**Video Script**

**Lecture 29 – Fandom & Cult Media**

**Fall 2020**

**Welcome**

We’ve moved through our class so far roughly chronologically: the advent of early film, transitional film, the studio era, radio, television, and then how the culture of 1960s and 1970s America transformed the media it touched.

Today’s lecture is a little bit different, in that it’s conceptual rather than chronological. But I thought we could build a bridge to thinking about fandom from our last two lectures, which touched on filmmakers championed by film nerds as well as mega-popular blockbusters like *Jaws* and *Star Wars*. How people connect to and defend these different forms—the impulse to take sides in the Scorsese vs. Marvel debate—is related to media fandom.

**Key Concepts**

Here are your key concepts for this lecture.

For much of this class, we’ve looked at what’s *on* the screen, as well as the industrial, regulatory, technological, and social factors that put it there. But where do fans fit into the picture? And, speaking directly to the concerns of this class, why should fans matter to the study of media history?

**Reflection**

First, I’d like you to indulge me in a little writing exercise. Take just two minutes and jot down some quick thoughts about these two questions. First, what is a fan? What distinguishes a fan from any audience member? And second, what are you a fan of? How do you express your fandom?

Come on back when you’ve considered what you’re most passionate about. It might not be media, either. It might be a sports team or athlete, a cuisine, or an activity.

**Hole**

Since we can’t share our answers with each other, I’ll give you an example from my own life. Growing up—and let’s face it, still now—I was a huge fan of the band Hole. I thought lead singer Courtney Love was so cool, and I loved her voice, and I liked how all of their songs were about the hardest parts of being a girl.

**Hole (continued)**

How I express that fandom, however, has changed over the years. **[ANIMATION]** I’ve paid money to see the band play a number of times. But when I was young, I would wait on long lines outside the venue for hours to get up close to the stage. That’s no longer a way I would demonstrate my love for this band, though—it’s not as important to me to be physically close to these musicians as it once was.

**[ANIMATION]** I’ve bought their records and merchandise (and I wish I still had that shirt, but I got rid of it years ago!). **[ANIMATION]** And I even have lyrics from one of my favorite songs tattooed on me, a tattoo I share with my best friend, with whom I did many of these fannish activities when we were teenagers.

My goal here is not to sell you on the merits of Hole (I mean, that’s a lie though, I kind of do want to do that) but instead to describe a range of activities that might set a fan apart from a more casual audience member or listener.

**Longhorns**

Being a fan might also look like this. This is a photograph from a UT football game, and you can observe some common social practices here. Everyone’s dressed in burnt orange. Everyone knows and is performing that hook ‘em gesture…

**Metallica**

…a gesture I could not have been more baffled by when I first moved here, since I didn’t grow up knowing anything about UT sports and had only seen that gesture in contexts like these. This is a group of Metallica fans at a concert making the same gesture, although it has a different social meaning here.

The significance is slightly fuzzy. It’s sooooort of meant to represent devil horns (it started with hair metal musician Ronnie James Dio, who stole it from his Italian granmother’s gesture to ward off the evil eye) but generally, in the context of a metal crowd, the gesture doesn’t mean “hook ‘em.” It signifies an affiliation with heavy metal culture.

**One Direction**

Fandom might also look like this group of One Direction fans from some years ago—which I keep in this presentation just because I get a kick out of that eyeball-licking sign, but it could be a picture of the BTS Army or another more recent pop music phenomenon. This might call to mind some of the photos we looked at of Beatlemania, or the widespread, full-bodied fandom of people who loved the Beatles in the 1960s.

So, Longhorns fans, Metallica fans, OneD fans: they’re all doing similar things. They’re standing, they’re screaming, and they’re gesturing at live events. But the social rules of each fan group, and the social meaning of each fan practice means that they might be perceived in different ways.

To put it another way: what does a OneD fan look like in your head. What does a Metallica fan look like in your head? Is that the same person in terms of age, gender, race, personal style, and so forth? Do the screams of a Metallica fan vs. the screams of a One Direction fan mean different things? Who might be called aggressive? Who might be called hysterical?

**Harry Potter**

Fandom might also be performative. Here, a bunch of Harry Potter fans are dressed up as characters from different wizarding houses.

**Cosplay**

Here’s an incredible cosplay by a *Mad Max: Fury Road* fan who incorporated their wheelchair into a two-person costume, representing Max chained to the hood of a war boy’s killer car.

**One Day at a Time**

Fans might also be activists on behalf of the media they love. Campaigns to save a canceled or endangered but beloved show would fall into this category, like the tenacious and ongoing campaign by *One Day at a Time* fans to save their show when it was canceled by Netflix—a campaign that was successful when it was picked up by PopTV, and recently relocated again to CBS.

**Women’s March**

And fandom might also look like this, when someone’s popular culture passions (here, a reference to *Star Wars*) bleeds into the way they live their life *unrelated* to media, like their political convictions. This picture was taken at a Women’s March, where this protestor’s *Star Wars* fandom gave voice to their beliefs about gender equality.

**Johnston**

Being a fan can also look like collective grief. Here’s a photo taken at the mural on Guadalupe, toward the south end of campus, that was painted by Austin musician Daniel Johnston. Just hours after he passed away last year, fans were already gathering to leave notes and flowers, light candles, and console each other about how much his music meant to them.

**Fan activities**

So, then, fan activities might be described as **[ANIMATION]** affirmational, or affective, or emotional, or transformational, or social, or participatory, or solitary, or political **[ANIMATION]** or several of these things at once, or none of these at all. But how we define a fan and their relationship to media products goes right to the heart of big, important questions about the role of media *and media corporations* in our everyday lives

**Definitions**

**[ANIMATION]** Lots of scholars over the years have tried to define what it means to be a fan and what that relationship can tell us about how media works on people, cultures, and societies.

**[ANIMATION]** The very earliest ideas about fandom, though, weren’t necessarily positive. The word fan comes from fanatic, meaning someone who is obsessive and overzealous, and in decades past fans who were *too* into their passions were seen as pathological—fandom was a symptom of an unhealthy mind.

**Play Misty for Me**

There are lots of depictions of obsessive, pathological fans in film and media history, but I figured I’d give you one that’s a) kind of a cult favorite and b) from roughly the era we’ve been talking about. *Play Misty For Me* was Clint Eastwood’s directorial debut, in which he plays a real cool cat radio DJ who plays jazz jams and recites poetry. Jessica Walter, of *Arrested Development* and subsequent gif fame, plays his increasingly deranged number one fan who calls in regularly, follows him to a bar, ingratiates herself into his life, and then tries to exact revenge in a host of bloody ways when he gives her the boot.

**Definitions (continued)**

But as more people began to study fans in earnest, that definition of fandom as a kind of mental illness gave way to an understanding that fandom is a social practice. **[ANIMATION]** Tulloch and Jenkins theorized in 1995 that the difference between fans and people who just plain like something is that fans organize themselves into communities. Fandom is public, collective, and collaborative. Followers are folks who just like stuff alone in their house. A *Great British Bake-off* follower watches the show. It’s delicious and heartwarming and the biscuits look great. A *Great British Bake-Off* fan, on the other hand, might watch with a group, live-tweet the episdoes as they come out, create gif sets of endearing moments for the Internet, etc.

**[ANIMATION]** Another scholar, Janice Radway, studied a group of romance novel fans. She too found that their fandom was social—it was something they did as a group—but further, she found that they formed an interpretive community. What does that mean? Well, she described it as a group of people with a shared set of purposes, preferences, and interpretive procedures around a certain media object. For the romance novel fans she studied, she found that these women:

* collectively valued and valorized a culturally denigrated object
* preferred books with spunky female characters who felt empowering to them (even when others might read those same characters as stereotypical)
* *and* read the books to escape crowded, demanding home lives as wives and mothers.

As a group, they shared similar uses of and meanings for these novels that they loved so much.

**[ANIMATION]** So, we know that fandom is a social behavior, but what does that look like? Well, folks have theorized that there are many ways to be a fan, but that you can classify all those different fan practices into two different camps. *Affirmational* fan practices support the fan object—this is stuff like buying and wearing official merch, collecting, watching and sharing trailers, and learning trivia. *Transformational* fan practices transform and extend fan object by using it as inspiration for a fan’s own creative work—this is stuff like writing fan fiction, making vids, remixes, etc.

The final point here is that the media industries have become increasingly interested in fans from roughly the 1970s through today, for many reasons. First, as *Jaws* and *Star Wars* first demonstrated, fans are great business. They spend tons of money on stuff. But in recent years, the media industries have grown interested in expanding the notion of fandom to be anyone who clicks a like button on social media. That’s technically a social action, in that it signals to other people that liking this thing is part of your online identity, but it’s also one that corporations can *monetize*. Directing fans toward actions such liking, commenting, watching, and sharing generates profitable data. Cosplay and fan fiction do not.

**Quote**

Generally, lots of scholars who look at fans understand fandom this way. In the words of scholar Henry Jenkins, “Fandom took shape as cultural studies was starting to blur the distinction between consumption and production, with fans valued precisely because they used the contents of mass media as raw materials for their own forms of cultural production.”

Transformational practices like fan fiction help make this point very clearly. Fan fiction uses the contents of mass media like superhero characters in order to create something new. That blends consumption—watching superhero blockbusters—with production—creating a new story.

**Question**

So, all of that leads us here. For the purposes of our class, we’re thinking about media fans in a historical sense. What can media historians learn from fans?

**Valentino**

First of all, fans are not a new phenomenon, and studying historical manifestations of fandom helps us see the role of media and in people’s lives across time.

Remember *way* back to our lecture on stars of the early studio era? One of the people we talked about was film heartthrob Rudolph Valentino. This is an image from his funeral in 1926, when the streets outside the chapel were clogged with thousands of fans grieving the loss of their screen idol. Valentino’s screen persona, as we discussed, was targeted mostly toward women—he was this seductive “Latin lover” type who could dance and romance you. But as you can see from the crowd, it’s not *just* women—this doesn’t look like the One Direction crowd, for example. This gives us some hints about how many people were seeing his films, how many people were curious about celebrity, and maybe even how central stars felt to lots of people’s lives in those early days of cheap, accessible films.

**Liszt**

…but we can take fandom back even further! Here’s a picture of piano hottie Franz Liszt, the composer and performer who inspired a widespread fan movement between 1841 and 1844 called “Liszstomania” by Heinrich Heine **[ANIMATION]**, a poet of the era. He documented female fans swooning over the composer, saying:

*“Throughout the room paled faces, heaving bosoms, highly-drawn breath during the pauses, were succeeded at last by stormy applause. The women are always as it were intoxicated when Liszt plays for anything for them. The Willis of the salon now gave themselves up to dancing with frantic delight, and I had difficulty in getting out of this confusion and saving myself in the adjoining room.”*

Willis, I should explain, are mythic ghost figures of brides who died before their wedding day, and return each night obsessed with dancing. Aside from the fact that that would make a great horror film (paging Ari Aster), the way he describes these women is very much in keeping with how “hysterical” female fans are described even today, screaming for boy bands.

There are lots of other stories of Lisztomania, including a popular anecdote of a woman who saw Liszt smoking a cigar on the street. Once he tossed his cigar butt into the gutter, she retrieved it and stuck it in her cleavage for safekeeping.

**Longfellow**

American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was so widely popular—with regular people! Kind of like the Stephen King of his day, if Stephen King wrote poems—that he corresponded with more than 6,200 fans over the course of his life. Illustrations of his house, which was a historic Revolutionary War property, were widely published, and as a result he had so many fans knock on his door he kept a basket of pre-signed autographs on his mantle for easy access.

So, again, certain aspects of fandom might be new. Commenting “zaddy” under a hot influencer’s latest thirst trap might be new—but the desire to know and be close to cultural figures, and the profound and meaningful relationships people can have with media, are longstanding facets of the human experience. By looking at those historical instances, we can begin to understand how media worked in everyday life, in different eras.

**Scrapbook**

Fans are particularly important to media historians because they are often historians themselves! Fan scrapbooks for Rudolph Valentino…

**Elvis**

…or Elvis Presley, or other cultural figures preserve media mentions, promotional materials, photographs, and memories. This is historical documentation that can and frequently *is* otherwise lost. Your reading for this lecture talks about this connection between doing scholarly historical research and the work that fans do to preserve the things they love.

**Elvis (continued)**

Here, you can see that this Elvis Presley fan has a bunch of photographs from different concerts they attended. A record like this, of what these shows felt like from the audience’s perspective, would certainly give us different information than a newspaper review of the same show, if that newspaper even preserved those articles.

**Cult**

Okay, so if we know what a fan is, and we broadly understand why fans might be important to understanding the role of media in our everyday lives, what’s the difference between a fan and a *cult* fan? What makes a movie a so-called *cult* movie?

Well, fan scholar Matt Hills defines cult fandom as **[ANIMATION]** a passionate, enduring, and socially organized fan audience. I’ve added emphasis here on “enduring.” Let’s dig a little deeper into that.

**Hills (continued)**

Hills says that cult fandom:

*“relates not to the intensity, social organization or semiotic/material productivity of the fandom concerned, but to its duration, especially in the absence of ‘new’ or official material in the originating medium. Thus, Star Trek fans did not become ‘cult fans’ historically until the program’s intense popularity persisted after its cancellation…”*

In other words, Hills is saying here that cult fans are fans who continue to love something full-time when there’s no new material to love. So, overlooked old movies and canceled television shows often become “cult” media because there’s nothing new except for a group of active fans to continue the discussion. And, as we’ll see, they often have some social watching practices that grow up around them.

**…anything?**

**[ANIMATION]** …but can anything have a cult fandom? Any movie? Any show? **[ANIMATION]** No. Cult media objects tend to display some combination of three key characteristics:

**[ANIMATION]** Auteurism, or an identifiable creator with a strong voice and style. **[ANIMATION]** An endlessly deferred narrative, or a question that’s never quite answered. **[ANIMATION]** And finally, hyperdiegesis, or a richly detailed world that’s only partially encountered within the media object, but nonetheless seems to operate according to an internal logic. These qualities reward repeated watching as well as encourage fan involvement—there’s lots to explore, there’s a question to answer, and there’s an authorial intention to always measure one’s conclusions and theories against. In this way, cult movies and television shows are both “created” by the media industries and “found” by fans—it’s a combination of both things.

Okay—now the fun part. Let’s look at some cult media.

**Rocky Horror**

Staying in that 1970s period we’ve been talking about, we can find one of the most enduring cult films of all time: 1975’s *Rocky Horror Picture Show*. If you haven’t seen it, it’s a musical comedy horror spectacular based on a 1973 stage play. It stars Tim Curry as Dr. Frank N. Furter, and a very young Susan Sarandon as one of a young couple who gets unexpectedly stuck at and seduced within Frank N. Furter’s castle. The movie sort of pays tribute to old science fiction and horror films, sort of like the ones William Castle used to put out, but what distinguishes Rocky Horror from any other wacky film is the intense moviegoing practices that developed around repeated screenings of this film. In some places, those screenings continued for decades and decades after it was released. Often held at midnight, Rocky Horror shows often drew LGBTQ and LGBTQ-friendly audiences who embraced the films androgyny, sexuality, and queerness.

**Fame**

Up until the pandemic shut down theaters, New York City *still* had weekly screenings at theater on 23rd Street every Friday and Saturday Night at midnight, and these screenings are deeply ritualistic and interactive. There are lines to yell back at the screen, props to throw, and people come in costume. There’s sometimes a cast who sings and dances along, and there’s always some sort of playful embarrassment of “virgins,” or people who haven’t seen the film before.

I’ve included in your module a link to one of the most iconic scenes from the film, the musical number “The Time Warp,” but also a scene from the 1980 movie *Fame* that is all about attending one of those interactive screenings.

**The Room**

Oh, hi Mark.

Much in the vein of the *Rocky Horror* cult phenomenon, a similar social movie-watching culture has arisen around screenings of unintentional comedy masterpiece *The Room*, a true garbage heap of a movie directed by and starring enigmatic gift from heaven Tommy Wiseau.

I’ve included in this module a Vox explainer on *The Room* if you haven’t seen it…

**Spoons**

…as well as a little video (which is not well shot, but bear with it) of someone in a theater explaining all of the participatory elements of a *Room* screening.

So, as you can see, both *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and *The Room*  become so-called “cult” films when an enduring fan community attends live screenings and builds intricate social practices over a span of years, if not decades, after the film was released. And to some degree, you can also see the three characteristics that Matt Hills pointed out. There is a strong style in these films.

There’s also—oddly, even in *The Room*—a sense of hyperdiegesis. Not to spoil anything, but the reason people throw spoons at the screen is because there is, for *some* reason, a framed photograph of a spoon in the background. *The Room* is a terrible film. All of its decisions are confounding, but because it’s such a poorly made film, exploring each of those badly made decisions at every level (including even in the background!) turns it into a fun world that people can play around in.

***The Prisoner***

Television shows can also be cult media, but cult television fandom tends not to revolve around these types of screenings with elaborate rituals, since television isn’t usually consumed publicly, like film.

Instead, cult television tends to be shows that offer deep dives, rich mythology, or mysteries that can be decoded as a group. And to be a cult show, it kind of *has* to be canceled in order to meet Matt Hill’s definition of an enduring fan base despite no new content.

One of the clearest examples I can give you of a cult television show and fandom is *The Prisoner*, a 1967 British science-fiction show starring Patrick McGoohan as Number Six, a British spy who is kidnapped and trapped in a mysterious village he can’t seem to escape.

**Village**

I’ve included a link for you to watch the first episode in full if you’re so inclined, and I recommend it both because it’s a fascinating show and also because the production design of the whole show is *so good*. It’s like Willie Wonka’s factory—just swap out the candy for an *excellent* font. Ugh, I love it so much.

But so, *The Prisoner* was cancelled after just one season, leaving its key central mystery unsolved—an example of an endlessly deferred narrative. The show’s fanbase endures to this day, communicating in physical fan conventions, through newsletters, and once the internet became a viable means of organizing, through websites, blogs, social media, and so forth.

**Videos**

My final two examples demonstrate how technological and industrial advances might be changing cult fandom, especially once we move into the digital age.

We’ll go into this in greater detail in a few lectures, but video helped increase access to cult films beyond just special screenings. I, for example, first saw *Rocky Horror* by renting it in the suburbs of New York City when I was far too young to have been allowed to go to a midnight screening. But as technology gives more people access to cult films and cult television, does it change the nature of cult fandom? And does it allow the media industries to capitalize on the cultures fans have built?

**Star Trek**

*Star Trek* is a great example of how the industry turned a cult fandom into an active one. The original series of *Star Trek*, which you watched a couple of weeks ago, ran only from 1966 to 1969, when it was cancelled. But *Star Trek* fans continued to rally around their cult media object, meeting at conventions, writing fan fiction, etc.

**SNL**

*Star Trek* fans gave the culture perhaps the prototypical image of a nerdy *male* fan. While female fans are often depicted as swooning, lovesick obsessives, from Lizst to One Direction, male fans are stereotypically depicted as geeky, asexual, know-it-alls. Here, you see this image in an old *Saturday Night Live* sketch called “Trekkies,” in which Captain Kirk himself tells these fans to “get a life.”

**Still**

The reality of *Star Trek* fandom was that it was equally female. Here’s a still from some local coverage of a 1976 *Star Trek* convention (also linked in the module) in which you can see that it’s full of women who are clearly active and central to this Colorado fan community.

**Gifs**

But over the years, studios and networks observed this enduring fandom. If people wanted to gather to talk about *Star Trek* and dress up like their favorite characters 15 years after it went off the air, might there not be a market there?

They responded by producing additional *Star Trek* series, like *The Next Generation, Voyager, Deep Space Nine,* and a whole host of films—which, in particular, were quite high-grossing and mainstream. *Star Trek: Into Darkness*, for example, made nearly half a billion dollars. If there’s new content and that content is widely loved—does that mean *Star Trek* fandom is still cult?

**Jon Snow**

The internet in particular facilitates studio and network monitoring of fan communities. When studios can easily locate and observe fan practices like playing with and theorizing about a show like *Game of Thrones*, and even incorporate those theories into the show, that raises questions. Is this a good thing? Is it a bad thing? Does it take advantage of fan labor? Is it surveilling fans who just want to have fun? Do fans *want* to write their own show? It’s an interesting discussion.

**Twin Peaks**

Because this is my lecture, I refuse to end it without talking about perhaps my favorite television show of all time, *Twin Peaks*. This was a perfect example of a cult show with a cult fandom when it was cancelled in 1991. The show was auteurist—deeply marked by the style of its creator, David Lynch. It had a vast and strange narrative world that encompassed the paranormal. And (at least at first) was organized by the deferred narrative of who killed Laura Palmer. So, it meets all of those three criteria that make a great cult object.

The show’s fan base endured for decades, enjoying and dissecting the show’s odd, sprawling narrative and surreal tone, which includes almost parodic scenes of idyllic small-town life alongside scenes of brutal violence, the supernatural, or utter mystery.

The show ran into trouble in its second season when it violated one of the three characteristics of a cult text and solved its central mystery—although I would argue, as a fan, that the solution is so strange it continued to be mysterious. Regardless, **[ANIMATION]** Damon Lindelof, the creator of *Lost, The Leftovers*, and *Watchmen* held up *Twin Peaks* as a sort of worst case scenario, or a trap that his show might fall into if it didn’t successfully spin new mysteries.

**The Return**

**[ANIMATION]** I’ve got TV critic David Bianculli on my side, who said “For those who dove inTwin Peaks was as deep a pool as TV had ever provided—not always clear, granted, but deep.”

But again, like *Star Trek*, the series was revived for a limited run in 2017 based on enduring interest from fans, who never stopped speculating about the rules of the Black Lodge and the fate of Agent Cooper. And unlike in 1990, this limited run debuted in a very different media ecosystem, when networks and streaming services have a great deal more data at their fingertips and, critically do not have to compete for an enormous audience share, like network television did in the early 1990s.. Does this mean *Twin Peaks* is still a cult show?

**Log Lady**

The relationship between the entertainment industry and fans changes over time—sometimes suspicious, sometimes antagonistic, and sometimes even parasitic. But it’s important to remember that fandom isn’t just about what you love—it’s about understanding how entertainment products shape our social world and social connections, and it provides valuable information to scholars about the power dynamics between corporations and audiences. I’m glad we got to spend at least one lecture thinking about audiences who are able to find and champion the pieces of media that speak to them, even if (like on *Twin Peaks*), it’s a log that’s doing the talking.