Plenary Affections

a response by Leslie Huang

Our societal fascination with fans is nothing new.[1] In response to the emergence of mass print culture, affective engagement with "objects of devotion" within communities infused cultural products with renewed meaning.[2] What is a fan, and what types of objects are interesting to them? And how might fan studies help us to think productively in art history? Mia I. Uribe Kozlovsky's study "Saints and Zinesters," which examines the twin devotions of fandom and religion, offers some insightful

[1] As a field of scholarly study, fan studies evolved from the florescence of visual culture studies, cultural studies, and media studies at the tail end of the twentieth century. Game studies is another field that has considerable overlap with fan studies. For a general history of the field, see: Henry Jenkins, "Fan Studies," Oxford Bibliographies, last modified August 2012, https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199791286/obo-9780199791286-0027.xml; and Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington, eds., *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World* (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

[2] Matt Hills, riffing on Benedict Anderson, describes a fan community as an "affective space," or an imagined community that is formed by fans through their intense feelings of attachment towards their object of interest. See: Matt Hills, "Virtually Out There: Strategies, Tactics and Affective Spaces in On-Line Fandom," in *Technospaces: Inside the New Media*, ed. Sally Munt (London; New York: Continuum, 2001), 147–60. The broader connection between affect theory and fandom can be credited to Lawrence Grossberg. See: Lawrence Grossberg, "Is there a Fan in the House?: The Affective Sensibility of Fandom," in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media.*, ed. Lisa A Lewis (London; New York: Routledge, 1992), 50–65.

interventions by attending to the practice of reinterpretation, knowledge production, and the nature of devotion itself.

Although a relatively new field of inquiry, fan studies, broadly defined as the study of "media fans and fan cultures," has developed considerably since its nascence in the 1970s. Henry Jenkins, a pivotal fan studies scholar, defines fans and fan cultures as follows:

> Fans might be broadly defined as individuals who maintain a passionate connection to popular media, assert their identity through their engagement with and mastery over its contents, and experience social affiliation around shared tastes and preferences. Fan cultures are the social and cultural infrastructures that support fan activities and interests.[3]

While the origin of fan studies lies in popular media, its distinct attention to "social affiliation" and the formation of "social and cultural infrastructures" offers a compelling framework for studying the interplay of affect and relationality at both the individual and communal registers.[4] Uribe Kozlovsky's analysis of the zine *St. Sucia* offers a keen insight into the dynamics of community formation in artistic practice, particularly how the deeply personal relationship between a fan and their "object of devotion" contributes to belonging. The communities in "Saints and Zinesters" are both distinct and overlapping, including the self-identified *sucias* gathering in the pages of *St. Sucia*, queer genealogies of feminist Latinx artists, as well as these groups' fraught devotion towards the Roman Catholic saint, La Virgen de Guadalupe.

Fans are omnivorous peripatetics who belong to and engage in multiple fandoms with varying degrees of affective intensity.[5] As an inherently participatory endeavor, a fandom community emerges through its relationships between persons, as well as with objects. Fans will repeatedly return to a media text to produce new meanings, an interactive and accretive process of reinterpretation that Jenkins calls

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[3] Jenkins, "Fan Studies."

[4] Recent use of this method by researchers in fields like religious studies and art history also reflect a growing interest in this approach outside of media studies. For example, Catherine Grant utilizes this approach to theorize the relationship between contemporary feminist artists and histories of feminism. See: Catherine Grant, "Fans of Feminism: Re-Writing Histories of Second-Wave Feminism in Contemporary Art," *Oxford Art Journal* 34, no. 2 (June 2011): 265–86. In fan studies, a semi-recent edited volume includes studies on the news, cultural theory, classical music aficionados, and theatre goers to performances of Anton Chekhov plays. See: Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington, *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World.*

[5] Henry Jenkins, "Fan," in *Keywords for Media Studies*, ed. Laurie Ouellette and Jonathan Gray (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 65–7.

rogue reading.[6] The "rogue" nature of this practice stems from fans' rejection of established meanings (the "canon") in favor of their own interpretations, as well as their disregard of mass consumption. For a fan, the same object may be an inexhaustible source of renewal that is regularly replenished by the attention lavished upon it. In the process of rogue reading, vague parts of a media text may be fleshed out or reimagined altogether in the form of fan-made objects, such as fanfiction, fanart, and cosplay. As Uribe Kozlovsky points out, Saint Sucia's initial conception was in the form of a "bad girl" alter-ego of La Virgen de Guadalupe. However, it was only through her collective writing by her readers that the inchoate saint's sacred vulgarity fully manifested. As the co-editors of the *St. Sucia* zine, Hernandez and Castro's iterative cosplays of Saint Sucia as Judy Baca's *La Pachuca* and La Virgen may be understood as embodied citations that reflect developments of the saint's identity through successive issues of the zine.

What I have discussed so far privileges the perspective of the fan and their activities as the heart of forming networks in participatory cultures. This stance is consistent with current trends in fan studies that have turned away from fandom as an "a priori space of cultural autonomy and resistance" towards a renewed emphasis on the relationship between fans' selves and their fan objects without reification of the fan as a subversive Other, a typical stance in prior research.[7] Fan studies provides a means to describe both the functional components of community formation and the complex, often contradictory motivations of its actors. Moreover, the inclusion of affect theory from the field's nascence recognizes that objects have a pull: they are Heideggerian things that "gather" people together, and which exist alongside rather than for the human. Seen in this way, the emotional and affective "excess" resulting from a fan's attachment to objects emerges as a point of interest rather than a point of embarrassment.

Although fan studies has normalized its objects of study, and fandom has become a more acceptable form of cultural consumption in the public sphere, there remain two elements that may discourage cross-disciplinary adoptions of a fan studies framework. The first is a divide between "high" and "mass" culture. In an effort to dissolve the false binary between fan and non-fan, scholars have emphasized how emotional attachment to objects and actions deriving from fandom—like interpretation, collection, and connoisseurship—have long been considered common,

[6] This concept develops Michel de Certeau's theory of "textual poaching," which describes a practice of appropriative reading where the reader takes from the text only that which is useful or pleasurable to them as the reader. See: Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (Hoboken, NJ: Taylor and Francis, 1992), 24.

[7] Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington, *Fandom*, 6.

everyday behaviors.[8] Still, whenever a cultural phenomenon appears unfamiliar to the dominant culture, the specter of the "fanatical" fan materializes. For example, in a 2019 *Saturday Night Live* sketch "E-Sports Reporter," the musician Chance the Rapper stars as put-upon sports correspondent Lazlowe Holmes, who has been pushed out of his familiar domain of basketball into the peculiar world of esports, or electronic sports.[9] Holmes functions as the audience's surrogate as he attempts an utterly bewildered and reluctant ethnography of the gaming world. His fitful efforts to interpret League of Legends gameplay and to understand the fervent reception of its nonathletic players by a coterie of fangirls (i.e. "groupies") reflects the broader struggle of mainstream culture to come to terms with the reality of e-sports and MMOs (massively multiplayer online games) as part of a wildly popular, billion-dollar global industry.[10] This reinforces the idea of fandom as "low" culture, restricting how historians can engage with their respective fields of study in a way that risks misinterpretation of the dynamics in a particular historical or cultural moment.

The traditional focus on popular media in fan studies has also raised questions about the method's broader applicability. Because a fan's relationship to their objects of interest exists within a structure of consumer capitalism, critiques point out how focusing on consumption as the primary form of engagement perpetuates the assumption of capitalism as a teleological inevitability, which also replicates anthropocentric perspectives of human-object relations.[11] These critiques are insightful reminders to pay close attention to the expression of structural forces through material culture, as well as the limits of their influence. Emphasis on affective modes of relationality offers an opportunity to consider how alternative forms of belonging have always co-existed alongside structures of dominance. For this reason, it is also crucial to examine human-object relationships across many historical time periods, not just in the chronotope of modernity.

In my own field of study, early modern Chinese art, I can think of many topics that would yield a compelling analysis. One example is the collective devotion to the written word shared by elite women in seventeenth-century Jiangnan. Their interests

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[8] Joli Jenson, "Fandom as Pathology: The Consequences of Characterization," in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media.*, ed. Lisa A Lewis (London; New York: Routledge, 2002), 9–29.

[9] E-Sports Reporter - SNL, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DlnwZzK2Ngo.

[10] Hilary Russ, "Global Esports Revenues to Top $1 Billion in 2019: Report," *Reuters*, February 12, 2019, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-videogames-outlook-idUSKCN1Q11XY.

[11] This criticism is not specific to fan studies, but a common point that has been directed at media studies and its affiliated fields (e.g., visual studies). This follows the shift in focus from producer to consumer in studies about the effects of globalization in a postmodern era. For an example of this theoretical framing, see: Nicholas Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, 2nd ed. (London; New York: Routledge, 2009).

were wide-ranging, including spiritual pursuits such as studying Buddhist sutras, and imagining a perfect love through discussions of romantic plays like *The Peony Pavilion.* These feelings and thoughts were made material through the women's literary and material cultural productions, which included fervent epistolary exchanges, gift giving, and self-published writings. Through discussing and sharing their objects of interest, elite women maintained a vast network of familial and friendship ties that spanned the Jiangnan region.[12] Paying attention to the affective nature of material exchange makes evident how human-object relationality has long been a keen point of interest to historians. Fan studies' underscoring of affect as an active agent in community formation demonstrates how objects can inspire a community's members plurality of responses, including developing their moral and ethical dispositions, and relationship to religion.[13] Uribe Kozlovsky's research in "Saints and Zinesters" draws attention to the overlap between the affect of devotion and fandom. Through collective artistic practice in *St. Sucia*, participants negotiated deeply personal relationships to La Virgen and the veneration of *marianismo*. Seen through fandom, the creation of religious art comes to encompass all manners of reinterpretation that have served the spiritual needs of its devotees.

As I prepared to write this response, I read case studies from all corners of the fandom world. Among the plenitude of emotional and affective engagements suffusing the texts, what became unmistakable was the shared desire for belonging, and the promise of recognition that being in community affords. In a profession that remains devoted to evidence-based research, I acknowledge that such an observation can be considered anachronistic, or lacking precision. To this point, I am reminded of Catherine Grant's closing revelation in "Fans of Feminism:"

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[12] Women's obsessive interest in *The Peony Pavilion* and its ties to the cult of *qing* (emotion) has been discussed extensively, particularly by Dorothy Ko. See: Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994).

[13] The intersection between religion and popular culture has long been of interest to religious studies scholars, evident in ongoing research that examines how fan cultures propagate religious beliefs. For example, Kaitlyn Ugoretz studies online Shinto communities and the globalization of the religion through popular media, including anime and videogames. Jolyon Thomas has written about how the 1989 Hayao Miyazaki film *Nausicäa of the Valley of the Wind* was read by some fans as a religious text. See: Kaitliyn Ugoretz, "As the Spirit Moves You: How Studio Ghibli Films Leave Room for A Range of Religious Interpretations," Beneath the Tangles, September 23, 2019, https://beneaththetangles.com/2019/09/23/studio-ghibli-films-leave-room-for-a-range-of-religious-interpretations/; and Jolyon Baraka Thomas, *Drawing on Tradition: Manga, Anime, and Religion in Contemporary Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2012).

> As I sat amongst the numerous files in the Lesbian Herstory Archive, sifting through leaflets, memoranda for obscure collectives, calls for submissions and meeting agendas, I realised that the contemporary artists had managed what I had not. By engaging with these histories of second-wave feminism in their art projects, they had creatively reworked these historical moments in a way that had not been possible as an art historian. […] Material that I had collected, pored over, and been fascinated by, but had been unable to write about, was now activated within the public realm…[14]

As both a historian and a fan of feminism, Grant expresses the impasse of writing history—how the necessity of narrative compels its objects to gather into recognizable patterns and exclude excess—the common, the idiosyncratic, the lesser. This impasse asks, does the demand of form and discipline diminish the true nature of objects? Or is it merely a failure of the historian to masterfully wield the tools of their profession? If the historical research is without flaw, but the value to its subject is lost, then for whom does this history have meaning? Does excess still not matter? To affirm attachment is to recognize and feel the affective warp that weaves together communities of humans and things. It is perhaps the most generous gesture we might extend to our historical subjects.

[14] Grant, "Fans of Feminism," 285.

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