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BOOK REVIEW

Fake geek girls: Fandom, gender, and the convergence culture industry, by Suzanne Scott

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Suzanne Scott. *Fake geek girls: Fandom, gender, and the convergence culture industry*. New York: New York University Press, 2019, paperback, \$30 (304p) ISBN 978-1479879571.

[1] Suzanne Scott's *Fake Geek Girls* is a timely and necessary extension of work on the relationship between fans and the industry through a feminist media studies lens. *Fake Geek Girls* uses the memetic trope of an inauthentic, highly gendered geek or fan to explore not how gendered fan boundaries are policed within fandoms, arguably the more obvious approach, but instead how the ways in which the industry engages, elevates, and sanctions fans privileges some groups of fans and fan behaviors over others. Scott writes transparently about her investments in fandom, her spiritual alignment with the concept of acafan, and her deep commitment to feminist approaches to fan studies. The feminist potential of fandom, she argues, may be squelched as the industry pays greater attention to fandom. Scott argues that despite the historical significance of female fans within both fandoms and fan studies, the way in which the industry positions and privileges affirmational fans and the male fans who fit within this paradigm can serve to push female fans to the margins. Her book looks at a number of sites of industry/fan connectivity—from fictionalized representations of fans to fan contests to celebrity fans—to consider what she calls the "convergence culture industry," (7) the context in which the industry has conditionally embraced some fans and excluded others. Methodologically this book also effectively demonstrates how important it is for fan scholars to study the contexts within which fans operate. Scott centers her analysis on media texts and industry discourse, with only a small number of sections looking at everyday fans or fan works.

[2] Scott's introduction contemplates how the mainstreaming of fandom has been treated as a threat by some fans, a threat that too frequently is blamed on women and minorities who are

painted incorrectly as interlopers. She considers the role of nostalgia and a kind of spreadable misogyny underlying movements to "Make Fandom Great Again" (17) by excluding certain fans. However, Scott ultimately centers her argument on the impact the industry makes in these debates through industry efforts to shape fans to meet their needs. In this chapter she coins the term "convergence culture industry" (7) —a clever and surprising combining of Henry Jenkins and the work of Adorno and Horkheimer—and calls for a deeper investigation into the impact of industry structures on fandom.

[3] Chapter 1 continues this concern with mainstreaming but focuses more substantively on Scott's contention that expanding the definition of fans can destabilize the underlying foundations of fan studies, most notably what she sees as an essential relationship between feminist media and fan studies. Scott engages key debates around the expanding subjects of fandom studies and the growing critiques of the concept of acafandom. She argues that much like the media industry, fan studies is in danger of similarly marginalizing female fans and transformative works. More explicitly, she posits the risk of a postfeminist fandom studies that depoliticizes essential parts of fandom, aligning fan studies too closely with industry norms. Scott pivotally engages with central dichotomies in fan studies and provides an argument linking transformative fandom with female fans and affirmational fandom with masculinity, a heuristic that much of the rest of the book depends on. The bulk of her subsequent chapters focus on the myriad ways in which the convergence culture industry prioritizes and proposes ideal fans and fan behavior. This ideal, Scott suggests, is primarily affirmational and focuses on an enunciative fandom that values encyclopedic knowledge over critique. Using a number of examples, Scott demonstrates that industry imperatives tend to favor the fanboy both for demographic and strategic reasons.

[4] Chapters 2 and 3 consider how representational tropes, both in traditional media and online, frame fandom in what she considers androcentric ways. In chapter 2 she notes that the fanboy, neatly aligned with the valuable young male demographic, has been represented more frequently and more positively than female fans. She explores a number of media texts to consider how the ways in which male fans are depicted may create a sense of entitlement or privilege among this subset of fandom. Chapter 3 considers how this entitlement has escalated preexisting gendered gatekeeping in fandoms. Here she coins the term "spreadable misogyny" (76), drawing on Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green's work on spreadable media (2013). Spreadable misogyny, she argues, allows some nerd subcultures to both validate their own victimhood and to attack women, who are treated as an external threat. She considers how this form of misogyny may be mimetic through an analysis of the idiot girl meme and fake geek girl discourse. Scott finds that hostility to women within fandom is not only apparent but that it draws on key value systems within fandom, like authenticity. She explains how this perception of fangirls as fake geek girls places female fans in untenable positions in which they are constantly having to prove themselves. While she explores instances in which women push back with their own memetic content, she also demonstrates that these negative discourses are pervasive.

[5] Chapters 4 and 5 look more closely at how industry-specific behaviors engage fans in managed ways, which she calls fanagement. In these chapters Scott not only demonstrates how fan behaviors have become measurable and potentially even monetizable by the industry but also how the creation of official industry opportunities, seen by some to legitimize fandom, often are

designed to exclude a number of fans and fan behaviors. In Chapter 4 she demonstrates how efforts to shape fan discourse through twitter hashtagging privilege enunciative fandom. Enunciative fandom is further privileged in projects like *The Talking Dead* (2011–) which elevate the image of a fanboy even while curating and limiting the types of allowable fan discourse, often at the expense of female fans. Even initiatives that ostensibly solicit genres of fan work associated with transformative work, like fan fiction or fan vids, are designed to exclude the kind of critical, interpretive, and sometimes erotic work that are part of these genres. Using the examples of FanLib, Kindle Words, and a number of tool kits for fan video content, Scott demonstrates that supposed collaborationist approaches to industry/fan projects are designed using terms and conditions in ways that preclude the types of fan content most associated with female fans. Chapter 5 further builds on the analysis of Chris Hardwick's *Talking Dead* by contemplating the idea of professionalization of fandom, particularly through the figures of the fanboy auteur and fantrepeneur. Situating these examples around long-standing debates around the appropriateness of monetizing fan work, Scott looks at how the industry has embraced the professionalized fan in ways that more community-based fandoms are wary of. Scott provides ample examples of ways male producers are able to use their fandom to argue for authenticity with viewers and to use their discourses with fans (as a fan) to shape narratives around a text. While she addresses mold-breaking cases, like Felicia Day's success leveraging her fan identity and Orlando Jones's fully immersed self-identification as a fangirl, she argues that in most cases the dynamic of producer/fan engagement and the slippage between these identities favor men, particularly in more official roles as the fanboy (or fangirl) auteur helming major cult media texts. She further considers how this concept can be extended to the idea of fantrepeneur who similarly use their fan identities as a brand but not necessarily as frequently in the auspices of the media industry as fanboy auteurs do.

[6] Scott's final chapter considers the ways in which the industry has made space for or engaged the geek girl. Her examples here primarily focus on fan merchandise and fashion and looks at Pinterest and Her Universe as spaces that bring fangirls into conversation with the convergence culture industry. Drawing on Hebdige's work, she looks at how both Pinterest and Her Universe create potential spaces for creativity and criticism through fashion and performativity, while also being limited by their privileging of highly gendered topics and images. Scott connects the possibility of gender-bending crossplay in Her Universe to her final example, the highly critical and transformative project The Hawkeye Initiative, which replaces hypersexualized comic book images of women with Hawkeye in the same pose. While this chapter was intriguing and rightfully demonstrates the need to consider how fangirls are spoken to and make space for themselves in the convergence culture industry's models of fandom, it was also the one chapter I felt needed more elucidation. While earlier arguments in the book were bolstered by plentiful examples of androcentric fandom in action, Scott's discussion of Pinterest and Her Universe focused more on the potential these spaces had for women rather than the ways in which they've been productively used. It is notable that her most detailed example in this chapter, The Hawkeye Initiative, is fully transformative and very much outside of the industry. This left me wanting a clearer sense of how these examples help us better understand the phenomena focused on in the rest of the book.

[7] Scott's book is an important contribution to the field for both fan and industry scholars. *Fake Geek Girls* speaks powerfully to the complex ways in which the industry transforms and is being

transformed by fandom. It also, crucially, updates our understanding of industry/fan dynamics to better grapple with contemporary technological and social contexts. However, the book also contains gaps that call for further scholarly debate, particularly regarding its underlying focus on two imagined categories of fans. Scott is relatively transparent about some of these gaps. She is particularly forthright about the need for a more intersectional analysis of gender and race in fandom. This is an important qualification, but one that I was left wishing she had tackled more deeply herself, given her discussion of figures like Yvette Nicole Brown and Orlando Jones. Scott should be credited for her choice to make her writing process transparent by explaining her choice to foreground androcentric fandom, but her frequent references to key issues of race left me wanting a more integrated consideration. Scott is also quite explicit about her own perspective as a fan and fan scholar and her intentional privileging of one form of fandom (feminist, critical, and often transformative) and fan scholarship over other possibilities in this book, sometimes to the exclusion of others. While this worked well as a polemic, it left me troubled at times where I felt the complex ways in which industry-sanctioned fan behavior interacted with other forms of fan behaviors, or could welcome important groups of people marginalized by existing fandoms, were not explored.

[8] Scott's linking of certain types of industry-sanctioned fandom to men/masculinity and other practices to women is important, but the gendered affirmational versus transformational binary of fan practices also warrants greater exploration and future research. Scott's examples included work by women like Felicia Day, E. L. Jones and Lauren Faust, female content creators who have thrived in this androcentric paradigm. Further, with female-targeted shows like *Pretty Little Liars* (2010–17) engaging in the kinds of Twitter tagging practices discussed in the book and long-standing histories of affirmational female fan practices like letter writing, further investigation is needed to explore whether or not the affirmational/transformational spectrum is as clearly gendered as it is being treated here. However, no text is ever complete, and the ways in which Scott's book elicits these questions for the future is, in and of itself, a strength. There is no question that the industry is engaging fandom in increasingly strategic ways and no question that the gendered boundary-policing endemic to internet culture is a significant and toxic element of today's digital fan cultures. *Fake Geek Girls* deftly pulls these two themes together and provides a clearer understanding of how industry imperatives may be creating fan hierarchies that disadvantage and marginalize women while breeding an attitude toward proper fandom that can turn hostile toward the women who are, and always have been, a central part of fan culture.

Reference

Jenkins, Henry, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green. 2013. *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*. New York: New York University Press.