1

Fandom as Pathology:
The Consequences
of Characterization

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The literature on fandom is haunted by images of deviance. The fan is consistently characterized (referencing the term's origins) as a potential fanatic. This means that fandom is seen as excessive, bordering on deranged, behavior. This essay explores how and why the concept of fan involves images of social and psychological pathology.

In the following pages I describe two fan types – the obsessed individual and the hysterical crowd. I show how these types appear in popular as well as scholarly accounts of fans and fandom. I consider why these two particular characterizations predominate – what explains this tendency to define fans as, at least potentially, obsessed and/or hysterical fanatics?

I suggest here that these two images of fans are based in an implicit critique of modern life. Fandom is seen as a psychological symptom of a presumed social dysfunction; the two fan types are based in an unacknowledged critique of modernity. Once fans are characterized as deviant, they can be treated as disreputable, even dangerous 'others.'

Fans, when insistently characterized as 'them,' can be distinguished from 'people like us' (students, professors and social critics) as well as from (the more reputable) patrons or aficionados or collectors. But these respectable social types could also be defined as 'fans,' in that they display interest,

9

affection and attachment, especially for figures in, or aspects of, their chosen field.

But the habits and practices of, say, scholars and critics are not deemed fandom, and are not considered to be potentially deviant or dangerous. Why? My conclusion claims that the characterization of fandom as pathology is based in, supports, and justifies elitist and disrespectful beliefs about our common life.

Characterizing the Fan

The literature on fandom as a social and cultural phenomenon is relatively sparse. What has been written is usually in relationship to discussions of celebrity or fame. The fan is understood to be, at least implicitly, a result of celebrity – the fan is defined as a *response* to the star system. This means that passivity is ascribed to the fan – he or she is seen as being brought into (enthralled) existence by the modern celebrity system, via the mass media.

This linking of fandom, celebrity and the mass media is an unexamined constant in commentary on fandom. In a *People Weekly* article on the killing of TV actress Rebecca Schaeffer by an obsessive fan, a psychologist is quoted as saying:

The cult of celebrity provides archetypes and icons with which alienated souls can identify. On top of that, this country has been embarking for a long time on a field experiment in the use of violence on TV. It is common-place to watch people getting blown away. We've given the losers in life or sex a rare chance to express their dominance.[1]

In one brief statement, cults, alienation, violence, TV, losers and domination (themes that consistently recur in the fandom literature) are invoked. A security guard, also quoted in the article, blames media influence for fan obsessions: 'It's because of the emphasis on the personal lives of media figures, especially on television. And this has blurred the line between appropriate and inappropriate behavior.'[2]

In newspaper accounts, mental health experts offer descriptions of psychic dysfunctions like 'erotomania' and 'Othello's Syndrome,' and suggest that the increase in fan attacks on celebrities may be due to 'an increasingly narcissistic society or maybe the fantasy life we see on television.'[3]

This same blending of fandom, celebrity and presumed media influence in relation to pathological behavior can be found in more scholarly accounts. Caughey describes how, in a media addicted age, celebrities function as role models for fans who engage in 'artificial social relations' with them. He discusses fans who pattern their lives after fantasy celebrity figures, and describes at some length an adolescent girl, 'A,' who in 1947 shot Chicago Cubs first baseman Eddie Waitkus. He argues that her behavior cannot simply be dismissed as pathological, because up to a point her fan activity resembled that of other passionate fans. The model of fandom Caughey develops is one in which pathological fandom is simply a more intense, developed version of more common, less dangerous, fan passion.[4]

This is also Schickel's explicit claim. He ends his book on the culture of celebrity by comparing deranged fans and serial killers to 'us.' He concludes that we 'dare not turn too quickly away' from 'these creatures' who lead 'mad existences' because 'the forces that move them also move within ourselves in some much milder measure.'[5] These academically-oriented accounts develop an image of the pathological fan who is a deranged version of 'us.'

One model of the pathological fan is that of the obsessed loner, who (under the influence of the media) has entered into an intense fantasy relationship with a celebrity figure. These individuals achieve public notoriety by stalking or threatening or killing the celebrity. Former 'crazed' acts are referenced in current news stories of 'obsessive' fans: Mark David Chapman's killing of ex-Beatle John Lennon, and John Hinckley's attempted assassination of President Ronald Reagan (to gain and keep the attention of actress Jodie Foster) are frequently brought up as iconic examples of the obsessed loner type.

This loner characterization can be contrasted with another version of fan pathology: the image of a frenzied or hysterical member of a crowd. This is the screaming, weeping teen at the

airport glimpsing a rock star, or the roaring, maniacal sports fan rioting at a soccer game. This image of the frenzied fan predominates in discussions of music fans and sports fans.

Since the 1950s, images of teens, rock 'n' roll and out-of-control crowds have been intertwined. In press coverage, the dangers of violence, drink, drugs, sexual and racial mingling are connected to music popular with young people. Of particular concern are the influences of the music's supposedly licentious lyrics and barbaric rhythms. Crowds of teen music fans have been depicted as animalistic and depraved, under the spell of their chosen musical form. Heavy Metal is the most recent genre of youth music to evoke this frightening description of seductive power: Metal fans are characterized, especially by concerned parents, as vulnerable youngsters who have become 'twisted' in response to the brutal and Satanic influence of the music.[6]

The press coverage of rock concerts almost automatically engages these images of a crazed and frantic mob, of surging crowds that stampede out of control in an animalistic frenzy. When 11 teenagers were crushed to death in Cincinnati's Riverfront Coliseum (before a 1979 concert by The Who) press coverage was instantly condemnatory of the ruthless behaviour of the frenzied mob. In his Chicago-based syndicated column, Mike Royko vilified the participants as 'barbarians' who 'stomped 11 persons to death [after] having numbed their brains on weeds, chemicals and Southern Comfort.'[7]

Yet, after investigation, the cause of the tragic incident was ascribed not to a panic or a stampede of selfish, drug-crazed fans, but instead to structural inadequacies of the site, in combination with inadequate communication between police, building workers and ticket-takers. Apparently, most crowd members were unsuccessfully (but often heroically) trying to help each other escape from the crush, a crush caused by too few doors into the arena being opened to accommodate a surge of people pressing forward, unaware of the fatal consequences at the front of the crowd.

In other words, the immediately circulated image of mass fan pathology (a crazed and depraved crowd climbing over dead bodies to get close to their idols) was absolutely untrue. As Johnson concludes, 'the evidence . . . is more than sufficient

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to discount popular interpretations of "The Who Concert Stampede" which focus on the hedonistic attributes of young people and the hypnotic effects of rock music.'[8] Nonetheless, the 'hedonistic and hypnotic' interpretation was widely made, an interpretation consistent with the iconic fans-in-a-frenzy image historically developed in connection with musical performances.

Concern over fan violence in crowds also appears in relation to sports. There is an academic literature, for example, on football hooliganism.[9] This literature explores the reasons for violence at (mostly) soccer games, where 'hard-core hooligans' engage in violent and destructive acts, often against the opposing teams' fans. These incidents have become cause for social concern, and have been researched in some depth, especially in Britain. Even though, obviously, not all soccer fans engage in spectator violence, the association between fandom and violent, irrational mob behaviour is assumed. In this literature, fans are characterized as easily roused into violent and destructive behavior, once assembled into a crowd and attending competitive sports events.[10]

To summarize, there is very little literature that explores fandom as a normal, everyday cultural or social phenomenon. Instead, the fan is characterized as (at least potentially) an obsessed loner, suffering from a disease of isolation, or a frenzied crowd member, suffering from a disease of contagion. In either case, the fan is seen as being irrational, out of control, and prey to a number of external forces. The influence of the media, a narcissistic society, hypnotic rock music, and crowd contagion are invoked to explain how fans become victims of their fandom, and so act in deviant and destructive ways.

Fans as Socially Symptomatic

What explains these two iconic images? One possibility is that they genuinely embody two different aspects of the fan/celebrity interaction – individual obsessions, privately elaborated, and public hysteria, mobilized by crowd contagion. But do these models accurately or adequately describe the ways in which fandom is manifested in contemporary life? Are they

appropriate representations of fandom? Do fans *really* risk becoming obsessed assassins or hysterical mobs? Do they (we) too easily 'cross the line' into pathological behavior, as Schickel suggests, because 'we suffer to some degree from the same confusion of realms that brings them, finally, to tragedy?'[11]

I suspect not, and the crux of my argument here is that these particular pathological portrayals exist in relation to different, unacknowledged issues and concerns. I believe that these two images tell us more about what we want to believe about modern society, and our connection to it, than they do about actual fan-celebrity relations.[12]

What is assumed to be true of fans - that they are potentially deviant, as loners or as members of a mob - can be connected with deeper, and more diffuse, assumptions about modern life. Each fan type mobilizes related assumptions about modern individuals: the obsessed loner invokes the image of the alienated, atomized 'mass man'; the frenzied crowd member invokes the image of the vulnerable, irrational victim of mass persuasion. These assumptions - about alienation, atomization, vulnerability and irrationality - are central aspects of twentieth-century beliefs about modernity.

Scholars as well as everyday people characterize modern life as fundamentally different from pre-modern life. Basically, the present is seen as being materially advanced but spiritually threatened. Modernity has brought technological progress but social, cultural and moral decay. The modernity critique is both nostalgic and romantic, because it locates lost virtues in the past, and believes in the possibility of their return.

In the early twentieth century, mass society terms (like alienation and atomization) took on added resonance in the urbanizing and industrializing United States, where the inevitable beneficence of progress (celebrated by technocrats and industrialists) was being increasingly questioned by intellectuals and social critics. Two aspects were of particular concern to American critics - the decline of community, and the increasing power of the mass media.

These concerns are related. Communities are envisioned as supportive and protective, they are believed to offer identity and connection in relation to traditional bonds, including race,

religion and ethnicity. As these communal bonds are loosened, or discarded, the individual is perceived as vulnerable - he or she is 'unstuck from the cake of custom' and has no solid, reliable orientation in the world.

The absence of stable identity and connection is seen as leaving the individual open to irrational appeals. With the refinement of advertising and public relations campaigns in the early twentieth century, along with the success of wartime propaganda, and the dramatic rise in the popularity of film and radio, fears of the immense and inescapable powers of propaganda techniques grew. It seemed that 'mass man' could all too easily become a victim of 'mass persuasion.' And under the spell of propaganda, emotions could be whipped into frenzies, publics could become crowds and crowds could become mobs.

This conceptual heritage, which defines modernity as a fragmented, disjointed mass society, is mobilized in the two images of the pathological fan. The obsessed loner is the image of the isolated, alienated 'mass man.' He or she is cut off from family, friends and community. His or her life becomes increasingly dominated by an irrational fixation on a celebrity figure, a perverse attachment that dominates his or her otherwise unrewarding existence. The vulnerable, lonely modern man or woman, seduced by the mass media into fantasy communion with celebrities, eventually crosses the line into pathology, and threatens, maims or kills the object of his or her desire.

The frenzied fan in a crowd is also perceived to be vulnerable, but this time to irrational loyalties sparked by sports teams or celebrity figures. As a member of a crowd, the fan becomes irrational, and thus easily influenced. If she is female, the image includes sobbing and screaming and fainting, and assumes that an uncontrollable erotic energy is sparked by the chance to see or touch a male idol. If he is male, the image is of drunken destructiveness, a rampage of uncontrollable masculine passion that is unleashed in response to a sports victory or defeat.

Dark assumptions underlie the two images of fan pathology, and they haunt the literature on fans and fandom. They are referenced but not acknowledged in the relentless retelling of

particular examples of violent or deranged fan behavior. Fans are seen as displaying symptoms of a wider social dysfunction – modernity – that threatens all of 'us.'

Fandom as Psychological Compensation

The modernity critique, with its associated imagery of the atomized individual and the faceless crowd, is mostly social theory – it does not directly develop assumptions about individual psychology. Nonetheless, it implies a connection between social and psychological conditions – a fragmented and incomplete modern society yields a fragmented and incomplete modern self. What we find, in the literature of fan–celebrity relationships, is a psychologized version of the mass society critique. Fandom, especially 'excessive' fandom, is defined as a form of psychological compensation, an attempt to make up for all that modern life lacks.

In 1956, Horton and Wohl characterized the media–audience relationship as a form of 'para-social interaction.'[13] They see fandom as a surrogate relationship, one that inadequately imitates normal relationships. They characterize the media mode of address as a 'simulacrum of conversation' and demonstrate how it tries to replicate the virtues of face-to-face interaction.

They also examine the structure and strategies of celebrity public relations, noting how they function to create what they call the celebrity 'persona.' They suggest that 'given the prolonged intimacy of para-social relations . . . it is not surprising that many members of the audience become dissatisfied and attempt to establish actual contact. . . . One would suppose that contact with, and recognition by, the persona transfers some of his prestige and influence to the active fan.' This implies that the fan, unable to consummate his desired social relations 'normally,' seeks celebrity contact in the hope of gaining the prestige and influence he or she psychologically needs, but cannot achieve in anonymous, fragmented modern society.

This statement is followed by commentary on a letter written to Ann Landers by a female fan (another 'Miss A.'), who says she has 'fallen head over heels in love with a local television star'

and now can't sleep, finds other men to be 'childish,' and is bored by her modeling job. Miss A. is said to reveal in this letter 'how narrow the line often is between the more ordinary forms of social interaction and those which characterize relations with the persona.' Even worse, 'persona' relations are deemed to have 'invaded' Miss A.'s life, 'so much so that, without control, it will warp or destroy her relations with the opposite sex' (p. 206).

Horton and Wohl suggest, however, that 'it is only when the para-social relationship becomes a substitute for autonomous social participation, when it proceeds in absolute defiance of objective reality, that it can be regarded as pathological' (p. 200). These extreme forms of fandom, they claim, are mostly characteristic of the socially isolated, the socially inept, the aged and invalid, the timid and rejected. For these and similarly deprived groups, para-social interaction is an attempt by the socially excluded (and thus psychologically needy) to compensate for the absence of 'authentic' relationships in their lives.

Schickel suggests that celebrities act to fulfill our own dreams of autonomy (the famous appear to have no permanent allegiances) and dreams of intimacy (the famous appear to belong to a celebrity community). The psychopathic fan-turned-assassin, he implies, similarly uses mediated celebrities to form an identity, although he kills in order to share their power and fame. To be a fan, Schickel and others imply, is to attempt to live vicariously, through the perceived lives of the famous. Fandom is conceived of as a chronic attempt to compensate for a perceived personal lack of autonomy, absence of community, incomplete identity, lack of power and lack of recognition.

These vague claims, bolstered by various strains of social and psychological research, parallel, strikingly, the claims made about the reasons for fanaticism. Milgram defines a fanatic as 'someone who goes to extremes in beliefs, feelings and actions.'[14] He suggests that fanatics use belief systems as a 'therapeutic crutch . . . staving off a collapse of self worth.' Any challenge to the fanatic's belief system is seen as a 'threat to his self-esteem,' and thus to his 'ego-defensive system.'

Interestingly, deviants are also seen by researchers as lacking in self-worth, or as having weak 'ego-boundaries.'[15] This

characteristic may even be linked to 'role engulfment,' where the identity of deviance becomes a way to organize a 'concept of self.'[16] Thus in all three concepts (fan, fanatic and deviant) a psychological portrait of fundamental inadequacy, and attempted compensation, is developed.

The inadequate fan is defined as someone who is making up for some inherent lack. He or she seeks identity, connection and meaning via celebrities and team loyalties. Like the fanatic and the deviant, the fan has fragile self-esteem, weak or non-existent social alliances, a dull and monotonous 'real' existence. The mass media provide (the argument goes) ways for these inadequate people to bolster, organize and enliven their unsatisfying lives.

Fandom, however, is seen as a risky, even dangerous, compensatory mechanism. The fan-as-pathology model implies that there is a thin line between 'normal' and excessive fandom. This line is crossed if and when the distinctions between reality and fantasy break down. These are the two realms that must remain separated, if the fan is to remain safe and normal.[17]

The literature implies that 'normal' fans are constantly in danger of becoming 'obsessive loners' or 'frenzied crowd members.' Ann Lander's curt response to Miss A. ('you are flunking the course of common sense') is figuratively given to all fans – as long as the fan shows 'good common sense,' remains 'rational' and 'in control,' then he or she will be spared. But if the fan ceases to distinguish the real from the imaginary, and lets emotion overwhelm reason and somehow gets 'out of control,' then there are terrible consequences. These consequences are referenced in the cautionary tales of fans who go 'over the edge' into fanaticism, and thus pathology.

Aficionados as Fans

The literature on fandom, celebrity and media influence tells us that: Fans suffer from psychological inadequacy, and are particularly vulnerable to media influence and crowd contagion. They seek contact with famous people in order to compensate

for their own inadequate lives. Because modern life is alienated and atomized, fans develop loyalties to celebrities and sports teams to bask in reflected glory, and attend rock concerts and sports events to feel an illusory sense of community.

But what happens if we change the objects of this description from fans to, say, professors? What if we describe the loyalties that scholars feel to academic disciplines rather than to team sports, and attendance at scholarly conferences, rather than Who concerts and soccer matches? What if we describe opera buffs and operas? Antique collectors and auctions? Trout fisherman and angling contests? Gardeners and horticulture shows? Do the assumptions about inadequacy, deviance and danger still apply?

I think not. The paragraph makes sense only if it is believed to describe recognizable but nebulous 'others' who live in some world different from our own. Fandom, it seems, is not readily conceptualized as a general or shared trait, as a form of loyalty or attachment, as a mode of 'enacted affinity.' Fandom, instead, is what 'they' do; 'we,' on the other hand, have tastes and preferences, and select worthy people, beliefs and activities for our admiration and esteem. Furthermore, what 'they' do is deviant, and therefore dangerous, while what 'we' do is normal, and therefore safe.

What is the basis for these differences between fans like 'them' and aficionados like 'us'? There appear to be two crucial aspects – the objects of desire, and the modes of enactment. The objects of an aficionado's desire are usually deemed high culture: Eliot (George or T.S.) not Elvis; paintings not posters; the *New York Review of Books* not the *National Enquirer*. Apparently, if the object of desire is popular with the lower or middle class, relatively inexpensive and widely available, it is fandom (or a harmless hobby); if it is popular with the wealthy and well educated, expensive and rare, it is preference, interest or expertise.

Am I suggesting, then, that a Barry Manilow fan be compared with, for example, a Joyce scholar? The mind may reel at the comparison, but why? The Manilow fan knows intimately every recording (and every version) of Barry's songs; the Joyce scholar knows intimately every volume (and every version) of Joyce's *oeuvre*. The relationship between Manilow's real life

and his music is explored in detail in star biographies and fan magazines; the relationship between Dublin, Bloomsday and Joyce's actual experiences are explored in detail in biographies and scholarly monographs.

Yes, you may say, there are indeed these surface similarities. But what about the fans who are obsessed with Barry, who organize their life around him?[18] Surely no Joyce scholar would become equally obsessive? But the uproar over the definitive edition of *Ulysses*[19] suggests that the participant Joyceans are fully obsessed, and have indeed organized their life (even their 'identity' and 'community') around Joyce.

But is a scholar, collector, aficionado 'in love' with the object of his or her desire? Is it the existence of passion that defines the distinction between fan and aficionado, between dangerous and benign, between deviance and normalcy?

So far we have established that one aspect of the distinction between 'them' and 'us' involves a cultural hierarchy. At least one key difference, then, is that it is normal and therefore safe to be attached to elite, prestige-conferring objects (aficionado-hood), but it can be abnormal, and therefore dangerous to be attached to popular, mass-mediated objects (fandom).

But there is another key distinction being made between the fan and the aficionado. Fans are believed to be obsessed with their objects, in love with celebrity figures, willing to die for their team. Fandom involves an ascription of excess, and emotional display – hysterics at rock concerts, hooliganism at soccer matches, autograph seeking at celebrity sites. Affinity, on the other hand, is deemed to involve rational evaluation, and is displayed in more measured ways – applause and a few polite 'Bravos!' after concerts; crowd murmurs at polo matches; attendance of 'big-name' sessions at academic conferences.

This valuation of the genteel over the rowdy is based in status (and thus class) distinctions. It has been described in nineteenth-century parades,[20] public cultural performances,[21] and turn of the century newspaper styles.[22] Unemotional, detached, 'cool' behavior is seen as more worthy and admirable than emotional, passionate, 'hot' behavior. 'Good' parades are orderly and sequential and serious (not rowdy, chaotic or lighthearted); 'good' audiences are passive and quiet and respectful (not active, vocal or critical); 'good' newspapers

are neutral, objective and gray (not passionate, subjective and colorful). Congruently, then, 'good' affinities are expressed in a subdued, undisruptive manner, while 'bad' affinities (fandom) are expressed in dramatic and disruptive ways.

The division between worthy and unworthy is based in an assumed dichotomy between reason and emotion. The reason–emotion dichotomy has many aspects. It describes a presumed difference between the educated and uneducated, as well as between the upper and lower classes. It is a deeply rooted opposition, one that the ascription of intrinsic differences between high and low culture automatically obscures.

Apparently, the real dividing line between aficionado and fan involves issues of status and class, as they inform vernacular cultural and social theory. Furthermore, the Joyce scholar and the Barry Manilow fan, the antique collector and the beer can collector, the opera buff and the Heavy Metal fan are differentiated not only on the basis of the status of their desired object, but also on the supposed nature of their attachment. The obsession of a fan is deemed emotional (low class, uneducated), and therefore dangerous, while the obsession of the aficionado is rational (high class, educated) and therefore benign, even worthy.

These culturally-loaded categories engage Enlightenment-originated ideas based on rationality. Reason is associated with the objective apprehending of reality, while emotion is associated with the subjective, the imaginative, and the irrational. Emotions, by this logic, lead to a dangerous blurring of the line between fantasy and reality, while rational obsession, apparently, does not. But does this reason–emotion dichotomy, complete with dividing line, hold up? Let me give you some examples from my own life, to suggest that the line is inevitably and constantly crossed, without pathological consequences, by respectable professorial types like me.

Anyone in academia, especially those who have written theses or dissertations, can attest to the emotional components of supposedly rational activity. A figure or topic can become the focal point of one's life; anything even remotely connected to one's research interests can have tremendous impact and obsessive appeal. For example, while I was writing my dissertation (on the commercialization of country music in the 1950s),

the chance to touch Patsy Cline's mascara wand, retrieved from the site of her 1963 plane crash, gave me chills.

Similarly, (but far more respectably) the handling of a coffee cup made by William Morris was deeply moving. I have also envied a colleague who once owned a desk that had been used by John Dewey, and I display a framed copy of a drawing of William James in my office. I would be thrilled if I could own any memorabilia associated with Lewis Mumford, to whom I regret not having written a letter of appreciation before he died.

Am I, then, a fan of Patsy Cline, William Morris, William James, John Dewey and Lewis Mumford? Or of country music, the pre-Raphaelites, the pragmatists and iconoclastic social critics? Yes, of course I am, if fandom is defined as an interest in, and an attachment to, a particular figure or form. Would I write a fan letter to these figures? Yes, if fan letter includes (as it does, in academic circles) review essays or appreciative quotation. Would I read a fanzine? Again yes, but in the scholarly versions – heavily footnoted biographies and eloquent critical appreciations. Would I seek autographs? Yes, if I could do so without losing face, via auctions or books or scholarly correspondence. Would I collect memorabilia? Well, I confess here to having at least one version of all 100 of Patsy Cline's recordings; calendars and a piece of cloth designed by Morris; and as many books as I can afford to purchase by James, Dewey and Mumford, along with miscellaneous biographies, reviews and commentaries.[23]

Would I defend my 'team,' the pragmatists, against the attacks on them by, say, Hegelians, neo-Marxists and/or post-structuralists? You bet. Would I do so in a rowdy, rambunctious or violent way? Of course not. I would respond instead with respectable rowdiness (acerbic asides in scholarly articles) and acceptable violence (the controlled, intellectual aggression often witnessed in conference presentations).

Would I claim to be 'in love' with any of these individuals, would I offer to die for any of these preferences? Not likely, and certainly not in public. I would lose the respect of my peers. Instead, I will say that I 'admire' William James, I 'read with interest' Lewis Mumford, I 'enjoy' pre-Raphaelite design and 'am drawn to' aspects of pragmatism. In short, I will

display aficionado-hood, with a vengeance. But, as I hope my confessions have made obvious, my aficionado-hood is really disguised, and thereby legitimated, fandom.

The pejorative connotations of fans and fandom prevent me from employing those terms to describe and explore my attach-ments. While my particular affinities may be somewhat idio-syncratic, everyone I've ever met has comparable ones. Most of us seem to have deep, and personal, interests, and we enact our affinities by investing time, money and 'ourselves' in them. I have even been fortunate enough to make a living in relation to my interests. Does that mean I am truly 'obsessed' by them? Am I, perhaps, even more dysfunctional than most because I force others (like students) to listen, even temporarily to participate, in my predilections?

Were I to call myself a fan, I would imply that I am emotionally engaged with unworthy cultural figures and forms, and that I was risking obsession, with dangerous consequences. I would imply that I was a psychologically incomplete person, trying to compensate for my inadequate life through the reflected glory of these figures and forms. My unstable and fragile identity needs them, they are a 'therapeutic crutch,' a form of 'para-social relations,' functioning as 'personas' in my life. I must have these relationships because my lonely, marginal existence requires that I prop myself up with these fantasy attachments to famous dead people, and these alliances with abstract, imaginary communities.

Obviously, I find these ascriptions of dysfunction, based on my affinities, to be misguided and muddleheaded, as well as extraordinarily insulting. I assume that others would, too, whether they call themselves aficionados or fans. The pejorative association of fandom with pathology is stunningly disrespectful, when it is applied to 'us' rather than 'them.'

The Consequences of Circumscription

There are consequences to defining fans as abnormal 'others,' irrationally obsessed with particular figures or cultural forms, capable of violent and destructive behavior. To consider these consequences, we need first to discuss why this kind of

stigmatizing definition have been developed, and why it continues to dominate the literature. What purposes does such a conceptualization serve?

Stigmatization of a persona or group can be seen as a way of relieving anxiety[24] by a display of hostility or aggression. It is a form of displacement, a blaming, a scapegoating that allows explanation in ambivalent or contradictory circumstances.

By conceiving of fans as members of a lunatic fringe which cracks under the pressure of modernity, as the canaries in the coal mines whose collapse indicates a poisonous atmosphere, we tell ourselves a reassuring story – yes, modernity is dangerous, and some people become victims of it by succumbing to media influence or mob psychology, *but we do not*. 'We' are not these unstable, fragile and therefore vulnerable people. We are psychologically stable and solid ('normal') and we will not crack. We recognize and maintain an equilibrium. Unlike obsessed and frenzied fans, we are in touch with reality. We have not crossed that line between what is real and what is imaginary.

To summarize, one outcome of the conceptualization of the fan as deviant is reassurance – 'we' are safe, because 'we' are not as abnormal as 'they' are, and the world is safe, because there is a clear demarcation between what is actual and what is imagined, what is given and what is up for grabs.

Defining disorderly and emotional fan display as excessive allows the celebration of appropriate fan display. Those who exhibit charged and passionate response are believed to be out of control; those who exhibit subdued and unimpassioned reaction are deemed to be superior types. Thus the 'we' who write about, and read about, 'them,' the fans, get to be allied with the safe and superior and worthy types. 'We' get to be thoughtful, educated and discriminating, if we assume that 'they' are obsessed, uneducated and indiscriminate. Not only do 'we' get to be safe, in spite of the perceived dangers of modernity, but we also get to be better than this group of inferior types – fans.

Defining fandom as a deviant activity allows (individually) a reassuring, self-aggrandizing stance to be adopted. It also supports the celebration of particular values – the rational over

the emotional, the educated over the uneducated, the subdued over the passionate, the elite over the popular, the mainstream over the margin, the status quo over the alternative. The beliefs evidenced in the stigmatization of fans are inherently conservative, and they serve to privilege the attributes of the wealthy, educated and powerful. If these are indeed the attributes and values that the critic or researcher seeks to celebrate, then they should be disentangled from their moorings in objective research or critical inquiry, and directly addressed.

Treating people as 'others' in social and psychological analysis risks denigrating them in ways that are insulting and absurd. The literature on deviance, fanaticism and fandom has a thinly veiled subtext – how are 'we' not 'them'? The 'others' become interesting cases, that tell us about life on the margin, or in the wild, under duress, or on the edge. Like primitive tribes to be saved by missionaries, or explained by anthropologists, we too easily use social and psychological inquiry to develop and defend a self-serving moral landscape. That terrain cultivates in us a dishonorable moral stance of superiority, because it makes others into examples of extrinsic forces, while implying that we somehow remain pure, autonomous, and unafflicted.

Much social analysis gets conducted from this savannah of smug superiority, particularly research on media effects. Whether researchers are concerned with the media uses and gratifications, or the circulation of ideology, or the reasons for fandom, 'they' (viewers, consumers and fans) are seen as victims of forces that somehow can not and will not influence 'us.' The commentator on fandom is protected by reason or education or critical insight; thanks to these special traits, 'we' don't succumb to whatever it is we believe applies to 'them.'

This is not only a dishonorable stance, individually, but it is a severely truncated basis for inquiry. It means that the perceived-to-be deviant, exotic and dramatic, is studied with zeal, while the normal, everyday, and accepted is ignored. Little is known, for example, about the variety of ways people make meaning in everyday ways. We know far too little about the nature – and possibilities – of varieties of affection, attachment, sentiment and interest, *as they are manifested in people's lives*. How and why do we invest meaning and value in things, lives, ideals? Does our selection of particular figures

and forms connect with other aspects of ourselves? How does sentiment work? How and why do things mean? These are not trivial or uninteresting questions, but so far they have barely been studied, except perhaps in the humanities as 'aesthetics,' and in the social sciences as functions of other (economic or psychological or demographic) forces.

I am arguing here that social inquiry and criticism can and should proceed very differently. They should not define people as collections of preferences to be analyzed and controlled, any more than they should define them as unwitting victims of ideology or advertising or media or mob mentalities or ego-fragmentation. Social inquiry can and should be a form of respectful engagement. It can and should illuminate the experiences of others *in their own terms*, because these 'others' are us, and human experiences intrinsically and inherently matter. Constantly to reduce what other people do to dysfunction or class position or psychic needs or socio-economic status is to reduce others to uninteresting pawns in a game of outside forces and to glorify ourselves as somehow off the playing field, observing and describing what is really going on.

If we instead associate ourselves with those 'others,' assume that there are important commonalities as well as differences between all individuals, communities and social groups, and believe that we are constantly engaged in a collective enterprise of reality creation, maintenance and repair, then we are less likely to succumb to the elitism and reductionism that so far has characterized the research and literature on fans and fandom. What I am suggesting is that we respect and value other people as if they were us, because they always are. I ask that we avoid, assiduously, the seduction of separateness that underlies the description of fans as pathological.

The moral iconography of the deviant other fosters a belief that modernity hurts 'them' and (for now) spares us, that the habits and practices of the wealthy and educated are to be valued and emulated, and that 'we' are inevitably separate from, and superior to, 'them.' To the extent that we stigmatize fandom as deviant, we cut ourselves off from understanding how value and meaning are enacted and shared in contemporary life. If we continue to subscribe to the dominant perspective on fandom – pathology – inquiry on fandom cannot help us

understand how we engage with the world. Instead, we will continue to conceptualize the fan as desperate and dysfunctional, so that he or she can be explained, protected against, and restored to 'normalcy.'

I believe what it means to be a fan should be explored in relation to the larger question of what it means to desire, cherish, seek, long, admire, envy, celebrate, protect, ally with others. Fandom is an aspect of how we make sense of the world, in relation to mass media, and in relation to our historical, social, cultural location. Thinking well about fans and fandom can help us think more fully and respectfully about what it means today to be alive and to be human.

Notes

1 Marilyn Robinette Marx, quoted in Axthelm (1989).
2 Gavin de Becker is described in Axthelm (1989, p. 66) as 'an L.A. security expert who helps stars ward off unwanted attentions.'
3 Jack Pott, Assistant Clinical Director of Psychiatry for Maricopa County Health Services, quoted in Rosenblum (1989), an *Arizona Daily Star* article kindly provided to me by Lisa Lewis.
4 Caughey (1978a). See also Caughey (1978b).
5 Schickel (1985). See especially the final pages.
6 See Miller (1988).
7 Quoted in Johnson (1987).
8 Johnson, ibid.
9 See, for example: Ingham (1978); Lee (1985); and Marsh *et al.* (1978).
10 See Dunning, Murphy and Williams (1986, p. 221), where they say that many fans are 'drawn into hooligan incidents – fans who did not set out for the match with disruptive intent . . . [by contact with] hard-core hooligans.'
11 Schickel (1985, p. 285).
12 The argument in this essay draws on my belief that vernacular social theory is accessible through the analysis of the narrative strategies of popular and scholarly accounts. I develop this belief, as well as the associated notion of the displacement of ambivalence, or scapegoating, in Jensen (1990).
13 Horton and Wohl (1956). Subsequently reprinted in Gumpert and Cathcart (eds) (1982).
14 Milgram (1977).
15 See, for example, the model developed by S. Giora Shoham (1976).

16 See the brief summary of this and other claims in Schur (1971).
17 The mass media, in conjunction with modern society, are believed somehow to blur this necessary distinction. The media are defined as dangerous precisely because they are believed to separate fantasy from reality. This account of media influence is pervasive, but fails to recognize the historical presence of narrativity in cultures, and that the insistence on distinctions between 'objective' fact and 'subjective' fiction is an historically recent development.
18 Vermorel (1985).
19 Probably best recorded in the New York Review of Books letters, in 1988 and 1989.
20 See Davis (1986).
21 Levine (1988).
22 Schudson (1978).
23 In the case of William James, my fandom extends to an interest in his parents and siblings, and I wish I knew something about his descendants. I have considered taking a vacation that would include visits to places he lived and worked. I disagree with some of the interpretations of some of his biographers, and am infuriated by Leon Edel's 'unfair' portrayal of William in his biography of Henry James.
24 See, for example, the conclusion of Shoham (1976).

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