Introduction

I guess I've written over a hundred fan letters over the years, most of which have been answered, some of which have been answered in a way that lets me know the letter was read, understood, and appreciated by the actor. I've received full resumés, complex descriptions from the actor's point of view of where his character is headed, exchanges based on genetic background of the actor, ethnic background of the character vs. the actor, etc. Many soap actors seem interested in how viewers see their characters, how viewers see the actors themselves, and are quite willing to take advice.

It is impossible to offer a profile of a typical stalker, but . . . they're media addicts. Many are loners seeking greatness by destroying greatness. . . . Somehow the public figure becomes the object of a grand delusion and the obsessed fan feels there is some kind of meaningful relationship.

Consider these two quotes, one from a thirty-eight-year-old man who is a devoted soap opera watcher, the second from security expert Gavin De Becker, interviewed for a recent magazine article whose title begins, "When Fans Turn into Fanatics" (*People Weekly* 1990:105). Are these quotes reconcilable? Does the soap fan's belief that his letters are "understood and appreciated" by actors constitute the "grand delusion" that the security expert warns of? What distinguishes a casual media consumer from a media fan, or a normal fan from a delusional fanatic?

The contemporary image of media fans is not a pretty picture. By reputation, fans cannot tell the difference between fiction and reality and are consumed with the minute details of make-believe worlds. Fans are portrayed as either losers—love-struck teenagers or lonely housewives—or lunatics who pose serious threats to celebrities' physical safety. These images are so widely held and so rarely questioned that virtually all fan

behavior — from the harmless to the violent — draws public ridicule and suspicion.

Criticism of fan behavior from both the popular and the academic presses has grown harsher in recent years. Early media coverage of fanship (individual fan behavior) was fairly benign. Articles appearing in teen magazines throughout the 1970s, for example, offered advice about starting or joining fan clubs and about participating in fandom, the realm of organized fan activity (Davidson 1973). The enthusiasm of sports fans was occasionally featured in coverage of a winning team; it was treated as both harmless and understandable. Beginning in the mid-1970s, trade magazines promoted personal computers as labor-saving devices for celebrities who wanted to send mass mailings to their fans (Swan 1987).

Over the last fifteen years, however, popular media coverage has shifted, focusing on fans' extreme or violent behavior. This shift is marked by the 1981 publication of an article in *People Weekly* magazine titled "Desperate to Fill an Emotional Void, Some Fans Become Dangerous to Their Idols" (Freedman 1981). Since the mid-1980s *People* has increased its coverage of extreme fan behavior, and other popular publications have followed suit. For example, an article about stalker fans bore the title "Vanna White and Teri Garr Ask the Courts to Protect Them from Fans Who Have Gone Too Far" (Schindehette 1990), and the January 17, 1994, *Newsweek* cover featured the attack on figure skater Nancy Kerrigan with the cover line " 'Why Me?' The New Fear of Stalking." By the late 1980s, infotainment television programming and television and radio talk shows had joined in with features on lunatic fans and celebrities' need for security protection. Increasingly, even the network news reports cases of celebrities threatened or assailed, such as the stalkings of David Letterman, Rebecca Schaeffer, and tennis star Monica Seles. Efforts of fans' victims to gain legal rights and protection also receive widespread coverage, most notably that of model/actress Theresa Saldana, whose face was disfigured in 1981 by a fan's knife attack. Current popular accounts suggest the existence of a dangerous, widespread, and psychologically unstable fan community.

This shift in the popular perspective on fans coincided with a growing market for news and gossip about celebrities — particularly entertainment

celebrities — that was easily accessible to the general public. In many ways, the current fascination with celebrity is the consequence of a narrowing gap between the famous and the unfamous caused by changing definitions of fame (Schickel 1985). At the turn of the century, celebrities were members of wealthy elites: politicians, inventors, and entrepreneurs. Admiration from the public was expected and tolerated, but one group did not rub elbows with the other. Today, in contrast, the media reduce the perceived social distance between ordinary people and the famous by creating and maintaining an illusion of intimacy. The tabloids in particular encourage the unfamous to engage the famous. While their reliability is debatable (Kelm 1989), tabloids facilitate pseudointimacy by providing luridly detailed reports about celebrities' private lives gleaned from police bulletins, nosy neighbors, or unnamed informants. Readers have been so successfully lured into the role of Peeping Tom that they now feel entitled to information about stars' personal lives. This results, for instance, in the hoopla surrounding Julia Roberts's surprise wedding to Lyle Lovett, where both the public and the press complained they were shortchanged: not only were they not invited to the wedding, but they did not even know that Lovett and Roberts were romantically linked.

Tabloids along with other popular publications flaunt the invasion of privacy of media stars by embedding readers in an enormous network of publicly available gossip. Public gossip influences the image of *both* celebrities and fans. Just as journalists conduct a feeding frenzy on the juicy details of stars' lives, they promote an image of the obsessive fan by circulating gossip that focuses only on fans' extreme behavior. When private behaviors are brought under public scrutiny, they are usually sensationalized rather than examined or explained. Rarely does popular coverage of fans encourage an understanding of *why* fans act the way they do. It is far simpler (and more newsworthy) to attribute mysterious or incomprehensible behavior to lunacy.

Until recently the academic community cooperated with the popular press and the general public in dismissing and ridiculing media fans.[1] While scholars have documented changing meanings of celebrity and fame, they have devoted little serious attention to understanding fan behavior. Current psychiatric doctrine, for example, supports the lunatic

image by linking fan behavior to erotomania, a disorder stemming from an idealized erotic delusion that one is loved by a person of higher status (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-III-Revised* 1987:199). As an explanation, erotomania ties fanship exclusively to the world of sexually based "craziness." Even entertainment field insiders readily accept this link. Critic Richard Schickel (1985), for example, says that an integral feature of the culture of celebrity is fans' "near murderous moments."

Research on television and film audiences further darkens this negative image. When one of the earliest studies on film audiences recognized the importance of fan mail to sustaining celebrity (Thorp 1939), other researchers dismissed the study's reliability because it focused on nonrepresentative subgroups of movie goers, namely teenagers and young girls. They further discounted the importance of fan mail with the observation that the vocabulary of fan-letter writers was severely limited (Handel 1950:10). Today's press supports the loser image by depicting letter-writing fans as "lonely people, latchkey children, and teen-age illitera[tes]" (Ciotti 1992:F25A). An article about *Twin Peaks* fans distinguished them from the stereotype by pointing out that "these people are educated, these people are upscale—these are not letters from the masses. Everything's punctuated correctly, the grammar and spelling are right" (Griggs 1991:2).

Why do we consider fans by definition abnormal? According to social theorists (Bourdieu 1984), fans are stigmatized and marginalized because they cross culturally defined boundaries of taste and rationality. Media fans particularly are subject to marginalization because their pleasure derives from fictional narratives rather than from something "real," like a basketball game. Sports fans who celebrate a World Series or SuperBowl victory are largely accepted by the same nonfan public (see Babad 1987) that ridicules comparable activities by media fans.[2] We especially stigmatize fans of television, because we define television not just as fiction but as bad fiction (see Brunsdon 1989). It is so bad, in fact, that people are embarrassed by their own viewing habits (McIlwraith et al. 1991; Whetmore and Kielwasser 1983) and routinely lie about how much television they watch or which programs they prefer. If simply *watching* leads to social degradation and personal embarrassment, then to say one is a *fan* of

television is unthinkable. Television fanship is acceptable only among adolescents, who are presumed immature, and the mentally unstable, who are presumed out of control.

The negative stereotypes of media fans, like most stereotypes, are based largely on ignorance. Few of us understand what fans actually do and why they do it. Why do grown-ups buy soap opera magazines or dress up like *Star Trek* characters or flood the producers of *Beauty and the Beast* with complaining letters when the heroine is killed off? we ask. Don't they have anything better to do with their time? Academics have recently called for scholarship that seriously examines fan subcultures—more specifically, for works that move beyond the loser/lunatic image and examine fans "as a normal, everyday cultural or social phenomenon" (Jensen 1992:13). Several scholars have addressed the challenge with ethnographic studies of fan communities, most notably Henry Jenkins's *Textual Poachers* (1992b) and Camille Bacon-Smith's *Enterprising Women* (1992). Both authors focus on prime-time and feature-film fan cultures, especially fans of *Star Trek*, the most widely studied subculture of media fans. Their work offers a significant contribution to knowledge about fan activities and the internal organization of fan communities, particularly the nature and meaning of fans' relationships with one another.

We take a different approach in this book, focusing less on fan-to-fan relationships than on how fanship and fandom are shaped by the cult of celebrity and by fans' relationships with the entertainment industry.[3] We move outside the context of the fan world itself to explore how that world interacts with media production in general. Not that we ignore the private world of the fan; in fact, we pay particular attention to how one integrates being a fan into one's day-to-day leisure activities, experience of pleasure, and personal identity. In part, we aim to normalize fan behavior by expanding what is known about its range and diversity.

We decided to study fans of daytime soap operas. Both of us are long-time soap viewers, and our dabblings in the soap fan world convinced us that a study of the subculture would yield an important perspective on media fans. Soaps are at the absolute bottom of the television hierarchy, lumped with game shows and professional wrestling in terms of their perceived moral worth (see Alasuutari 1992). Being a soap viewer, let

alone a soap fan, is about as low as one can sink on cultural taste hierarchies. For this reason, what we would discover about this community, we believed, should extend what is known about media fandom as a whole by revealing its borders. For better or worse, soap fans are considered the outer limit of fan cultures.

More important, we chose soap operas as a vehicle for exploring how narrative structure and aspects of production shape fan cultures, features overlooked in existing research. Fans of different narrative forms are not interchangeable, and the activities through which they engage texts are not the same. Because the soap opera genre relies on particular subjects, themes, and narratives, it attracts a viewing audience with similar interests. Its structure is unique within the world of television, and scholars have convincingly demonstrated how that structure resonates with and is interpreted by viewers (see Allen 1983, 1985; Brown 1987; Modleski 1983). This made soaps an easy type of programming for us to draw on in examining how generic elements like content, structure, and production significantly influence the activities, organization, interests, and pleasures of fans. In other words, it matters that *Star Trek* fans choose that particular program to be a fan of, or that soap fans choose to be fans of soaps and not, say, of *Jeopardy*. Fan behavior is not haphazard, accidental, or spontaneous. It reflects the cultural object or text it addresses.

A final reason we wanted to study soap opera fans is to expand what is known about the private meaning of fanship. The most recent studies of fans (Bacon-Smith 1992; Jenkins 1992a, b; Penley 1991) suggest that at the core of media fandom lie the alternative texts created and produced by the fans themselves based on the primary narrative, such as fanzines, song tapes, or original artwork. In this perspective, fan worlds are constituted by the public and semipublic activities of fans. Although we agree that fan texts provide intriguing evidence of fan culture, our initial experiences with the soap fan world convinced us that concentrating on activities obscures an important element of fan worlds: the process by which people identify themselves as fans. As we show, fans engage in negotiations over the meaning and relevance that being a fan has in their lives, and these struggles influence their degree of involvement with organized fandom. We propose that fanship is about both engaging in activity and managing

identity, which allows us to rethink sociological understandings of subculture. We want to question not just what fans *do* but who they *are*.

Readers might be surprised that we do not take an especially gendered approach in our study of soap opera fans, for soaps were created for a female viewing audience (Allen 1985), and despite demographic changes the audience remains largely female (Rouverol 1992). In addition, feminist scholarship has convincingly analyzed soaps' particular appeal for women, in terms of both story content and narrative structure, and we draw on that literature in order to introduce the reader to the genre and to inform specific analytic points we make in the book. But while soaps' viewing *audience* is most appropriately analyzed in terms of gender, that variable is less salient to an understanding of the soap *fan community*. Once we begin investigating the semipublic and public world of fans, variables other than gender explain more.[4]

We drew upon a wide range of source materials for our study of soap fans, including fans' responses to a questionnaire we designed, in-depth interviews with many fans, letters and other materials in fan magazines, viewers' postings on electronic bulletin boards, and observations from our own participation in the world of soap fans. We also interviewed soap actors—from day players to divas—soap writers, producers, fan club staff members, and journalists who write for the daytime magazines as well as photographers who contribute to them. We quote liberally from these materials throughout the text but identify individuals by name only when they have given us permission to do so or when they have been interviewed by others for public attribution (for example, magazine and television features on soap celebrities and other industry participants). We report details about how our study was conducted in the Appendix.

The book is organized into six chapters. In the first we describe the soap opera genre and offer initial thoughts on the impact of the narrative form on the construction and activities of its fan community. In the second we explore how the celebrity-fan relationship is created collaboratively by the production industry, the press, and relevant others, and how in turn that relationship cultivates and sustains fanship. In Chapter Three we look at the dual processes of becoming and being a fan: fan as activity and fan as identity. Here we also discuss the stalker stereotype as it applies to the

soap world. In Chapter Four we explore the issue of pleasure, focusing on a newly visible form of fan pleasure that plays with the boundaries between the real and the fictional. In the fifth chapter we examine the impact of fans on the media production process specifically and on the production of cultural meaning more generally, focusing on the possibilities for viewer and fan agency. In the concluding chapter we suggest how our findings contribute to the concepts of viewing pleasure, power, and agency and to the phenomenon of subculture in everyday life.