

## Spotlight: Fan and Audience Studies Scholarly Interest Group

By Mel Stanfill and Ross Garner, SCMS Fan and Audience Studies SIG Co-chairs

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The concept of 'resistance' has, in the broadest sense, been integral to debates within audience and fan studies from the early 1980s onwards, when Stuart Hall's theoretical model of the encoding and decoding of mediated communication argued for the agency of situated audience members within processes of reading media texts. Since then, audience and fan studies has consistently explored audiences' resistance to forms of cultural, social, political, and symbolic power in multiple ways. Approaches have ranged widely, from feminist interventions regarding how women re-value and use traditionally disparaged media forms to resist patriarchal ideologies to how fans' transformative reading practices and creation of their own media texts have provided avenues of expression for marginalized queer and racialized readers, and beyond.

The Fan and Audience Studies SIG aims to be a community of scholars at all career points who are exploring issues such as these, as well as recognizing that these narratives of resistance have often been incomplete and need to be further interrogated. Research in fan and audience studies is thoroughly diverse. For example, research topics can include exploring the practices of film, television, and other media consumption from a historical perspective to increase our understanding of the role of media in the day-to-day lives of groups marginalized along intersectional axes of class, gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, etc., tackling forms of oppression arising from how industries interpret and make decisions based on the accumulation of quantitative data sets, and looking at how those same 'resistant' communities have been sites of exclusion and oppression. Broadly committed to challenging the traditional centrality of 'the text' within film and media studies, the Fan and Audience Studies SIG recognizes and embraces the interdisciplinary nature of research engaging with

media consumption contexts and seeks to consolidate and legitimize this work, both within and outside of SCMS's borders.

We strive to achieve these goals in various ways. These include providing, an annual essay-writing prize for graduate students (which includes support through to publication in a recognized peer-reviewed journal), offering travel grants to assist with conference attendance, and peer-to-peer mentorship for all SIG members ranging from those in graduate school through to precariously employment and then tenured (or equivalent) positions. The mentorship programme is thus designed to assist members with tackling a range of inequalities that they may encounter and sharing strategies and best practices for addressing deeply entrenched assumptions that occur within institutions and departments such as hiring committees' and/or promotion panels' perceptions of the field and the research that it produces.

Additionally, the SIG expands its scope beyond the parameters of the annual conference to include events that aim to recognize the field's interdisciplinarity by making connections between fan and audience studies and other areas of media and cultural studies. For instance, during this academic year we have run events focused on branding yourself for the job market, the spatial dimensions of media consumption and the identities that these enable and discourage, and will soon be offering a session examining what audience and fan studies can learn from media industries perspectives (and vice versa).

Moreover, the Fan and Audience Studies SIG is well-situated to connect with many of SCMS's other Caucuses and SIGs due to the range of practices and media forms that fall under our umbrella. At the 2021 conference, the SIG sponsored panels on topics ranging from the 'fannish' behaviors of the alt-right, the online gaming platforms that gestate extreme right-wing sentiment and recruit individuals to this cause, historical discussions exploring audiences' affective attachments during the period of 'early cinema', and consumption practices relating to media forms including established and institutionally controlled broadcasting through to self-produced texts on platforms like YouTube. The Fan and Audience Studies SIG intersects with the work of many others, looking at the behaviors of fans and audiences across Classical Hollywood and Silent Cinema, TV Studies, Transmedia and other forms of broadcasting (e.g. Radio and Podcasting), Digital Media, Video Games, and Comic Books. What's more, as highlighted above, the SIG's aims to explore the experiences of marginalized people makes us well placed to align with all SCMS's Caucuses via a shared commitment to providing a platform for scholars writing from positions of

social, cultural, and political exclusion. As the SIG continues to develop, we look forward to exploring these possibilities for collaboration with SCMS's other SIGs and Caucuses further.

However, we also recognize that despite audience and fan studies' commitment to a progressive political agenda, whether in terms of the intersectional identities that it strives to represent or the conservative assumptions regarding media consumption that it seeks to challenge, inequalities are also reproduced. One of the most pressing issues in recent years, especially within fan studies as a subdiscipline, has been decentering the structuring whiteness of the field where the default figure of 'the fan' that is subconsciously constructed is normatively assumed to be a white, Westernized, heteronormative, cisgender, middle-class consumer. One way that the SIG has sought to address these issues is by a commitment to ensuring that every non-conference event we organize includes scholars occupying a range of identity positions. However, as co-chairs we recognize that we reflect this whiteness problem in the field at large even as we work to contest it. Thus, the SIG is committed to encouraging--and, through our mentorship program, helping develop--the up-and-coming generation of scholars that is less white, less cis-het, and increasingly attuned to these structures of power to gain access to positions of power and influence, both within SCMS and outside the organization.

In the Fan and Audience Studies SIG, we both work to complicate the centering of industry and text-based approaches to media that ignore what actual people do when they get their hands on it and are in the process reckoning with our own foundational assumptions about who fans and audiences are, what they do, and who is and isn't welcome in those spaces. This work to push both the broader field of cinema and media studies and our own subfield is both fundamental to what scholarship should do and essential in the current moment of reactionary backlash against equity and inclusion.