Fan Culture – Performing Difference

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Introduction

The usual textbook introduction on theoretical concepts like 'audience', 'fandom' or 'culture' starts with a definition of the key issue. In our chapter about fan culture, we hesitate to give such a clear-cut characterization of 'fan', 'fandom' or 'fan culture'. The reason for our reluctance is that the term 'fan' tends to be loaded with negative connotations of hysteria and pathology, whereas when one looks at the actual cognitions, investments, practices and interactions involved in being a fan, one sees many similarities between the fan of popular culture, the 'connaisseur' of literature and classical music, the collector of art, the ideal citizen in democracy and even the scholar doing academic research. This may seem too radical an assertion to begin with, but consider the following scenes taken from our immediate circle of friends and colleagues:

- A dinner party with a *haute cuisine* five-course meal. The hosts discuss their passion Wagner's *Ring* cycle and lengthily recount their feelings at a recent performance, which, in its full length, lasted for 15 hours and for which they took a full week off.
- A political party meeting celebrating its electoral victory. The party leader arrives surrounded by cameras and microphones, and the gathered party members burst out in loud cheers, chanting her name.
- A media scholar studying *Big Brother*, immersing himself in hours of television, streaming video and internet forums; discussing the ins and outs of the programme with academics worldwide; and only half-jokingly calling its inventor John de Mol 'God'.

The Wagner connoisseurs will probably not describe themselves as fans, and most likely, they will not be pleased to be called so. Neither will the citizen or

the scholar appreciate a comparison with fans. Terms related to high-cultural fandom, to public participation, and to knowledge work – connoisseur, citizen, scholar – differ significantly in connotation from fans. Yet, these seemingly different groups share extensive and detailed knowledge of their object; they are heavily emotionally connected to their object; they spend large amounts of time on it and deeply appreciate it to exchange their experience with other like-minded people. But whereas the connoisseur, the citizen and the scholar are praised for their intensive investments, the fan is more regularly accused of having silly pleasures, of leading vicarious lives and losing their mind over their idols or favourite programmes. Such pathologizing notions of fandom have dominated public discourse in which fans are portrayed, according to Jenson (1992), as either the obsessive individual (for example, the fan Mark Chapman who shot John Lennon four times on 8 December 1980) or the hysterical crowd (the 'bewildered' audience of, say, Robbie Williams).

Why do fans have such a bad reputation, what is gained by these pathologizing notions of fandom, and what 'real' experiences go on behind public stereotypes of the fan? These are the questions that we will discuss in this chapter, using recent cultural studies work on fandom. While media psychology would provide another possible perspective to discuss fandom, it tends to focus primarily on the relation between the individual fan and his or her text (see Box 14.1). In our understanding of fandom it is particularly the social-cultural context and social interaction of fandom that negates the public concern around obsession and other pathologies, and that makes it possible to compare fandom to the other cultural, political and knowledge practices we just discussed.

We will examine three important dimensions in fan-studies. First, the *cultural dimension*, referring to studies in which fans were taken seriously and their fandom are read as acts of cultural production, if not resistance (Lewis, 1992; Jenkins, 1992; Fiske, 1992). Second, the *performative dimension*, which shifts the focus from the ideological discourse on power and resistance towards the cultural *practices* of fandom. Fandom is a performative act that should be read in conjunction with pivotal indicators of difference – gender, age, sexuality, class and ethnicity (Hills, 2002; Lancaster, 2001). Third, the *local dimension*, which emerges in the context of debates on globalization and in connection to the Anglo-Saxon bias of fan-studies, inspiring research that is more sensitive towards the specific cultural context of fan cultures (Chow and De Kloet, 2005; Meers, 2006). Before embarking upon this journey into fan-studies, in which we move from the cultural to the performative and finally local dimension, it makes sense – despite our hesitations – to briefly explore which definitional notions of the fan have been proposed, and point at the complications we meet when we try to define fandom.

Box 14.1   Notes on fan psychology

Two concepts are crucial within media psychology to understand fandom: identification and parasocial interaction (PSI). The latter term stands for the social interaction between audiences and media figures as if in a typical social relationship (Giles, 2002). Cohen (1999: 329) defines PSI as a relationship in which 'the viewer is engaged in a role relationship with a television persona.' Although most PSI research focuses on television, the concept can also be applied to pop stars and movie actors. While in early studies PSI was often considered to compensate for a lack of 'real' social contacts (Rosengren and Windahl, 1972), later studies showed how PSI does not correlate to loneliness or escapism (Rubin and McHugh, 1987). Perse and Rubin (1989) showed that people use fundamentally the same cognitive processes in both interpersonal and mediated communication. Rubin and McHugh (1987) distinguished three types of attraction in PSI: social, physical and task attraction. They found that social attraction (i.e. the media figure could be a friend) was most important.

Apart from PSI, Cohen (1999) mentions three other possible ways of relating to media personalities: First, identification, characterized by the sharing of perspective. Second, wishful identification, characterized by the desire to emulate the figure with which we identify in general or specific terms. Third, affinity, referring to the liking of media characters without identifying with them, or forming a parasocial relationship. (For a lucid meta-study on PSI, see Giles, 2002.) However useful this terminology can be for analyzing fandom, in focusing solely on the relationship between a person and the text, it largely fails to account for the social dimension of fandom. In particular, fans constitute vibrant interpretative communities.

Defining fandom

'Fan' is an abbreviation of 'fanatic' a word that comes from the Latin word 'fanaticus'. While the term originally meant, quite simply, 'of or belonging to the temple, a temple servant, a devotee,' its meaning quickly slipped towards more negative connotations, including 'frenzy', 'madness' and 'obsessive' (Jenkins, 1992: 12). Cultural studies' approaches to fandom have usually tried to debunk such associations and present less value-loaded analyses of fandom. One problem most authors encounter is that fandom cannot be pinned down to a singular definition as expressions and performances of fandom change over

time and place. Many authors come up with distinctions within the general category of fans. Tulloch and Jenkins (1995: 23), for instance, make a distinction between 'followers' and 'fans', along the axis of engagement with the object of fandom. Unlike a 'follower', a fan claims a social identity. Brooker and Brooker's (1996: 141) distinction in 'admirers', 'fans' and 'cult fans' echoes a similar mode of distinction (see also Meers, 2006).

Abercrombie and Longhurst's (1998) taxonomy of audience involvement is arguably the most extensive example of such attempts at refinement. They have proposed to consider fandom as the first degree of intensity with which one can relate to cultural texts. In a continuum of audience involvement, they distinguish between mere consumers on the one extreme and petty producers on the other, with fans, cultists and enthusiasts in the middle.[1] While it does make sense to distinguish between different kinds of audience involvement, their proposal is problematic for its overhaul of common academic and common sense concepts. Abercrombie and Longhurst explain that the fan in previous studies resembles most closely their definition of a cultist, but as Hills (2002: ix) observes, 'It seems faintly unhelpful to produce a taxonomy in which the definition of "fan" is at odds with the use of this term in almost all other literature in the field.' Hills continues to approach cult fandom as a 'particular (enduring) form of affective fan relationship' (Hills, 2002: xi).

While these authors start from different degrees of involvement in cultural texts, Fiske (1992: 37–38) has made a distinction based on what people *do* or *perform* with their fandom. He distinguishes three levels of productivity: First, at the level of *semiotic productivity*, consumption of popular culture entails 'the making of meanings of social identity and of social experience from the semiotic resources of the cultural commodity.' (1992: 37) At the second level, that of *enunciative productivity*, the meanings made at the first level are 'shared within a face-to-face or oral culture' that take a public form. This level includes the fervent fan talk, the sharing of experiences and styling of, for example, hair and outfit, in other words, the appropriation and development of a specific subcultural style. The third level of fandom concerns *textual productivity*, 'fans produce and circulate among themselves texts which are often crafted with production values as high as any in the official culture.' (1992: 39) Dutch fans of *Lord of the Rings*, for example, do not only gather every month in a special tavern, they also develop new story lines, learn and develop the languages invented by Tolkien and dress up as Hobbits, Elves and Orcs to engage in role-playing games in Dutch forests (van RomondtVis, 2004). With the rapid emergence of the Internet over the 1990s, and the related introduction of new technologies, including all kinds of digital media-tools (Photoshop, Garageband, Blogging

etc.), textual fan-production has proliferated and globalized significantly. Today, fans are, even more so than in the past, also producers (Shefrin, 2004).

Fiske sensitizes us to the intimate relationship between the fan and the object of fandom, and his categorization reveals how delicate the line between fan and non-fan is – how often are we not involved in enunciative and at times even textual production ourselves?[2] The level of participation through active appropriation of the object of fandom hints at the performative dimension of fandom. Fans perform a sense of distinction through the accumulation of what Thornton (1995) terms, echoing the work of Bourdieu, subcultural capital. While fan studies often challenge the explicit or implicit high-low distinction that produces derivative accounts of fan cultures, it is becoming increasingly important to take issue with the hierarchies that are produced within the domain of popular culture: fandom of Britney Spears, for example, remains a more contested type of fandom when compared to fandom of U2. Studies consequently need to be sensitive to these more subtle patterns of distinction *within* popular culture.

The tactics of distinction (vis-à-vis other fan cultures or within the same fan culture) all revolve around claims to authenticity – of being the true fan. Fandom can consequently be read as a performative politics of identity in which the authentic self wishes to differentiate him or herself from the inauthentic other. This notion of the performance of 'difference' makes it especially, possible to compare the fan to connoisseurs, citizens and scholars, all of whom can be seen as agents of consecration that contribute to the formation of a collective belief surrounding the value of symbolic goods (Shefrin, 2004: 270). The fan's quest for authenticity produces inauthentic Others – the non-fan – just like the connoisseur of high culture looks down on dim pop culture fans, just like the citizen condemns the politically disinterested consumer, and the scholar defies the everyday, non-systematic knowledge of journalism. All these cases involve quite a vicious war of positions (Jancovich, 2002).

Authenticity of fans is produced through a deep commitment to popular texts, ranging from Elvis to the *X-files*, from *Star Trek* to *Lord of the Rings*. These appropriations are often closely linked to the classic indicators of social difference: class, gender, age, sexuality and ethnicity. For example, Beatlemania was very much a girl culture (Ehrenreich et al., 1992), whereas gay men form fan communities around the Eurovision song contest (Lemish, 2004). Fans produce an identity that borders on the acceptable, since the objects of fandom are considered trivial in dominant discourse. But, as Hills also observes, the more important issue is not whether fandom can be perceived as a mode of popular resistance, or whether fandom is 'good' or 'bad,' but to explore '*what fandom does culturally*' (Hills, 2002: xii, original italics). We agree with Hills that in order

to approach this question it is crucial to depart from singular studies on specific fan cultures, as well as to think beyond simplistic binaries of resistance versus complicity. We need to move towards a broader understanding in which different and partly overlapping fan cultures are integrated so as to grasp the cultural dynamics that propel the global rise and decline of fan cultures. But before delving into the performative dynamics of fandom, it is crucial to go back in time to the early 1990s, when the first ethnographic studies on fans were published.

The cultural dimension

Jenkins (1992), Fiske (1992) and Lewis (1992) can be considered the key representatives of the cultural dimension in fan-studies. Their work has been greatly influenced by De Certeau's 1984 classic *The Practice of Everyday Life*. The poaching metaphor is employed by De Certeau to account for the active act of reading. De Certeau describes readers as nomads who travel through the media-landscape, picking and choosing, using and abusing what is to their liking. The cultural dimension is thereby driven by a fundamental debate in fan-studies: are fans duped by a consumerist culture industry, or are they active agents who shape their own life in an original fashion? This resistance versus compliance dualism propels most of the studies that follow the cultural approach of fan-studies. Its proponents firmly opt for a resistant reading of fandom: fans are anything but duped by the culture industry. Instead, they are active agents, or poachers, that appropriate media texts to make sense of everyday life. In his book *Textual Poachers,* Jenkins (1992) distinguishes five characteristics of fan cultures:

First, fandom concerns a particular mode of reception. 'Fan viewers watch television texts with close and undivided attention, with a mixture of emotional proximity and critical distance.' (Jenkins, 1992: 277–8) Following Fiske's levels of fan-productivity, reception involves fierce discussion with others over the text, up to the level of textual production. Second, 'fandom involves a particular set of critical and interpretive practices' (1992: 278). Becoming a fan implies becoming accustomed with the preferred reading within the fan community, to become skilful in including playful references to the text and to establish links between one's own life and the text. Third, fandom constitutes a base for activism. Since fans are the ones to speak back to the networks and producers, according to Jenkins, they give a voice to the invisible audience. In the words of Shefrin (2004: 270), fans contribute 'to the evaluation of a cultural producer's symbolic capital'. Fourth, 'fandom possesses particular forms of cultural production, aesthetic

traditions and practices. (...) Fandom generates its own genres and develops alternative institutions of production, distribution, exhibition and consumption' (2004: 279). Fandom hence constitutes an alternative economy outside the mainstream. Fifth, fandom functions as an alternative social community. Fans try to establish a 'weekend-only world' outside dominant cultural values of work. Fandom constitutes a space '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' (2004: 283; see also Meers, 2006: 71).

Studies in this line of research tend to offer a rather celebratory ethnographic insight in fan cultures. The insistence to analyze what fans do with media, rather than what the media do with fans, remains an important story to be told. It counters both traditional models of effect research as well as pathologizing approaches to fandom. Ethnographic fan-studies also move beyond an inversion of the 'fan as duped by the culture industry' narrative by focusing on the mundane and everyday realities of fandom. One more recent example along this line of research comes from Hodkinson (2002), who presents an ethnographic insiders account of Goth culture, in which he fiercely debunks the (postmodern) claim that collective identities and subcultures are increasingly becoming fragmented. He shows how offline and online fan practices strengthen group ties and help produce a spectacular subculture. In recent years, everyday fandom has become increasingly digitalized, when the Internet provides a new way to align with fans nationally and globally (see Box 14:2 for a study of online fandom).

Box 14.2   Tune in, log on: Soap, fandom and online community according to Baym

Taken from van Zoonen (2000).

Baym's (2000) case study of the Internet community that evolved around the American soap *All My Children* is highly illustrative for online fandom. Baym participated in the Usernet news group and observed the interaction between its participants between 1990 and 1993. She returned to the group in 1998 to see whether the development and greater availability of the Internet had changed the practices in the group. The conversations between the participants – mainly women – were primarily concerned with the interpretation of soap stories and characters. Fans process the soaps, for instance, by relating them to

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their own lives or by speculating about future events. As Baym shows through extensive quotes from the multitude of postings in the group, these interpretations emerged in dialogue and deliberation, which have both a playful and an emotional component. Part of the pleasure of the news group was in the common evaluation of the quality, realism and underlying messages contained in soap texts.

The participants proved to be a highly competent audience expressing critical assessments of the show that often surpassed the knowledge of the producers. Some long-time fans felt they knew the characters and their fictional community better than the writers and were struggling – as it were – with the writers about the ownership of the series. Baym showed how participants came up with new and better storylines, which they exchanged among themselves in a humorous display of creativity and wit. The deliberation around these new stories was conducted in a general sphere of friendliness and consensus seeking. The fact that these participants were mostly women certainly contributed to the group atmosphere, according to Byam. However, it was not gender alone that was an explanatory factor here, but its articulation with the specific textual features of the soap operas that call for diverging meanings and interpretations. In her analysis, Baym thus links fandom to the specificity of a medium (the Internet), to gender (women) and to genre (soap).

During the 1990s, the paradigm of fan-studies has moved increasingly beyond a romanticisation of fandom. Fan cultures are increasingly seen as incoherent, to quote Jancovich (2002: 315): 'in fact, cult movie audiences are less an internally coherent "taste culture" than a series of frequently opposed and contradictory reading strategies that are defined through a sense of their difference to an equally incoherently imagined "normality", a loose conglomeration of corporate power, lower middle class conformity and prudishness, academic elitism and political conspiracy.' To follow a resistance versus compliance dualism is therefore inadequate. According to Hills, fandom is necessarily contradictory, 'fans are both commodity-completists and they express anti-commercial beliefs or "ideologies"' (Hills, 2002: 44). Fans hence oscillate between consumerism and 'resistance'. Their identity is constructed in the never-ending dialectic inside and outside commodification.

The performative dimension

In the attempt to think beyond a resistance versus compliance model it is important to focus on different *practices* of fandom, to unpack their performative repertoires and take issue with the underlying struggles for and over power. 'Thinking of fans as performers means displacing an emphasis on the text-reader interaction, and focusing instead on the myriad ways that fans can engage with the textual structures and moments of their favoured cult shows, reactivating these in cultural practices of play' (Hills, 2002: 41, see also Lancaster, 2001). Performance studies can be traced back to two distinct schools, one focusing on performativity, the other on performances. First the philosophical school, in which authors like Austin (1962) and Butler (1990), among many others, analyze how words impact upon reality. Butler argues that not only is gender a construction, it is a performative construction. We perform our gender in our everyday lives. While performance may evoke connotations of false or fake, Butler takes a Foucauldian position, namely what is left behind the performative mask is a void, or subjectivity is nothing but performance. Subjectivity is constituted through discourse, and once we define discourse as inherently performative (as signalled by Austin's notion of *speech acts*), subjectivity is turned into a performative act.

The second school in performance studies comes from sociology (Goffman, 1959), anthropology (Turner, 1988; Fabian, 1990; MacAloon, 1984) and theatre studies (Schechner, 2002). Here, the attention moves away from phenomenological questions on subjectivity towards a more down-to-earth approach in which everyday social life is perceived as a performance. It can be read in line with Shakespeare's clichéd phrase that 'all the world's a stage'. Studies along this line of thinking involve analyses of the dramaturgical rules that guide performances, and are highly sensitive to the social context in which performances occur.

When we apply a mix of the theatrical and phenomenological approaches of performance studies to fandom, we are able to delve deeper into its social implications. Fandom can be a way to perform sexual preferences, for example, when gay men go together to bars to watch the Eurovision song contest (Lemish, 2004). It can be a way to perform gender, for example, when men go to football matches dressed up in special outfits to support their team (Brown, 1998). It can be a way to perform ethnicity, for example when the black fans of *50 Cent* gain street credibility through their intense involvement with their object of fandom.[3] And it can be a way to perform political involvement, for example, when fans cheer along with their favourite politicians while wearing the colours of their political party (van Zoonen, 2004).

Fandom often involves conspicuous consumption of collectors' items like first editions, bootleg tapes, and all sorts of paraphernalia. Fan cultural capital has gained economic value over the past decades. According to Hills, consumption has a strong performative dimension: 'media fandoms presuppose consumption and are expressed through consumption – it is hence both an act and an itera-tion-without-origin' (Hills, 2002: 159). The performative dimension becomes most apparent at the moment of impersonation, according to Nightingale (in Hills, 2002: 160): 'Impersonation generates another experience [the experience of "improvisation"], a re-creation of the start not as an image but as a story about capitalism, often as the story of a contradiction in capitalism. As the "star's" personal narrative is recreated and explored by the impersonator, another performance, another personal narrative is pursued – the imperson-ator's life as the star.' Through impersonation and improvization, the fan oscil-lates between his 'self' and the 'other', between intense 'self-reflexivity' and 'self-absence' (Hills, 2002: 171). Fandom involves the performative embodiment of such contradictions, blurring the line between self and other (see Box 14.3).

Box 14.3   Buffy Fandom

Buffy the Vampire Slayer has rapidly gained a cult fan following since the series started in 1997. The series directly and deliberately speaks to the experience of outsiderdom, an experience very much shared by fan cultures (Williamson, 2005: 296). The vampire Spike represents an otherness that fans recognize in themselves. Spike encourages a fannish immersion in the text, he 'becomes meaningful to fans because of the existence of a cross-textual, cross-genera-tional sympathetic vampire which transcends him and through which he can be read' (Williamson, 2005: 299). James Marsters, the actor playing Spike, can be considered a subcultural celebrity, according to Hills and Williams (2005). His performance merges to a large extent actor and character, he appears fan-like, thereby disrupting the distance between 'fan' and 'celebrity'. Key to this inter-vention is Marsters' self-styled accessibility to his fans. His discursive blurrings of character/actor identities, combined with his availability for fans, 'feed into the fans' positive interpretations of Spike' (Hills and Williams, 2005: 354).

Both the deliberate intertextuality encoded in the series as well as the con-flation of Marsters with Spike – of the actor with his character – are illustrative for the performativity of fandom. The intertextuality of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* – consciously encoded in the text – encourages new readings that, in particular

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in a social context, can be read as playful performances of the fan to express, that is; construct and display, his or her fan-cultural capital. The merging of the actor Marsters with the vampire Spike hints at the performativity of both the persona as well as the character. The audience is drawn into the series, encouraged to engage in intertextual performances that include real life role-playing games, both online and offline. Such acts of textual production destabilizes the boundary between self and other, between real and imagined. Through role-playing games, fans are involved in a process of perpetual becoming: becoming the Other, becoming the vampire, becoming Spike.

In particular, digital performances of fandom have proliferated tremendously over the past decade. Technological developments facilitate new performative modes of fandom. For example, during *Idols* contests, television viewers participate in the show by SMS voting (Reijnders, et al., 2006). Media audiences increasingly become participants. This may result in what can be termed 'SMS democracy'. In China, the *Supergirl 2005* contest, based on the *Idols* format but restricted to female contestants, became one of the nation's media hypes of 2005. For the first time in China's history, its citizens were allowed to vote through SMS for their favourite contestant. Three and a half million Chinese voters chose Li Yuchun to become the winner and a rising pop star in China (Anonymous, 2005, online).[4] Li Yuchun's stardom is produced by her fans, rather than the other way round. This example is also telling for yet another important aspect of fan culture: the voting system is of particular relevance in the Chinese context, since it offers a fundamentally democratic model and potential to subvert an authoritative political regime, whereas in a Western context, SMS voting practices can be and are being criticized for their capitalist logic. In other words, this example points to the importance of locality, which brings us to the last dimension in fan-studies.

Box 14.4   Marco versus Leon – The Netherlands versus Hong Kong (Chow and de Kloet, 2005)

Amidst American domination of the global pop music scene, an increasing number of people choose a local artist as their star. In a comparative study of fans

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'Plate 14:1   The fans of Marco Borsato and of Leon Lai, in configuring their local communities, in characterising their local stars, have succeeded in claiming their own space, their own preferences and values, even if the world is said to be flattened out by globalising forces'. Pictures reproduced by kind permission of Paciwood Music and Entertainment Ltd © and Loe Beerens ©.

of Hong Kong pop idol Leon Lai and his Dutch counterpart Marco Borsato, Chow and de Kloet (2005) found striking differences in both localities. In general, while the Dutch fans see Marco as an ordinary human being, the Hong Kong fans characterize Leon as an extraordinary worker. The Marco fans' notion of ordinariness, with its associated constructions of having feelings, being authentic and accessible, also leads to articulations of strong emotional ties to his music – entirely absent in the discourse of the Leon Lai fans. Besides his good looks, Leon Lai's most remarkable character trait is work rather than charity – his hardworking perseverance and constant attempt to seek improvement and honour. The different characterizations, the authors argue, are in turn informed by the dominant discourse on being ordinary, emotionally honest and humanitarian in the Dutch society at large, as well as that on being more than ordinary, hardworking and proud in the Hong Kong context.

The fans of Marco Borsato and of Leon Lai, in configuring their local communities and in characterizing their local stars, have succeeded in claiming their own space, their own preferences and values, even if the world is said to

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be flattened out by globalizing forces. They are empowering their local stars as much as they are empowered in negotiating their experiences not only in the pop music world dominated by global icons such as Madonna, but also in the larger context of global culture, global economy and global politics. Even when the music of Marco and Leon sounds not unlike that of global counterparts, even when they look not unlike their global counterparts, their local fans perceive them differently.

The local dimension

Fandom can also be a way to express and construct locality. However, locality has remained an understudied topic of research in fan cultures, which continues to show a strong Anglo-Saxon bias. While fandom is taken as a 'response to specific historical conditions' (Jenkins, 1992: 3), the studies undertaken so far by and large fail to reflect upon cultural specificities and therefore run the danger of producing a homogenizing discourse in which fan is turned into a universal label. Under the current conditions of increased globalization, this lack of sensitivity to the importance of place is rather surprising and motivates us to pay particular attention to fandom as *a performance of locality*. The debate on globalization is characterized by two opposite poles: one school argues that globalization is flattening our world (Friedman, 2005), with the US as the cultural, political and economical epicentre of our world. Here, globalization is seen as a process of homogenization or 'McDonaldization' (Ritzer, 2000). The apocalyptic undertone of this argument often includes a harsh critique on the US, in particular, its alleged dream-factory, Hollywood.

The other end of the debate interprets globalization as a process of increased heterogenization, with new cultural elements being cut and pasted with already existing cultural patterns, producing creolized cultures (Hannerz, 1987), or propelling the indiginization of 'foreign' cultural forms (Appadurai, 1996). Similar cultural icons can therefore have different readings, and therefore produce different fan cultures, in different cultural contexts. Along the same line, local stars are appropriated by local fan cultures to produce a sense of locality (cf. Appadurai, 1996), or to construct a *heimat*, a feeling of home (Morley, 2001) – see Box 14.4. For example, Kuwait youth appropriates *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* to express a sense of cultural anxiety combined with a longing for modernity (Havens, 2001). Japanese Hip Hop is an expression of a middle-class club culture, rather than an ethnic lower-class street culture as in the US (Condry, 2000). Not only are cultural genres appropriated differently in different parts of the world, but so to is similar text read differently. A study by Liebes and Katz reveals how cultural background

greatly influences the reading of the soap opera *Dallas* (Liebes and Katz, 1993). Similar cross-cultural studies for fan cultures are, however, scarce.

One recent study that involves a cross-national comparison focuses on audiences of *Lord of the Rings*. A total sample of 24,648 respondents filled in an online questionnaire. On a decreasing 5 point-scale, they valued the movie, on average, very high (1.4). Meers (2006: 76) further distinguishes them in three types: the *Lord of the Rings* fan, the fantasy fan and the blockbuster fan. Whereas the first group uses the books as their point of reference, the second group uses fantasy films and the third group takes blockbuster films as their reference points. The depth of their engagement with the text is highest for the *Lord of the Rings* fan, and lowest for the blockbuster fan. When comparing the quantitative data of the study, De Kloet and Kuipers (2006), however, discovered no clear or systematic differences between countries, or between clusters of countries. Following Beck (2002), they label the movie as a case of 'banal cosmopolitanism'. Their argument resonates with the homogenization thesis; the *Lord of the Rings* fans are like banal cosmopolitans whose fan alliances move beyond national and cultural boundaries.

Conclusion

Our description of the three dimensions of fan-studies may suggest neatly demarcated approaches. As we indicated in the introduction of this chapter, the pathologizing discourse on fandom is still in currency, particularly in popular discourse. The cultural dimension, which is driven by a desire to counter this discourse, remains of crucial importance. The performative dimension shifts the focus from reading fandom in terms of compliance versus resistance, towards a reading of fandom as a shared cultural practice. The last dimension sensitizes research to local particularities and cosmopolitan possibilities of fandom. Rather than reading these dimensions as contrasting paradigms, we wish to stress that they are complementary and can be combined in a singular study. By way of conclusion, we discuss two more points: one regarding the importance of the objects of fandom, and the need to study fan cultures in combination with a study of star-texts, the other referring to the political economy underpinning fan cultures. Here we return to a classic cultural studies position: reception analysis should go hand-in-hand with a textual and production analysis.

First, fan cultures are formed around specific cultural texts and the nature of these texts is what distinguishes fans from connoisseurs, citizens and scholars, not their cognitions, emotions, behaviour and everyday lives. Ideally, fan-studies should involve, therefore, a more thorough analysis of the object of fandom. There can be no fan without an object of fandom. However simplistic such an observation may sound, fan-studies do run the danger of ignoring the

particularities of the text, and dismiss the ideological and economical inter-twinement of production and consumption. It remains, therefore, important to study the object of fandom in conjunction with its surrounding fan culture. The work of Dyer on stars (1998) helps to analyze what can be called the *star-text*. Stars are, according to Dyer, not only characters, they are also real people. The star-text involves not just the cultural texts produced by the star, but also his or her personal life. Stars-texts are deeply polysemic, while stars operate as spec-tacular signifiers. According to Dyer, 'star images function crucially in relation to contradictions within and between ideologies, which they seek variously to "manage" or resolve' (1998: 34). According to Ellis, a star is 'a performer in a particular medium whose figure enters into subsidiary forms of circulation, and then feeds back into future performances' (1992: 91). Ellis continues to observe that stars are 'at once ordinary and extraordinary, available for desire and unat-tainable' (1992: 91). Studies of stars should hence involve a wide array of texts in which the star appears, both in his role as performer (actor, musician, etc.) as well as in report on his 'real' life, and be sensitive for the multiple meaning and contradictory ideologies embodied in stars. Such a textual analysis will facilitate a deeper understanding of the fan's involvement with the star. Again, here lie the commonalities with other cultural practices such as art and politics; especially in the latter field, the celebrity-politician has become an icon of per-version of democratic and deliberative values with little appreciation of the potential for meaning and involvement that they offer (cf. van Zoonen, 2005).

   Second, the politic-economical context in which media texts are produced and consumed is of crucial importance (Mansell, 2005; Golding et al., 1997), and is too often ignored in fan-studies. In his study of cult movie fandom, Jancovich observes how this fandom grew out of a post-war process in which selective film markets were created that were defined as different from mainstream, commercial cinema. 'Indeed, it is the very ideology which insists that these markets are free from eco-nomic criteria which needs to be criticized' (Jancovich, 2002: 317). The positioning of non-mainstream cult cinema can be read as a marketing tactic, one that resem-bles the portfolio marketing strategies in the music industry in which specific units develop and promote specific music genres (Negus, 1999). Andrejevic's study (2002) expresses a similar concern, referring to participants and audiences of reality TV as savvy consumers whose ideas on self-realization, consumption and pleasure are manufactured by a culture industry that is driven by the logic of global capitalism. The earlier mentioned study on cross-cultural differences in fandom of *Lord of the Rings*, and the lack thereof, also hints at the power of the culture industry that pro-duces similar readings of specific products targeted at worldwide audiences. In a perverse way, fans are constitutive, in their disavowal of the culture industry, in their ingenious and passionate fabrications of an 'authentic self', of the cultural

mainstream (see also Hills, 2002, in particular, Chapter 1). A study of fandom brings us finally back to a classic debate in sociology: the debate between agency and structure. Studies of fans should be sensitive to the structural and cultural conditions that both produce and contain fan cultures, while keeping a close, committed, ethnographic eye on the cultural practices of fans in their everyday lives.

Summary

- The knowledge, investments, practices and interactions involved in fandom are not fundamentally different from those related to art, politics and scholarship. What distinguishes these relations to culture is the nature of the textual object. Fans are active consumers who use media texts as a way to construct their identity and make sense of everyday life.
- Fandom is a way to accumulate fan cultural capital and helps to produce an authentic self.
- Fandom can be perceived as a performative act, in which fandom can be interpreted as spectacular performances of gender, age, ethnicity, sexuality and class.
- Under current forces of intense globalization, fandom is an important way for the production of locality, in which fan cultures either emerge around particular local stars or produce specific local readings of global stars.
- Studies of fan cultures need to include analyses of the object of fandom and be highly sensitive to the political economy that produces star-texts.

GOING FURTHER

Baym, N. (2000) *Tune in,* Log on: Soap, Fandom and Online Community. London: Sage.
Presents an in-depth, qualitative longitudinal study of an online community of soap opera fans [See Box 14.2].

Dyer, R. (1998 (1979)) *Stars.* London: Routledge.
Classic study of the importance of stars in our everyday life, lucid example of the possible strengths and insights provided by textual analysis, focus is predominantly on movie stars.

Hills, M. (2002) *Fan Cultures.* London: Routledge.
Provides the best overview of fan studies currently available, strongly inspired by earlier studies, but refuses to get trapped in a resistance versus compliance dichotomy.

Jenkins, H. (1992) *Textual Poachers – Television Fans and Participatory Culture.* London: Routledge.
Classic fan-study which is theoretically inspired by the work of Michel de Certeau, with valuable insights into the active engagement of fans in media, and its potential political implications.

(Continued)

Lewis, L. A. (ed.) (1992) *Adoring Audience – Fan Culture and Popular Media.* London: Routledge. Reader with key texts on the cultural dimension of fandom, presents together with Jenkins the academic start of fan studies.

STUDENT ACTIVITY 14.1

Today's global stars like Robbie Williams and Kylie all have their own fan-websites. Select the message-board of the fan website of your favourite star and analyze the first 50 postings. Give examples of the cultural, the performative and the local dimension of the postings, inspired by the theory provided in this chapter.

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Notes

1 Their definitions of these three categories are as follows: '*Fans* are those people who become particularly attached to certain programmes or stars within the context of a relatively heavy media use.' (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998: 138), '*Cultists* are more organized than fans. They meet each other and circulate specialized materials that constitute the nodes of a network.' (Ibid: 139) '*Enthusiasts* are, in our terms, based predominantly around activities rather than media or stars.' (Ibid: 139).

2 Jeroen, for example, is a fan of Chinese popular music, a fandom he has translated towards a PhD project (de Kloet, 2001), just like Liesbet's lifelong admiration of the Tudor Queen Elisabeth I of England (1533–1603) has resulted in a not really necessary paragraph in her latest book *Entertaining the Citizen* (van Zoonen, 2005). For the problems related to this hybrid scholar-cum-fan position see Modleski (1991), Hills (2002), Jancovich (2002) and Dee and Williamson (2005).

3 Whereas white suburban fans of Hip Hop are labelled as cultural tourists whose performance involves either a negation of or a longing for a marked ethnicity (Christenson and Roberts, 1998).

4 Due to her androgynous performance and ambiguity regarding her sexual preferences, she quickly turned into a national gay icon as well.