



New audiences, new textualities

Anti-fans and non-fans

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ABSTRACT ● Intentionally or not, audience research often equals fan research, as anti-fans and non-fans are ignored or assumed. However, televisual anti-fandom and non-fandom involve different viewing practices, different proximities from the text and, thus, different textualities. This article therefore argues for the necessity of more research into anti-fans and non-fans, proposing that such research will shed further light on the nature of televisual textuality and on the role of media talk and intertextuality in forming it. The text remains a mysterious figure in media and cultural studies, and this article aims to bring us closer to understanding it. First, fan research and its own implicit assumptions of relations between text and audience are discussed; then, an 'atomic' model of textuality is presented, accounting for fans, anti-fans and non-fans; and, finally, a method for studying new audiences and textualities is offered. ●

KEYWORDS ● affect ● fans ● methodology ● reception studies ● television audiences ● text ● textuality ● viewing positions

As media consumers, fans attract a lot of attention: Hollywood has a penchant for movies about them (*King of Comedy*, *Misery*, *The Fan*, *Almost Famous* and so on); they feature prominently in jokes; they have their own speciality stores, magazines and websites; journalists and interviewers are irresistibly drawn to them; and, over here in academia, they are favourite audience research subjects.¹ Indeed, as the wave of post-encoding/decoding model audience research continues to hit media and cultural studies, it is

remarkable how often the fan can be found atop the crest of this wave. In this article, I will be interrogating this position and this body of research, engaging in an 'oceanography' of reception studies, so to speak. My interests lie not in disputing academic interest in the fan, but in examining what this wave has unnecessarily and unintentionally pushed under, what is missing from its present thrust and what the effects of these omissions have been on the wider discipline of media and cultural studies. One of the key 'submerged victims' of fan research has been a full understanding of textuality, particularly televisual textuality, and of the broad variety of interactions that occur between text and audience. Consequently, while I believe that audience research is a vital component of a critically active, engaged and aware media and cultural studies, it is in need of reinvigoration. My task in this article will be to evaluate its present status, and to suggest ways in which we may reinvigorate it by studying 'new' televisual audiences, and, hence, new televisual textualities.

This study sprang from observations made during the early stages of audience research into viewers of *The Simpsons*. The original intent was to conduct individual interviews, but when several people asked to be interviewed in couples, I rather grudgingly agreed. Several of those couples were polarized, though, with one an avid fan, and the other either a *Simpsons* detractor or a non-fan. What struck me, however, was how many of the anti-fans and non-fans could provide a lengthy and impressive in-depth analysis of *The Simpsons*. This commentary differed from their fan counterpart, and thus clearly was not 'borrowed' from the fan, merely parroted for their or my benefit. Rather, they were responding to the show in meaningful ways, for the show had considerable meaning for them. I also heard from people who had been *Simpsons* fans, but who had long since reduced their viewing to once every month or two, and yet still spoke of it as meaning and doing very particular things for them. For the purposes of these interviews, my interests lay slightly elsewhere, but this article represents an attempt to make sense of these and other viewers' anti-fan or non-fan engagements with television, and of what their relationship with its texts means for an understanding of its textuality. As such, the article is speculative, but will at times draw from this research to provide glimpses of what further empirical work might offer.

Network executives would no doubt love it if all audiences were fans, but they are not. Rather, many viewers watch distractedly, in bits and/or casually; many, too, hate or dislike certain texts. When one's relationship to the text is no longer one of close affect, though, the very nature and structure of that text changes. Textuality shifts according to viewer engagement level, and it is therefore not possible to read an anti-fan's or non-fan's text off a fan's. Instead, we need to focus particular attention and dedicated studies on anti-fans and non-fans as distinct matrices of viewing and textuality, and there is, as such, still much to be learned of contemporary media

textuality. I intend in this article to take some early theoretical steps towards realizing this new research agenda. To begin, however, I will look briefly at the need for fan studies, and the reasoning behind them, tracing some of their major successes. Subsequently, I will argue that fan research has left the anti-fan and the non-fan, and their own texts and textualities, under-researched and insubstantially theorized or understood, and I will present a three-way model of the televisual text, allowing for fan, anti-fan and non-fan. Then, lest we convince ourselves that research is (or can be) dictated solely by theory, I will also look at the nuts-and-bolts questions of methodology and practice, and will attempt to outline a programme for future work into these 'other' viewers of television.

The fan and fan studies

Media and cultural studies, I hope we can now agree, need to conduct audience research at some level if they are to complete the communication loop from sender to receiver. Textual analysis still has much to offer, and we would be irresponsible to abandon it on literary and film studies's theoretical doorstep, but it still cannot answer what happens on decoding. Likewise, while production-end analysis and political economy approaches tell us a lot about the state of media texts before they reach the audience, and about the media environment, they cannot and do not tell us what the audience does with these texts – what influence, power, effects or meaning they take on; how we use them to construct personal or group identities; or how they fit into our 'mattering maps' (Grossberg, 1992). While by no means an archangel of incontrovertible proof, reception research offers us valuable insights into consumption and decoding, and offers us the opportunity to round out theories of the media and their place in society with empirical observation. However, a great deal of this work turns to the specific audience of fans. Why might this be?

First, methodologically, fan research allows the researcher to avoid screenings, and with them the nasty aura of the positivist laboratory study. Much work into audiences previous to the encoding/decoding wave (and much since) took people out of their natural viewing environments, showed them a sample text or texts and recorded their responses. These studies raise many questions regarding replicability and artificiality, and neatly but highly problematically remove context from the picture of media consumption. Indeed, David Morley has noted of his *Nationwide* audience work (1980) that it involved showing a programme that several participants never watched to them in an environment in which they would never watch anyway (1992: 136–7), and it was this observation, among others, that led Morley to his study of the familial viewing context in *Family Television* (1986). Once our informants are fans, though, we do not need to call them

in for screenings. Fans live with in-built, intricately detailed memories of their text(s), and fan research therefore allows us to ask incisive questions about the fan's actual viewing environment, responses and/or use of the text(s). Admittedly, their answers come couched in language, and are *reports* of what was felt or done, not the elusive 'thing itself', and thus we should avoid the naturalist trap of taking such reports as gospel, but we have still significantly cut through the artificiality of the laboratory approach.

Fan research has been institutionally and personally *convenient*, as I will discuss later, and thus there exist many prescient reasons why the turn to in-depth audience research has often assumed the form of fan research, but it has also served an important role in understanding media consumption through focusing on a particular type of involvement with the media text. Elsewhere, the fan has notoriously been regarded as a dupe, a passively blind receptor to corporate propaganda and establishment ideology, and an obsessive, strange social outcast. Furthermore, as Ann Gray (1999) notes, there has frequently been a gendered element to this pathologization. Behaviour perceived as fundamentally irrational, excessively emotional, foolish and passive has made the fan decisively feminine. Even when the fan is not female, in the prevalent image of the unattractive, acne-suffering, 30-year-old virgin male computer nerd lies the epitome of all that is not masculine. The word 'fan' itself is often used pejoratively, mostly to describe those who enjoy already-disfavoured genres such as soap operas, romances, science fiction or pop music;² thus large swathes of viewers and texts alike have been written off. Fan studies, by contrast, have provided a much-needed intervention and corrective, researching rather than assuming, exploring rather than judging.

Reading any study of fans, one can be struck by their recognizable and familiar humanity. Even studies of those fans whom society pathologizes and ridicules the most – romance readers (Radway, 1987), fan fiction writers (Jenkins, 1992; Penley, 1997; Lancaster, 2001), soap aficionados (Ang, 1985; Buckingham, 1987; Thomas, 2002), fantasy or sci-fi gamers (Lancaster 2001), or fans of violent movies (Hill, 1999) – remain instrumental in dispelling beliefs of the fan as weird, somewhat suspect Other, and have gone a long way towards proving that fandom, psychological instability, and audience passivity are in no way conjoined, and that fans are no less complex and multifarious than others. Indeed, building on early fan studies and breaking out of the defensive mode required of many earlier theorists, recent studies of fandom have focused on differences, nuances and even contradictions and clashes within fandom. Matt Hills' *Fan Cultures* (2002) is particularly illustrative here, writing back to early work and some of its romanticizations of fandom; likewise, Kurt Lancaster (2001) uses performance studies theory to tell the story of fandom from outside its usual cultural studies home, hence illuminating fan studies in the process and,

with Hills, proving that fan studies are far from monolithic and reminding us of how fandom itself is far from monolithic.

John Corner (1996) has accused audience research in general of having given up on the 'macro' political issues of the 'public knowledge project' to pursue 'micro' issues and revel in popular culture and questions of pleasure and identity-construction, but this reductive argument ignores that the media's relevance to contemporary society is by no means to be found solely at the level of politics and ideological perpetuation. Furthermore, as David Morley counters, the argument also forgets that 'macro-structures can only be reproduced through micro-processes' (1992: 18–19), and so complaining of fan studies' micro focus is like saying we should get on and build a house without knowing how it is done.

What, then, is 'wrong' with fan studies? Or, rather, we could ask, what important issues, audiences and textualities are hiding in its shadow? For the problem lies in the path not taken, and the audience research not done. Here, too, let us focus on television, for while books and movies may at least ask for a more fan-like proximity with the text, television offers multiple viewing positions and distances.³ Hall's 'dominant', 'oppositional' or 'negotiated' reader positions (1980) make perfect sense when the text being reacted to is the same (the finished book or film), but television offers the added complication of partly and differently read texts, demanding that we add the dimension of fan, anti-fan and non-fan to that of dominant, oppositional and negotiated.

When faced with an unappealing television line-up of programmes, it is common to claim 'nothing's on' when what is meant is that nothing one particularly *likes* is on, but fan studies can often literalize the comment, leading us to the conclusion that if a fan is not watching, then 'nothing's on'. By focusing so intently on the fan, reception studies are distorting our understanding of the text, the consumer and the interaction between them. As Clifford Geertz famously observed, a blink of the eye can be a twitch, a wink, a mock wink or even a rehearsed wink, and the art of ethnography involves distinguishing between them (1993: 7). Fan studies have helped us to explain the winkers, but as yet there has been little work into the twitchers, parodists and rehearsals. To fully understand what it means to interact with the media and their texts, though, we must look at anti-fans and non-fans too.

Atomic phenomena and the text

To help us conceive of why such a consideration may be important, and purely as a visualizing tool, let us imagine the text as an atom.⁴ Of course, atoms are always colliding and intermingling, and so too are texts always intersected and interrupted by dense networks of intertextuality (Bakhtin,

1986; Bennett and Woollacott, 1987), making it impossible for us to regard any atom or any of its constituent parts as either independent or truly stable. Nevertheless, working with it as the basic unit of textuality, the atom has a nucleus of protons and neutrons, surrounded by electrons, spinning around the nucleus at speed. And, as we will discuss later, positrons – the positively charged anti-particles of electrons – also orbit the nucleus. With this as our text, now let us add different audiences, for if as audience researchers we are trying to see the text through its audience's eyes, our picture of the text will vary quite markedly, depending on how close the audience is to the 'work' itself.⁵

Right at the very centre of the text, in its relatively stable nucleus, first we find the aptly named 'close reader'. In good Leavisite fashion, such a reader ignores the text's outlying regions and interactions with other texts, and chooses instead to remain in a realm of supposed denotation and stability, determined that here, at the very centre of the text, lies the key that will unlock the entire work, answering the multiple mysteries of the atom. As this is a position adopted almost solely by supposedly neutral analysts, let us designate them neutrons. Of course, though, close reading and the myth of neutrality are exactly what reception and fan studies rebelled against, preferring to look at how a text is actually situated in society, at what else accrues to 'the text itself'.

In his Affective Stylistics period, Stanley Fish demanded that literary studies should involve '*an analysis of the developing responses of the reader in relation to the words as they succeed one another in time*' (1980: 73; emphasis in original), arguing of the text that, ultimately, 'what it does is what it means' (1980: 77). Fish elaborated that too often literary analysis involves regarding the text as a structural, *spatial* whole, when in fact it is an entity that comes into being *in time*. As analysts, he points out, 'somehow when we put a book down, we forget that while we were reading, *it was moving* (pages turning, lines receding into the past) and forget too that *we were moving with it*' (1980: 83; emphasis in original). Fish was interested, then, in how one sentence or line acts on and contextualizes another, and in how interpretation must continually reoccur as one reads, so that what a text is and what it means are constantly shifting. If we now apply such a theory of textual phenomenology to television, we have a situation in which series may take years to (re)form as texts. Indeed, whereas finishing a book allows us to treat it as a spatial whole to some degree, ongoing television series deny even that. The weeks between episodes open up a text, allowing all manner of intruders and intertexts to inflect our textual gestalt, to pull us as readers away from the work and to set us in motion. There is still a role for close textual analysis, for the work still lies at the centre of the text, but we cannot see everything from this point.

However, by turning to the fan, we have only moved to the proton. Granted, fans actively look 'outside' the nucleus to intruders and intertexts,

negotiating certain readings of the text, and they may well read over or in spite of it (Jenkins, 1992; Penley, 1997; Lancaster, 2001), fitting text into personal or group context. Nevertheless, we can count on them to be remarkably aware of and close to the work. In this regard, although Abercrombie and Longhurst note that 'fans are nomadic in that they move across and between texts and read intertextually' (1998: 124), in fact they are tourists, not nomads, for what they find elsewhere is always related back to the positively energized environment of the proton, back to the textual nucleus. Constance Penley, for example, rewrites NASA and *Star Trek*, but she does so intricately aware of the textual nucleus of both. To fit something into the 'NASA/TREK' universe, one must first know that universe extremely well, and, as Penley notes, 'No one knows the object better than the fan' (1997: 3). Similarly, while Lancaster writes on fans who 'perform' most of their fandom outside the nucleus, he concludes that they do so 'to try to recapture – through participation and immersion – the original cathartic moment experienced during the first viewing of the originating material' (2001: xxxiv).

As faithful viewers who know what happened last week and many weeks before, who likely shush those who interrupt a programme and/or who record it for subsequent (repeat?) viewings, and – simply – who watch the whole show, fans experience a proximity as close (if not closer) to the producer's text/nucleus as any researcher. Abercrombie and Longhurst helpfully point out that fans come in different shapes and sizes, and that there is a spectrum of involvement even within positive involvement, ranging from 'fan' to 'petty producer' (1998: 141), and thus some protons in this model are closer to the centre than others. But, effectively, the text/nucleus is still in fairly stable hands: fans are frequently more than close readers, but they are also and always-already close readers to some degree, and never escape a deep awareness of the work. Consequently, if as researchers we turn to fans to go beyond our own neutron position and the work itself, fans still have close links, so there is still further yet to travel, with more motion to track.

The anti-fan

Let us turn, then and instead, to the electrons. Although the fan is positively charged, what of those who are negatively charged? What of anti-fans? This is the realm not necessarily of those who are against fandom per se, but of those who strongly dislike a given text or genre, considering it inane, stupid, morally bankrupt and/or aesthetic drivel. Fan studies have taken us to one end of a spectrum of involvement with a text, but we should also look at the other end to those individuals spinning around a text in its electron cloud, variously bothered, insulted or otherwise assaulted by its presence.

Anti-fans have long been fans' Other, but let us now let them speak for themselves, particularly now that they, too, often form social action groups or 'hatesites', and can thus be just as organized as their fan counterparts. Such a research interest may at first seem arcane and eccentric; however, I believe the anti-fan may provide an interesting window to issues of textuality and its place in society.

The assumption behind not enquiring into anti-fans may be that, through their dispassion for the text, they know little about it, do not watch it and thus are poor informants. But, anti-fans must find cause for their dislike in *something*. This something may vary from having previously watched the show and having found it intolerable; to having a dislike for its genre, director or stars; to having seen previews or ads, or seen or heard unfavourable reviews. Take, for instance, Vivi, who hated the animation and colours on *The Simpsons*, and resented missing jokes and not getting cultural references in it, and thus had watched the show only a few times, never stomaching more than two minutes before turning it off. She explained that 'even though I don't watch this show, I don't *like* this show, uh, I have to know about it to a certain degree . . . otherwise I will be excluded from the conversation of my friends'. And know about it she did, offering insightful commentary, and all the while marking that while she did not like *The Simpsons*, it had a definite meaning to her and played a definite role in her life. Indeed, in this interview, although Vivi's husband was a fan, she had just as much to say of the text as did he.

In this or any other case, clearly anti-fans construct an image of the text – and, what is more, an image they feel is accurate – sufficiently enough that they can react to and against it. In analysing my interviews, for example, I found a fascinating near-perfect correlation between loving or disliking *The Simpsons* and seeing it, respectively, as critical of America and American life, or as yet another symbol of crass American cultural chauvinism. This correlation had little to do with differences of culture or predispositions to America, but rather to a difference in the text itself as perceived by close or 'distant' readers. Particularly for anti-fans who have not watched the show and yet judge it so vehemently, a textuality is born into existence in large part separate of what might be 'in' the text as produced. 'Oppositional' readers in Hall's terminology are one thing, but anti-fans may not even be viewers in the sense of people who have watched a show. Thus while much analysis of texts is steadfastly stuck to close reading, if we can show that people engage in distant reading, responding to texts that have not been viewed, and more importantly if we can track exactly how the anti-fan's text or text stand-in has been pieced together, we will take substantial steps forward in understanding textuality and in appreciating the strength of contextuality.

Reflecting on the nature of textuality, Nick Couldry offers that 'the important question is: on what scale do readers themselves regard textual

order as existing?’ (2000: 71), for the text, at heart, is ‘a complex of inter-related meanings which its readers tend to interpret as a discrete, unified whole’ (2000: 70–1). To those, then, who vehemently state that *The Simpsons* is ‘rubbish’ without having watched it, clearly they have a very firm notion of the show’s textual order; clearly it is a discrete, unified whole to them; and clearly this *text* has taken on some form of meaning in their lives. Moreover, we are not just talking of lone, angry individuals, for entire interpretive communities can come to share these texts (the electron may not travel alone). In the early 1990s, for example, *The Simpsons* was at the centre of a North American moral panic over ‘family values’, with particularly Bart Simpson becoming a fearful symbol of disruptive youth rebellion, hence pointing to the existence of a powerful, communal anti-fan text. It should be of great interest to us, however, how such a text was formed, and from where it came. Certainly, when researchers such as Barwise and Ehrenberg find respondents rating on an appreciation scale texts they plainly admit to never having seen (1988: 51), there is quite literally more to textuality than meets the eye.

A study of anti-fandom would therefore likely demand that we take what Gerard Genette calls ‘paratexts’ (1997) more seriously. Paratexts are those semi-textual fragments that surround and position the work. Writing of books, Genette gives the examples of covers, prefaces, reviews, typeface and afterwords, none of which is truly independent of the work, but all of which stand to inflect our interpretation of a text substantially. Turning to television, introductory sequences, ‘spoilers’ and ads, newspaper, magazine or web articles, merchandise and the very buzz or media talk that surrounds any given programme all become important paratexts. As Genette describes, ‘the paratext provides an airlock that helps the reader pass without too much respiratory difficulty from one world to the other’ (1997: 408). Paratexts, then, are set up around the work’s perimeter, controlling access to the nucleus, so to speak. All of us must pass through them, and so their role is often sorely undervalued, but the non-viewing anti-fan may only ever ‘read’ the text at its ‘airlock’ outskirts, in the realm of the electron cloud. As Genette points out, the paradox of the seemingly independent paratext is that while a text cannot exist without a paratext, paratexts can exist without (and hence can create) texts. Vivi, as I have said, could analyse and even deconstruct *Simpsons* minutiae with considerable talent, and yet it seemed obvious that a considerable amount of her knowledge and therefore image of the text came from media talk and overheard conversation about it, not from the combined 15 minutes or so of the show that she had seen spread out over several years, so that when she spoke of a limited admiration for the show’s parodic commentary on the media, and I asked for examples, she laughed and replied ‘I don’t know how I know this’, but made it clear that the knowledge came from outside her own *Simpsons* viewing. More anti-fan studies, then, would surely prove the importance of paratextuality, and may

even lead us to engage in 'close readings' of paratexts, asking, for instance, what is in *The Simpsons*' paratextual assemblage that labels it as crass American chauvinism to its anti-fans, or lets Vivi 'know' it as a parodic text.

Studying the anti-fan could also provide further insight into the nature of affective involvement, for many of us care as deeply (if not more so) about those texts that we dislike as we do about those that we like. To offer a famous example, Salman Rushdie will forever be in danger because of a strong anti-fan reaction to his novel *The Satanic Verses*. Thousands, perhaps even millions, of these anti-fans care enough about a text they have not read that they would call for its author's assassination. Certainly this is an exaggerated example, but it nevertheless points out that dislike is as potentially powerful an emotion and reaction as is like. My interview with Vivi, we should note, was set up by her, not her fan husband, for, as she explained to me with some passion in her voice, 'I really wanted an opportunity to express my opinion about this problem!' And, of course, fans can become anti-fans of a sort when an episode or part of a text is perceived as harming a text as a whole, as for instance with *Star Wars* fans at the self-explanatory www.jarjarbinksmustdie.com. Behind dislike, after all, there are always expectations – of what a text should be like, of what is a waste of media time and space, of what morality or aesthetics texts should adopt, and of what we would like to see others watch or read. To study the anti-fan, then, is to study what expectations and what values structure media consumption.

Certainly, expectations and values are in need of more research, and more than the obligatory single-sentence-Bourdieu-hit-and-run reference treatment to which they are often limited. Understandably, audience researchers have been wary of talk of 'value' and 'quality', for it is under such banner terms that much of television has been critically sidelined by many, and hence under which work on television texts has been considered unworthy, even laughable. However, as Charlotte Brunsdon argues, by refusing to talk of or study quality, we only yield the floor to the most conservative of opinions (1997: 124). Studying anti-fan disapproval and/or dislike, then, would offer media and cultural studies meaningful re-entry points to discussing quality, values and expectations, allowing us to focus on the range of everyday viewers' values, and on how they interact with media consumption, use and meaning. Values and quality, in short, could be reintegrated into research and into conceptions of what formulates textuality, rather than continue to serve solely as barriers to, or reaction points of, audience research.⁶

Ultimately, there is much to be learned of textuality for all audiences by studying anti-fans. In a sense, media and cultural studies could be said to approach the question of textuality back to front when it starts with fans, for this method involves starting at the nucleus of a text and trying to move out to see what else becomes attached – and therefore 'ancillary' and

'secondary' – to the text, whether paratext, intertext or context. As an exercise, let us reverse this process, and start at the outside, at a point where the close reader's text itself does not exist. At this point – the point proper of the anti-fan – we can more fully appreciate the power and role of textuality by feeling its reverberations, by measuring or otherwise sensing the gravitational pull that it exerts in society at its furthest climes. Then we can move inwards towards the text as object on the page or screen.

The non-fan

On this inward journey, though, before we reach the fan, we first encounter the non-fan. By non-fans, I mean those viewers or readers who do view or read a text, but not with any intense involvement. Non-fans likely have a few favourite programmes and are fans at other times (for these are neither essentialist nor exclusive categories), but spend the rest of their television time grazing, channel-surfing, viewing with half-interest, tuning in and out, talking while watching and so on. Ron Lembo charts the prevalence of people who come home from work, plonk themselves in front of the television, and just see what happens to be on (2000), and surely we all experience or observe this form of viewing all the time. Indeed, Barwise and Ehrenberg note that of the popular English programme *Brideshead Revisited*, 60 percent of English adults watched at least one of the 11 episodes, but less than 10 percent saw all or all but one (1988: 42). Moreover, Barwise and Ehrenberg's work dates from a pre-cable/digital/satellite era, so if we add an extra 50 channels or so to some of these viewers' households, plus the internet as key home leisure site and televisual rival, we soon appreciate how common non-fans are. Non-fandom is the comfortable majority. Even many 'fans' are lax fans, watching when they can rather than when they must, loving a text but watching it only occasionally, perhaps even at times out of a sense of duty, and hence blurring the boundary between non-fan and fan.

Non-fans watch because they want to, and so their 'charge' is still positive, but they share some of the anti-fan's lack of familiarity, and hence share the electron's hectic pace around the nucleus/text. Being a fan requires discipline, whereas being a non-fan is considerably more open and nebulous a category and practice, involving considerable flow in and out of different viewing positions. There is an element of the mysterious anti-matter to non-fans, and so let us dub them positrons, the anti-particle equivalent of electrons.

As with anti-fans, non-fans experience a text at its outskirts. Take Daphne, for instance, who estimated that she sees about four episodes of *The Simpsons* every six months. As she remarks, she is 'not a regular. I'm not a committed *Simpsons* watcher, but I enjoy it when I do [watch]'. Given

the nature of her viewing, some of the episodes she has watched were caught in progress, and she watched some alongside something else, flipping back and forth with the remote control. A considerable amount of production information was lost on her, and yet she knew snippets; she often had to guess or ask others why this character acted in such a way; and if someone interrupts the programme, she will probably not care too much, adding matter-of-factly, 'if I've got a commitment outside of the room, I'll leave it'. Not surprisingly, Daphne's view of the text proved at times wildly different from many fans', or from mine as the close-reading researcher's. It also differed markedly from other non-fans. Certainly, while fans tended to read *The Simpsons* as critical of America, anti-fans saw it as very pro-American and Daphne sided with the fans on this point; there was no agreement whatsoever among non-fans, with some even perplexed at the notion that the show was either. After all, if we ask everyone on a high-speed rollercoaster to tell us about the ground they are soaring over, each will see something quite different.

As with anti-fans, the problem posed by non-fans such as Daphne is no small one, for the very nature and physicality of the text changes when watched by the non-fan, becoming an entirely different entity and spelling out serious ramifications for the study of texts. Until now, media and cultural studies have often been content to ask what power or effects a text may have, how an audience might resist a text or what role context plays, but non-fan engagement with the televisual text denies us the existence of the solitary, agreed-on text with which to anchor such discussions. And as any scientist knows, when we make a constant a variable, the experiment must be started anew. This does not in any way make rubbish of work on textuality to date – it is not apocalyptic – for as fan studies make clear, active involvement with a relatively constant text is still a reality for many of us *at given times*. However, non-fan research would suggest that the varieties of media engagement are under-theorized, and would offer the empirical work and observations that would allow such theorizing to increase. Already, Joke Hermes (1995) has conducted fascinating work into the role of 'meaningless', 'putdownable' media texts that serve as 'in-between' activities (see also Lembo, 2000), but audience research must engage in more such work, and attempt to fill out in dedicated studies the largely uncharted area of non-fan engagement with media texts. Couldry suggests that "[p]utdownable" materials are, of course, highly ordered textual productions, but that does not mean their readers treat them as "texts" in the same way as they do films or novels – or even that they treat them as texts at all' (2000: 71–2), but this still points not to a lack of textuality, but rather to an under-theorization of textuality. Therefore, continues Couldry, '[s]pecific forms of "textuality" have to be investigated in their own right' (2000: 72).

The majority of time spent watching television for many viewers finds us

watching programmes that we do not care deeply for, and so important work exists in finding out what the text and textuality mean to us at such times. If we are not winking, what are we doing? *The Simpsons*, *Friends*, *Big Brother*, *Ally McBeal*, *South Park*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and many other international or national programmes are part of a common language, as are many of their events and characters, and these texts grow through media talk to something more than just the moment(s) of viewing. Indeed, Thaís Machado-Borges points out of Brazilian telenovelas that they have been ‘displaced’ into the everyday, as everything from shoes to viruses are named after their characters, and as their events seem to be known by an entire nation (2002), while Will Brooker records the ‘overflow’ of *Dawson’s Creek* into CDs, websites and J. Crew shirts (2001). All of these programmes *mean* something to many of us, regardless of how little we watch them, yet this is a still under-studied realm of textuality. Barthes’ dictum that ‘the Text cannot stop [. . .]; its constitutive movement is that of cutting across’ (1977: 157) applies to the reader as well, and yet, too often, analysts try to still both text and reader, blind to their dynamic transitivity.

Alternatively, the point at which texts hit everyday life is often the point at which analysts efface textuality to ‘flow’. Thus, for instance, Radway (1988), Appadurai (1995), Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) and Lull (2001), in their own ways, all focus on how individuals draw from media flows to construct their own flows of identity. To James Lull, therefore, we are all ‘cultural programmers’, constructing our own ‘supercultures’ as bits of this and bits of that, ‘customized clusters, grids, and networks of personal relevance – intricate cultural multiplexes that promote self-understanding, belonging, and identity while they grant opportunities for personal growth, pleasure, and social influence’ (2001: 132). Once again, though, the text becomes submerged. Studies into flows, supercultures and the everyday are a vital and exciting new area of cultural and sociological work, and in and of themselves constitute important work. Nevertheless, we should not always be supersizing, and must at the same time be able to study texts as texts, and not just as flows. We still need to ask what meanings, power, effects, identity and so forth are matrixed by specific texts for the non-fan, focusing the flow on individual instances and moments, once more allowing the ‘micro’ to suggest and construct the ‘macro’.

Methods of study

Of course, though, calling for more non-fan or anti-fan research involves practical as well as theoretical issues, and I now wish to examine some of these. After all, fan research offers a certain level of convenience, to the point that many projects that we may refer to as ‘fan studies’ likely set out simply as reception studies, but found it convenient to study fans. Fans, let

us be honest, are easy to find. To begin with, they are often highly socially organized, meaning that one need only tap into existing group networks. Then, the issue of what is in the interview for them – frequently a barrier to finding research participants – is easily answered. The very nature of fandom suggests willing informants: they feel strongly about the text(s) in question and have considerable interest in them, they are likely to enjoy talking about the text(s), and, given the popular image of fans as socially inadequate nerds, it may well be in their interests to defend themselves and their text(s) from further abuse. What is more, fans make particularly good interview subjects. Precisely because they care about the text(s) under study, they can be counted on to give involved replies to our questions. Their fan activities will frequently involve discussion and analysis of the text(s), so they will have a discursive history to draw on in an interview setting, and are therefore very likely to provide us with impressive, elaborated answers. If researchers fear monosyllabic replies and disinterested, uninteresting commentary from subjects, fans represent little risk, and so researchers cannot help but be drawn to them.

By calling for more anti-fan and non-fan research, then, I may seemingly be leading us to icy waters and awkward interviews with not-entirely-willing participants whose indifference to our research interests may well transfer to indifference to the interview. However, this need not be the case. Learning from what I discovered by chance, small group interviews, rather than individual ones, could prove fruitful. Here, I would recommend that, true to their ease of 'locate-ability', we begin our search for subjects with fans and anti-fans, for, as I found with Vivi, anti-fans will often respond to calls for participants too. We could then ask each fan or anti-fan to try to assemble a few friends who watch or have watched the text(s) in question, but stipulate that we are looking for people with varied levels of interest or involvement in it. To begin with, this solves the dilemma of where to find the non-fan, short of randomly asking people in and ascertaining their level of involvement once into the interview – a strategy that seems to entail a considerably high hit-and-miss risk ratio and may well turn up as many non-viewers as non-fans.

This method also retains the positive aspects of fan research. By asking our primary contacts to assemble a small group of friends, we can be reasonably sure that the resulting groups will be familiar and comfortable with each other, and we also increase the likelihood of interviewing groups that have already discussed the text in some capacity. Certainly, we can expect a variety of group dynamics, from ones in which the fan is respected as an expert, to ones in which anti-fans and non-fans 'gang up' on the fan, but this variety between groups could well prove illuminating. In addition, because part of our interest in interviewing anti-fans and non-fans would be to see how media texts fit into society, we could learn a great deal from observing how a group of friends activate the text in discussion. Ultimately, this strategy will likely avoid producing indifferent, monosyllabic responses,

and yet still offers us access to how anti-fans and non-fans talk of and regard media texts.

From a sociological standpoint, this strategy will also allow us to observe how fans, anti-fans and non-fans relate to each other, and how a media text and its meanings are negotiated between individuals with different levels of regard for, and involvement with, that text. In turn, then, this strategy could lead to a better understanding of how texts are regarded at the social, versus personal, level, telling us of a text's atomic weight. Media talk has colonized a considerable amount of everyday speech, and by studying fan to anti-fan to non-fan relationships and discussion, we could better appreciate how this talk feeds back into the text, inflecting its meanings, and possibly accentuating or de-accentuating its content, political or otherwise. Even within the categories, we would surely find significant differences and interrelationships: when asked about moral majority and 'family values' complaints about *The Simpsons*, Vivi just furrowed her brow and dismissed them as 'stupid fools', and she clearly held no ill-will to *Simpsons* fans (indeed, she is married to one!), setting her aside from some who detest both the text and the fans. Hence, we might also ascertain what purchase appellations such as fan, anti-fan or non-fan carry with viewers, and what (other) terms and accompanying conceptions of different viewing categories exist among viewers themselves. Such a strategy for research is, of course, not without faults (it relies quite heavily on a fan's or anti-fan's ability and willingness to assemble others, for instance), but it nevertheless deserves a trial, offering as it does the potential for some rich and new insights into media engagement, textual ontology and media talk.

Conclusion

Audience and reception studies have come a long way and produced much invaluable work in a short period of time. Indeed, although media and cultural studies often posit the post-war years as the field's biblical Genesis, we can date western concerns with textuality and the nature of the text back in a line to Plato. Throughout this considerable history of textual studies, though, few or none have bothered to look to the reader. Even literary studies and literary theory's own contemporaries talk only of ideal or hypothetical readers, and thus the theoretical and methodological boldness of audience research is truly commendable. However, it is not enough to pick one type of reader and tailor the text exclusively to this reader's measurements. As much as recent work on fandom continues to show the cultural relevance and complexity of fandom, the fan cannot and should not serve as textuality's default magic charm.

Rather, to further advance our study of textuality and its role in society, we must now go looking, microphones in hand, for different types of

audiences and, with them, different types of textuality. Our textual age is of an altogether more hectic sort than that of many of textuality's former students. For many of us, to go a single day without encountering multiple, even countless texts would require great skill and even greater isolation. Texts are everywhere, rocketing by us as often as we rocket by them. Thus, as Nick Couldry notes, a defining question for media and cultural studies becomes, 'on what terms can we go on thinking, and talking, about "texts" *at all* in cultures where, in a sense, we have too many texts?' (2000: 69; emphasis in original). My own answer is that we must look to anti-fans and non-fans as well, and study how the text changes – what atomic forces are at work – as it meets different audiences and viewing environments. Fragmented, distracted and over-saturated textual delivery and consumption show no signs of decreasing, nor does the complete media-textual infusion of everyday life. This way, then, lies the future of textuality, and, with it at least in part, this way should lie the future of audience research.

Notes

- 1 This article began life as a paper presented at the Fourth Crossroads in Cultural Studies Conference in Tampere, Finland, 2002. Thanks are due to those who commented on that paper, particularly to Nick Couldry.
- 2 Indeed, one hardly ever hears of 'new fans', as the person who watches three hours of CNN each day is simply called 'well-informed'.
- 3 Even here, though, we must be careful of over-estimating a book reader's or movie watcher's level of engagement. After all, many books are merely leafed through; cinemas are the sites not just of viewing, but also of discussion, love-making and napping; and books and films can also live through media talk alone.
- 4 It should be understood that this lay version of the atom, and accompanying descriptions of physics, are used loosely and highly selectively, and apologies are therefore offered to physics-savvy readers.
- 5 Here I use Roland Barthes' terminology of the 'work' as the actual, physical object or presence on the screen, and the 'text' as existing only in the interaction, and as 'practical collaboration', with the reader (1977: 163).
- 6 For a particularly good treatment of expectation and consumption, though, see Barker and Brooks (1998); and for an exemplary recent discussion of quality, see Thomas (2002).

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