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ARCHAEOLOGIES OF FANDOM

Using Historical Methods to Explore Fan Cultures of the Past

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Active media fandom is so widely assumed to be a contemporary phenomenon that students look at me quizzically when, in teaching reception studies research methods, I broach the subject of studying historical audiences and past fandoms. They ask how can we analyze fans and the relationships that they formed, decades ago, with film, radio, television or other media objects, if we cannot directly observe or interview enthusiastic viewers? Some scholars approach the research exclusively through a theoretical lens of film spectatorship, through teasing out fans' fervor from the media objects themselves. While cultural theories always play a major role in analyzing and extrapolating from the evidence we can uncover, that is not the only avenue for the study of past fandoms.

This chapter will explore how scholars have been locating fragments of past fan practices, applying the methods of what Daniel Cavicchi terms "historical anthropology" (2009). Although the conclusions gained from such research will always remain partial, what we learn can be both valuable and fascinating. The study of historical fandoms is necessary for us to understand that affinity relationships have long roots, and that few practices are truly new. Scholars in a variety of fields loosely connected to contemporary fan studies, from literary studies and the history of the book, to music studies, to cultural and social history and gender studies, have been exploring historical examples of the relationships between the most ardent audience members and the media they were passionate about, and historical celebrities' interactions with their admirers. This chapter will use as a case study the early twentieth-century origins of the movie fan, trace the ways that scholars in history and cinema studies have analyzed fan cultures and historical movie audiences of the silent film era, and then provide suggestions for a variety of ways in which evidence of historical film fan practices can be found and evaluated.

Past Fandoms

One of the most striking differences between fan cultures of the past and present is their scope—the ability of fans today to create and participate with others in interactive communities, collecting media objects and ephemera, making fan art, sharing fan fiction and having the ability to easily discuss their interests with others online; this has enabled the study

of contemporary fandom to mushroom. Without convention gatherings and digital platforms for sharing their passions and products, without the ease with which fans today can make their own sophisticated media objects – could there have been real fan cultures in the past? The rise of mass-produced and mass-distributed media itself was a core necessity to enable fan culture to form (Cavicchi 2009).

In formative studies published in the 1980s, scholars began to dig deep into archives to find early examples of enthusiastic audience relationships with celebrities, texts and media objects. Braudy (1986) located the origins of celebrity culture in celebration of leaders of the classical world, like Alexander the Great, and intellectuals of the Renaissance era like Erasmus, and then the spread of fame through the spread of mass-produced images and news made possible by the printing press. Darnton (1986) and Davidson (1989) sparked the field of the history of reading in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe and the United States, which intertwined the development of technologies and industries of book publishing with attention to individuals' documentation of their reading practices. Fans in the past flocked to see famous authors, joined book clubs, created scrapbooks and engaged in dialogues with their favourites via fan letters. Historians of opera and classical music, who study prominent singers and composers, and those who research novelists, poets and playwrights in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, have unearthed evidence of, among other fandom moments, the addictions of avid music fans to the attendance of live concerts in the 1850s, and promoter P.T. Barnum's creation of a publicity frenzy around superstar vocalist Jenny Lind (Cavicchi 2011), fan correspondence with Elizabeth Barrett Browning (Eisner 2007) and the expansion of General Lew Wallace's blockbuster novel *Ben Hur* into widely shared cultural events (Ryan 2016). The affinity of female theater-goers for the players in hometown stock companies (Fuller 2002) and the cultivation of support for local sports teams from the league's managers and team owners (Dewberry 2003) are other examples of proto-fandom microhistories. Archaeological approaches can be applied to many other historical moments, to search for historical audiences and fan cultures of the past.

Fans and Audiences in the Writing of American Film History

Evidence of the emergence of an informal, loosely connected, nationwide movie fan culture in the first two decades of the twentieth century, especially in the United States, home of the largest population of early moviegoers (Butsch 2000), has been a by-product of scholarship in the last 30 years into the cultural history of cinema and its audiences. The earliest chroniclers of motion picture history focused on inventors, technological developments, prominent early directors and studio heads, aesthetic developments in film style and star personae. Audiences originally entered into this history through distanced observation, through the concerns of social critics, who were nonplussed at the enthusiasm of the urban immigrant audiences who flocked to makeshift nickelodeons in working class areas of major cities. Early twentieth-century observers expressed concerns about these moviegoers – they gathered as an impressionable mass audience, vulnerable to the persuasive impact of the films they watched. Women and children were prominent in the nickel theater audiences, and they stood out more to critics because many nineteenth-century entertainments had been marketed exclusively for men. Social critics worried about protecting children and women from indecent films and lewd behavior in theaters, and sought, along with church leaders and local police and civil officials, to regulate the theaters and censor the films (Fronc 2017). Rarely did social critics actually ask audiences why they enjoyed movie shows. While urban immigrant audiences received the most attention from social critics and the motion picture trade press, enthusiastic

viewers also were drawn to movie shows in small towns and rural areas (Waller 1995; Fuller 1996). As film exhibition matured into an accepted commercial endeavor across the nation, with purpose-built theaters, steady local connections and wide audience attraction, cinema audiences were considered inactive, passive viewers absorbing media messages, although critics remained concerned for vulnerable child viewers.

The techniques of crafting history "from the bottom up" by social and cultural historians in the 1980s, brought nickelodeon audiences back to scholars' attention. Rosenzweig (1985) and Peiss (1986) investigated the impact of the new cheap commercial entertainments of the 1900s on urban immigrant workers, who fought for expanded leisure time. Analyzing the pull of consumer culture to muffle more widespread labor movement activity and militant class consciousness, these authors persuasively argued that urban immigrant workers, especially young women, made these cheap nickel theaters their own vital centers of community. They and other historians have used social critics' dour reports to tease out evidence of the audiences' pleasure in the films, the early performers, the social connections forged in the small space of leisure carved out in overstuffed ghettos – especially available for the women, girls and children.

Hansen (1991) combined feminist film spectatorship theory with cultural theory to chart the importance of films and nickelodeons in the incorporation of female audiences into an expanded public sphere. She explored how middle-class female audiences could bring their knowledge of classic literature like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Biblical stories to form a greater appreciation of early tableaux films, to the appeal of Edison's Teddy Bear films to draw women into consumer culture and, later, the commodification of female sexual desire in the stardom of Rudolph Valentino. deCordova (2001) linked early movie fans' interest in "Picture Personalities" like Mary Pickford, Charlie Chaplin and Douglas Fairbanks to a changing cultural order. Stamp (2000) analyzed popular culture depictions of the urban working-class female movie fan in fiction, art and film, as well as the central place of vulnerable women in sociological discourse and film censorship concerns. Film historians have continued to connect films of the nickelodeon and transitional period of silent film to the fannish devotion and emotional pleasure female audiences gained from genres like serial films and female-centered melodramas. Anselmo (2015) has brought a material culture approach to her research into silent film female fandom, as she examines primary source artifacts such as fans' scrapbooks of favorite stars, diaries of films they've seen, fan works of art and poetry and other records of their movie going practices. Her work connects to that of historians of reading like Sicherman (2010), who has studied the reading and collecting habits of nineteenth-century middle-class young women, and to investigations of historians of gender such as Schrum (2004), who has sought to chart the rise of adolescent culture in the 1930s and 1940s through both representations of young women in the media, and girls' own personal diaries, scrapbooks and school yearbooks. These items, both intensely personal and shared by their communities, helped their owner/creators form a sense of teenaged identity and placed them firmly within growing consumer and movie fan cultures.

Social scientists' concerns about the possible deleterious effects of film on its audiences led to their creation of several massive research investigations in the late 1920s, such as the projects known as the Payne Fund Studies. Jowett, Jarvie and Fuller (1996) located some of the primary source evidence gathered for the studies as well as archived correspondence between the researchers as they discussed the evolution of their projects. While Payne Fund-associated scholars, and the bulk of their studies, dismissively characterized their young movie-going subjects as vulnerable to the strong influence of motion pictures and in need of protection from Hollywood influence, some of the original materials, such as autoethnographic essays

collected for Blumer's volume (1932), read against the grain, reveal young audience members exhibiting anecdotal evidence of fannish behaviors. Girls and boys imitated their favorite movie stars, invented games that drew on popular film genres, collected photos and articles about actors from the fan magazines, habitually attended local movie theaters with friends who shared their passion for films, copied the fashions, make up and quirky behaviors of beloved stars and discussed the latest movies between classes at school.

Historical examinations of film exhibition and local movie going practices have also contributed to the study of cinema audiences and past fans. While documenting the circuits through which distribution and exhibition of films contributed to the building of an American film industry, Gomery (1992), Waller (2001), Allen (2007) and Fuller (2008) have encouraged researchers to think about the roles of place and space, the cultural and economic geography of a town's amusement district in determining the impact of theaters on their communities, the active roles of theater managers in attracting audiences and catering to viewers' needs. Klenotic (2011) has brought the tools of social geographic analysis through mapping to analyze the impact of theater location on moviegoing practices. Moore (2008) and Abel (2015) have examined the ways in which public discourse about films, theaters and fan culture circulated through local newspapers. Research in all these historical areas continues to expand as cinema scholars further explore the connections between film texts, the production, distribution and exhibition arms of the film industry, and reception by audience members in a variety of cultural contexts.

Methods for Researching Historical American Movie Fans and Audiences

Training in research methods associated with social and cultural history has shaped my own quest to understand movie fans in historical settings, as I search for contextualization of past film and media production and consumption practices. While analyzing specific film texts provides one form of information to understand what kinds of meaning fans in the past took from them, I enjoy starting my research from the other end, examining the peripheral contexts of moviegoing practices and fan affinities. My searches locate the scraps left behind by individuals, and their intermediary interpreters, and fragments among the records of institutions that were concerned about those who attended the movies. In examining the materials I locate, I try to understand patterns of difference that factors such as social class, gender and age, race and ethnicity, wealth and poverty, education level and religious faith and geographic/regional location meant to the experience of being a movie fan.

First for discussion are the most personal items of individual movie fandom evidence. During years of digging around museum, university and private archives, antique shops and eBay listings, I have been fortunate enough to unearth fan scrapbooks and diaries, letters and postcards and creative works produced by movie fans. I have also located ephemeral items produced by film studios and third-party trinket-makers, which reached fans' hands as souvenirs given out at movie theaters, or as dime store merchandise, and I work to build historical contexts around them, looking for patterns and links to the time and place of their creation, the ways these items represent the movies and their audiences and the range of possible meanings they created for the fans who collected them. Oral histories of movie fans from the silent era, or contemporary interviews, are very difficult to find; a few exist in journalistic accounts or surveys taken by social service agencies in the 1910s and 1920s. One rare cache of memories of moviegoing in Northern New England in the 1920s and 1930s is found in surveys and oral histories gathered from senior citizens in Maine and New Hampshire as part of Northeast

Historic Films' (NHF) Going to the Movies project in the 1990s. These accounts have been made available for online viewing, along with other primary source documents of fan and film exhibition history, on the NHF website.

Scrapbooks were one of the most popular ways in which fans in the first four decades of the twentieth century collected and creatively explored their interests in early movie stars and films. They can still be found in antique stores and on eBay. Among those in my collection are a school composition book filled with pictures of silent cowboy stars and male movie actors, assembled by a young boy, which demonstrates that fandom was not exclusively a feminine pursuit; another focuses on the 1916 film *Intolerance* and its performers and details a fan's approach to a film that scholars usually don't consider as popular cinema; and a Mary Pickford scrapbook compiled over at least 20 years by a dedicated fan, who layered fan magazine and newspaper clips over the years on top of each other, creating a multi-faceted portrait of the fan's evolving relationship with her favorite star. Scrapbooks pull together articles, photos and brightly colored cover portraits that moviegoers clipped from the fan magazines, combined with newspaper clips and theater programs; they might be annotated by the scrapbook maker with lists of favorite performers, drawings and embellishments. Additional sources that might reveal how a fan expressed her or his special interests can be found in material such as personal diaries, letters and postcards sent to family and friends and comments written in school yearbooks.

Industrially produced ephemera linked to the movies, which were given out to fans, have been produced from the earliest days of film exhibition. A fascinating array of inexpensively produced souvenirs, advertising tie-ins and other ephemera were distributed to fans by film studios, movie theaters, fan magazines, consumer product advertisers and third-party companies. Photos, postcards, toys, spoons, buttons and badges – giveaway items attracted viewers to theaters, promoted particular serial film titles, studios and stars and transformed a fan's fascination with the movies into concrete material objects to possess and collect. Cigarette cards, felt pennants, silver-plate spoons with portraits of stars on the handles, playing cards, candy boxes, scarves, pillow covers, postcards, cardboard fans, celluloid broaches, school notebooks with Alice Joyce or William S. Hart on the covers, Charlie Chaplin figurines, chromolithograph yard-long prints of Mary Pickford or Marguerite Clark, to hang on the wall. These fragments of paratextual evidence produced by the film industry (and allied trinket manufacturers) helped to spread the ideas of film stardom and fan culture among the moviegoing public.

Cultural Intermediaries as Fan History Resources

Most of the evidence of early movie fan practices comes from locating materials produced by cultural intermediaries – in the reports of theater managers, issues of fan magazines, discussions of audiences in film industry trade publications and references to fans found in the reports of investigative groups and institutions concerned about the well-being of people who frequented movie theaters. (Stewart 2005; Hallet 2013; Bowers and Fuller 2013). Theater executives, film critics, business people, writers and investigators reported on fan activity. Some found it was in their interests to cater to fan desires, while others sought to manage, contain or limit those desires. Audience intermediary sources can range from the reports of movie theater managers and newspaper and fan magazine columnists, to material culture studies of advertising and marketing ephemera, to geographical, cultural and architectural studies of the theaters and place of movie theaters in local communities, to the reports of sociologists and social workers.

Movie theater managers and other film exhibitors were key audience intermediaries in the study of their local patrons, as it was important to the exhibitors' livelihood to attract and satisfy their local clientele, through film booking choices, building environments, advertising and public relations, theater service and safety measures. Pleasing their local audiences, and adapting to their changing tastes, was top priority for exhibitors. Fannie Cook, half of the itinerant travelling exhibitors, Cook and Harris High Class Moving Picture Company, received a letter from a host at an opera house in rural Vermont in 1906 who was nonplussed at the quick spread of movie fandom when she related that a young man who had seen the Cook program, expressed a wish that he could watch movie shows every night (Fuller 1996). Film exhibitors in the stationary nickelodeons and later neighborhood movie theaters promoted fan activities among their patrons, providing publicity materials about current films and players, holding contests and finding other ways to keep their patrons engaged with Hollywood culture.

Local theater managers learned about upcoming films and shared information about their patrons in the film industry trade press. While entertainment industry publications geared to producers and actors (like *Variety* or the *New York Clipper*) addressed audience issues in a perfunctory way, journals that included theater managers and film exhibitors among their correspondents discussed audiences frequently. *Moving Picture World, Exhibitors Trade Review* and other publications, available online through the Media History Digital Library, provide detail about recurring tensions and negotiations between fans and the businesspeople who wanted their admission money. *Motion Picture Herald* from the late 1910s until the mid-1940s provided small town exhibitors with a forum, the "What the Picture Did for Me" department, in which individual exhibitors like Gladys McArdle of the Owl Theater in the 800-person village of Lebanon, Kansas, discussed localized examples of fan behaviors and audience reception of current film releases. The reports and comments she and her fellow theater managers submitted offer a fascinating glimpse into the workings of small town movie fan culture (Fuller 2008).

While some newspapers like the *New York Times* gave film little coverage in the silent era, most publications in small towns and medium-sized cities offered their readers a wide variety of information about local promotion and reception of films and stars, and detailed the relationships between theater managers and the communities they served. In Cooperstown, New York, the editor of the weekly paper also owned the nickelodeon, and so he printed a great deal of commentary linking his local audiences to the Manhattan-based industry. Upstate New York newspapers have been digitized for online searching, as have a growing number of newspapers through genealogical research websites. Local film critics and Hollywood correspondents for some of the larger newspapers became intriguing intermediary links between fans and film culture. Mayme Ober Peake, Hollywood correspondent for the *Boston Globe* from 1926 to 1940, is one example of a journalist who explored connections between fans in New England and their interests in Hollywood.

Klinger (2006) argues that fan cultures grow with the ability to collect, own and repeatedly view media objects, that fan magazines and the ephemera that moviegoers collected were the closest fans in the "old days" could get to the material film object and/or their favorite picture personalities. *Motion Picture Story Magazine* (*MPSM*), which began in 1911, and *Photoplay* in 1912, provide an invaluable intermediary source for studying fan culture. As the number of stationery nickel theaters spread after 1905, thousands of film enthusiasts scattered across cities and small towns, some interested in the techniques of production and projection, others intrigued by films' narratives and content, and those entranced by the "picture personalities" who appeared on screen, looked for ways to increase their knowledge. They eagerly read the first special-interest film magazines and even the movie industry trade journals, and started

submitting questions and inquiries about film casts and plots to the editors; these enthusiastic audience members helped transform some of those publications into fan magazines.

Examining the ways in which the editorial and reader-submission content of *MPSM* changed over its first years of publication is a testimony to the influence and desires of its readers to know more and different information than the publishers originally intended. *MPSM* began as something akin to the journal collections of short stories that were so popular in the early twentieth century (Fuller 1996). Establishment of *MPSM's* "Answer Man" column gave fans individual and collective voices – as correspondents asked for information about films, producing companies and players, the magazine grew and the Answer Man's column expanded to dozens of pages of correspondence. *MPSM* and its rival *Photoplay* began to include fan art, poetry and testimonials to their favorites. Almost like a movie fan internet website that included discussion forum, blogs and tweets, *MPSM* readers had unprecedented ability to read each other's questions, involve the Answer Man in dialogue, promote their favorites and their pleasures. The fan magazines enabled vicarious participation in movie fan culture from hundreds of thousands of readers and served, in their earliest years, as a collective space of inquiry, discussion and outlet for the creativity of fan poetry and art. After about 1916, and Hollywood's rise to dominance in the American film industry, concentrating on feature-length films and nationally known stars, the fan magazines incorporated a much smaller amount of direct input from their readers, and marginalized representations of male fans, but they generated a great deal of information with which fans could expand their knowledge and interests. *MPSM* and *Photoplay* were joined by dozens of other magazines in the silent era, and many of them are now available to read through the Media History Digital Library, and through other websites.

Conclusion

Just this week, while searching through the industry publications digitized at mediahistoryproject.org, I uncovered a new fragment contributing to the origins and spread of movie fan culture. I found that Kent Webster, reporter for the trade journal *Nickelodeon*, while visiting the Essanay studio's production of "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" (adapted from the popular vaudeville song), then filming on location at the White Sox stadium in Chicago, remarked "I am not only a film fan, but … also a dyed in the wool baseball bug as well." (1910: 62). This is one of the earliest published references to movie fans that I have yet located, and Webster's linkage of what we think of as feminine movie fandom with masculine affinities for baseball is fascinating.

As we undertake further research into historical audiences made possible by searching through the increasing numbers of digitized journals and fan magazines and by investigating new collections of source materials being unearthed from basements and archives, I join Daniel Cavicchi (2014: 70) in his call for participating in a "Fan History Initiative." Researchers in fan studies should work together with scholars in other fields to expand the fascinating enquiries that are being done across the disciplines to study the complexities of historical fandom, so that we can better understand the continuities and differences between past audience behaviors and those that are so intriguing today.

Starting in on the adventure of excavating evidence from more than 100 years ago about fannish practices is a challenge, and the results will always remain partial and speculative. But our understanding of past film viewers' relationships with the movie actors, films and movie culture that so engaged them will be much more enhanced when we do it. The more we can make links to ongoing behaviors and desires, the more we will find that the opera fans of the

1820s, theater fans of the 1880s, baseball fans of 1900 and movie fans of the 1910s and 1920s were a lot like the passionate media fans of today. We will gain a more nuanced understanding of the interactions between past media, past audiences and the culture that those viewers created for themselves.

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