are given and buy what they are sold. Official fan organizations generate and maintain the interests of regular viewers and translate them into a broader range of consumer purchases; i.e., spinoff products, soundtracks, novelizations, sequels, etc. Fandom (i.e., the unofficial fan community) provides a base from which fans may speak about their cultural preferences and assert their desires for alternative developments.

d. Fandom possesses particular forms of cultural production, aesthetic traditions and practices. Fan artists, writers, videomakers, and musicians create works that speak to the special interests of the fan community. Their works appropriate raw materials from the commercial culture but use them as the basis for the creation of a contemporary folk culture. Fandom generates its own genres and develops alternative institutions of production, distribution, exhibition, and consumption. The aesthetic of fan art celebrates creative use of already circulating discourses and images, an art of evoking and regulating the heteroglossia of television culture.

The nature of fan creation challenges the media industry's claims to hold copyrights on popular narratives. Once television characters enter into a broader circulation, intrude into our living rooms, pervade the fabric of our society, they belong to their audience and not simply to the artists who originated them. Media texts, thus, can and must be remade by their viewers so that potentially significant materials can better speak to the audience's cultural interests and more fully address their desires.

Fan art as well stands as a stark contrast to the self-interested motivations of mainstream cultural production; fan artists create artworks to share with other fan friends. Fandom generates systems

of distribution that reject profit and broaden access to its creative works. As Jeff Bishop and Paul Hoggett have written about sub-cultural communities organized around common enthusiasms or interests, "The values. . . are radically different from those embedded within the formal economy; they are values of reciprocity and interdependence as opposed to self-interest, collectivism as opposed to individualism, the importance of loyalty and a sense of 'identity' or 'belonging' as opposed to the principle of forming ties on the basis of calculation, monetary or otherwise" (Bishop and Hoggett 1986, 53). Fanzines are most often sold at cost; the circuit stories are made available for fans to make their own copies; fan videos are exchanged on a tape-for-tape basis; filk songs traditionally circulated through word-of-mouth. There is evidence that these practices are beginning to change—and not necessarily for the better. Witness the emergence of semiprofessional publishers of zines and distributors of filktapes, discussed in the previous chapter, yet even these companies originate within the fan community and reflect a desire to achieve a better circulation of its cultural products.

Fandom recognizes no clear-cut line between artists and consumers; all fans are potential writers whose talents need to be discovered, nurtured, and promoted and who may be able to make a contribution, however modest, to the cultural wealth of the larger community. In researching this book, I spoke to many who had discovered skills and abilities that they had not recognized before entering fandom; they received there the encouragement they had found lacking from their interactions with other institutions. They often gained subsequent opportunities on the basis of these developed skills.

e. Fandom functions as an alternative social community. The song lyrics that open this chapter, like the filk songs discussed in the previous chapter, capture something essential about fandom, its status as a utopian community. "Weekend-Only World" expresses the fans' recognition that fandom offers not so much as an escape from reality as an alternative reality whose values may be more humane and democratic than those held by mundane society. T. J. Burnside Clapp contrasts the intimacy and communalism of fandom to the alienation and superficiality of mundane life:

I see them daily, months on end.  
The surface all I see.  
Do they hold the things in their hearts

That I do in mine?  
We talk of mortgages and sports  
And what's new on T.V.  
But we grow no closer  
With the passing time.

T. J. Burnside Clapp,  
"Weekend-Only World", 1987,  
Fesarius Publications

She can spend far less time in the company of fans, in that "weekend-only world" of the con, yet she has "lived a lifetime in those few but precious hours" and has felt closeness to many who were strangers before fandom brought them together. She gains power and identity from the time she spends within fan culture; fandom allows her to maintain her sanity in the face of the indignity and alienation of everyday life: "It keeps me safe through weeks so long between."

Writers such as Hans Magnus Enzensberger (1974), Frederic Jameson (1979) and Richard Dyer (1985), have pointed toward the utopian dimension of popular culture; its appeal to the consumer is linked to its ability to offer symbolic solutions to real world problems and felt needs. Jameson has shown how mass-culture texts must evoke and manage social and political anxieties and fantasies. Traces of these countercultural impulses remain present, even within texts that otherwise seem reactionary: "Genuine social and historical content must first be tapped and given some initial expression if it is subsequently to be the object of successful manipulation and containment" (Jameson 1979, 144). Richard Dyer has similarly argued that entertainment offers us an "image of something better" than the realm of everyday experience; entertainment gratifies because it holds open the imagined possibility of satisfying spectators' actual lacks and desires. Entertainment, Dyer asserts, teaches us "what utopia would feel like" (Dyer 1985, 222). In a discussion of the American musical, Dyer contrasts popular entertainment with real-world problems: popular entertainment promises abundance instead of scarcity, energy instead of exhaustion, intensity instead of dreariness, transparency instead of manipulation, community instead of fragmentation. Science fiction has often been discussed as providing readers with the image of a better world, an alternative future, an ideal against which to measure contemporary life but also a refuge from drudgery and constraint (Lefanu, 1988).

Fan culture finds that utopian dimension within popular culture a site for constructing an alternative culture. Its society is responsive to the needs that draw its members to commercial entertainment, most especially the desire for affiliation, friendship, community. Mass culture provides many images of such a world—the tunnel community of *Beauty and the Beast*, the expanded family of the Enterprise Crew, the political commitment of the Liberator, the ideal partnership of countless cop shows, the merry men of Sherwood Forest, the dedicated members of the Blackwood project. The characters in these programs devote their lives to goals worth pursuing and share their hours with friends who care for them more than life itself. The fans are drawn to these shows precisely because of the vividness and intensity of those relationships; those characters remain the central focus of their critical interpretations and artworks.

Life, all too often, falls far short of those ideals. Fans, like all of us, inhabit a world where traditional forms of community life are disintegrating, the majority of marriages end in divorce, most social relations are temporary and superficial, and material values often dominate over emotional and social needs. Fans are often people who are overeducated for their jobs, whose intellectual skills are not challenged by their professional lives. Fans react against those unsatisfying situations, trying to establish a “weekend-only world” more open to creativity and accepting of differences, more concerned with human welfare than with economic advance. Fandom, too, falls short of those ideals; the fan community is sometimes rife with feuds and personality conflicts. Here, too, one finds those who are self-interested and uncharitable, those who are greedy and rude, yet, unlike mundane reality, fandom remains a space where a commitment to more democratic values may be renewed and fostered. Noncommunal behavior is read negatively, as a violation of the social contract that binds fans together and often becomes the focus of collective outrage.

Nobody can live permanently within this utopia, which becomes recognizable as such only against the backdrop of mundane life; fans must come and go from fandom, finding this “weekend-only world” where they can, enjoying it for as long as possible, before being forced to return to the workaday world. Within the few short hours they spend each month interacting with other fans, they find something more than the superficial relationships and shoddy values

of consumer culture. They find a space that allows them to discover “what utopia feels like.”

In a telling critique of the politics of postmodernism, Lawrence Grossberg notes that while we often think of political resistance in negative terms—as a rejection or repudiation of existing conditions—it may also have a more positive or celebratory dimension:

Opposition may be constituted by living, even momentarily, within alternative practices, structures and spaces, even though they may take no notice of their relationship to existing systems of power. In fact, when one wins some space within the social formation, it has to be filled with something, presumably something one cares for passionately. . . . And it is here that questions of desire and pleasure must be raised as more than secondary epiphenomena. (Grossberg 1988, 169–170)

Fandom constitutes such a space, one defined by its refusal of mundane values and practices, its celebration of deeply held emotions and passionately embraced pleasures. Fandom’s very existence represents a critique of conventional forms of consumer culture. Yet fandom also provides a space within which fans may articulate their specific concerns about sexuality, gender, racism, colonialism, militarism, and forced conformity. These themes regularly surface within fan discussions and fan artworks. Fandom contains both negative and positive forms of empowerment. Its institutions allow the expression both of what fans are struggling against and what they are struggling for; its cultural products articulate the fans’ frustration with their everyday life as well as their fascination with representations that pose alternatives.

In making this claim, I am not asserting that fandom necessarily represents a progressive force or that the solutions fans propose are ideologically consistent and coherent. A poached culture, a nomadic culture, is also a patchwork culture, an impure culture, where much that is taken in remains semidigested and ill-considered. As Grossberg asserts, a politics of consumption:

does not say that people always struggle or that when they do, they do so in ways we condone. But it does say, both theoretically and politically, that people are never merely passively subordinated, never totally manipulated, never entirely incorporated. People are engaged in struggles with,

within and sometimes against real tendential forces and determinations in their efforts to appropriate what they are given. Consequently, their relations to particular practices and texts are complex and contradictory: they may win something in the struggle against sexism and lose something in the struggle against economic exploitation; they may both gain and lose something economically; and although they lose ideological ground, they may win some emotional strength. (Grossberg 1988, 169-170)

The irony, of course, is that fans have found the very forces that work to isolate us from each other to be the ideal foundation for creating connections across traditional boundaries; that fans have found the very forces that transform many Americans into spectators to provide the resources for creating a more participatory culture; that fans have found the very forces that reinforce patriarchal authority to contain tools by which to critique that authority. We should not be surprised that in doing so, fans absorb much that we as leftist academics may find aesthetically dubious and politically suspect. What is surprising, particularly in the face of some fifty years of critical theories that would indicate otherwise, is that fans find the ability to question and rework the ideologies that dominate the mass culture they claim as their own. A character in Lizzie Bordan's *Born in Flames* describes political alchemy as "the process of turning shit into gold"; if this claim is true, there may be no better alchemists on the planet than fans.

I am not claiming that there is anything particularly empowering about the texts fans embrace. I am, however, claiming that there is something empowering about what fans do with those texts in the process of assimilating them to the particulars of their lives. Fandom celebrates not exceptional texts but rather exceptional readings (though its interpretive practices makes it impossible to maintain a clear or precise distinction between the two).

This is a book about fans and fan culture. It is not about the media industry and it is not about popular texts. I have no particular objections to studying these topics and have done so on other occasions; both seem necessary to a full understanding of mass culture and media consumption. Only by analyzing the structures of the primary text can we fully understand what fan interpretation contributes in the process of appropriating these programs for their own uses (thus, for example, my account of *Beauty and the Beast* ac-

knowledges generic features of the program and aspects of its production history as well as the categories by which fan critics evaluated and interpreted it). Only by locating the market conditions that block fan access to the means of mass cultural production can we understand the political dimensions of their relationship with the media. I am not privileging the fan here, because I want to decenter the text or even prioritize consumption over production. Indeed, my hope is that fan critical practice may provide a model for a more specifically drawn, more exploratory and speculative style of media criticism: one alive to the pleasures of the text but retaining some critical distance from its ideological structures. What I want to reject is a tradition that reads the audience from the structures of the text or in terms of the forms of consumption generated by the institutions of production and marketing. What I want to challenge is the tendency to create a theoretical fiction that masks rather than illuminates the actual complexities of audience-text relations.

Media theorists have always made claims about the audience. What audience research contributes to this debate, then, is not the focus on the audience but rather a reconsideration of the most productive methods for making meaningful generalizations about the nature and character of audience response. Media scholars cannot help but talk about the audience in relationship to media culture; the question is what types of audience(s) we will talk about and whether they will be allowed to talk back. Much of what passes for critical theory lacks even the most rudimentary grounding in empirical reality, drawing its assumptions about spectatorship through a combination of personal introspection and borrowed authority. The result is a curious theory that cannot be tested and must be taken on blind faith. I question what forms of popular power can be founded on theories that require our unquestioning acceptance of hierarchical knowledge and which become accessible only to an educated elite.

The problem I confronted upon entering media studies, having already spent a number of years in the company of fans, was that the dominant conceptions of television spectatorship seemed radically at odds with my own experience of the media. The sweeping claims of ideological critics were totally implausible in their dismissal of popular readers as positioned by the text and unable to resist its demands. Such approaches cannot begin to account for the

writing and circulation of fanzines or the mixture of fascination and frustration that runs through fan discourse. As Ien Ang writes:

Ethnographic work, in the sense of drawing on what we can perceive and experience in everyday settings, acquires its critical mark when it functions as a reminder that reality is always more complicated and diversified than our theories can represent, and that there is no such thing as 'audience' whose characteristics can be set once and for all. The critical promise of the ethnographic attitude resides in its potential to make and keep our interpretations sensitive to the concrete specificities, to the unexpected, to history. . . . What matters is not the certainty of knowledge about audiences, but an ongoing critical and intellectual engagement with the multifarious ways in which we constitute ourselves through media consumption. (Ang 1990, 110)

In other words, ethnography may not have the power to construct theories, but it can disprove them or at least challenge and refine them. While I have drawn on theory as a tool for understanding fandom as a set of cultural, social, and interpretive practices, I have not drawn upon fandom as a means of developing a new theory of media consumption. I distrust the move which takes concrete, culturally situated studies of particular fan practices, of specific moments in the ongoing relationship between audience(s) and texts, and translates them into data for the construction of some general theory of the media audience. Fan culture differs in a qualitative way from the cultural experience of media consumption for the bulk of the population. It is not simply that fan interpretations are more accessible to analysis, more available for observation than the transitory meanings produced by nonfan viewers, but rather, participating within fandom fundamentally alters the ways one relates to television and the meanings one derives from its contents. The fan audience is in no sense representative of the audience at large, nor can we go from an understanding of a specific subculture to an account of *the active spectator* (a phrase which necessarily remains a theoretical rather than an ethnographic construct). I am not even sure that the types of fans I have discussed here, fans of a particular configuration of popular narratives, are necessarily identical with other varieties of fans, fans of specific media personalities, rock performers, sports teams or soap operas. These groups will have

some common experiences as well as display differences that arise from their specific placement within the cultural hierarchy and their interests in different forms of entertainment.

It strikes me as ironic, however, that before Cultural Studies began to research fan culture, fans were dismissed as atypical of the media audience because of their obsessiveness and extreme passivity; now that ethnographic accounts of fan culture are beginning to challenge those assumptions, fans are dismissed as atypical of the media audience because of their activity and resistance. Both positions portray the fan as radically "Other" rather than attempting to understand the complex relationship between fan culture and mainstream consumer culture. We cannot afford to dodge that question; we can neither afford to move from the extreme case to the general (as has been true of some recent work within the Cultural Studies tradition) nor can we afford to ignore the connection that places fan culture on a continuum with other media consumption. We can, however, insist that any theory that is constructed to account more generally for the relationship between spectators and texts not preclude the existence of the practices documented here. We can even hope for theories that can explain their persistence in the face of strong countervailing pressures. A model that sees only media effects on passive spectators falls short of this test; a model that allows for different forms of interaction, that posits a more active relationship in which textual materials are appropriated and fit to personal experience does not. Fandom does not prove that all audiences are active; it does, however, prove that not all audiences are passive.