

Book Review of Textual Poachers: Participatory Culture of Fandom

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Abstract

Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture by American scholar Henry Jenkins breaks the stereotypes of fandom held by academia and puts forward original views based on cultural studies by Antonio Gramsci and “poaching” originally introduced by Michel de Certeau. He believes fans are not passive consumers of content, but poachers that reinterpret, appropriate and create textual meanings. Sharing similar ideas and preferences, fans build a participatory utopia against big media to share their opinions freely. This book provides a new paradigm for fan studies and helps develop and harness the potential of fan communities.

Keywords

Henry Jenkins; Textual Poachers; Participatory Culture; Fan Communities.

1. Introduction

“Fan” is an abbreviated form of the word “fanatic,” which has its roots in the Latin word “fanaticus.” Fanaticus, meaning excessive and inappropriate enthusiasm, originally referred to extremely religious devotees. “Fan” was first used in the late nineteenth century by newspapers to describe “crazy” followers of sports teams and later of arts and commercial entertainment. The widespread use of “fan” marks the beginning of a distinctive cultural and aesthetic phenomenon worth studying.

Because of his contributions to the rise of fan studies, Henry Jenkins is regarded as a pioneer and authority on this subsection of cultural studies. His most famous works, such as *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (1992), *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (2006), and *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture* (2006) are well-acclaimed classics in the field of media and cultural studies and fan studies.

In *Textual Poachers* which includes most of his thoughts on fan culture, Jenkins discusses participatory culture and creative activities unique to fan communities, and the complex relationship between mass media and consumers in a capitalist era. The original and forward-thinking book is still inspirational for today's fast-changing media environment.

2. Theoretical Framework of Textual Poachers

Published in 1992 when traditional media, such as radio, television and film were in their heyday, *Textual Poachers*, under the influence of the Gramscian turn and de Certeau's “poaching” theory, questioned the stereotypes and prejudices against fan communities held by the mainstream media. Considering before him academia tended to view fans as unable to judge and evaluate the quality of television shows[1], emotionally unstable and delusional[2], Jenkins was a disruptive thinker.

2.1. The Gramscian Turn in Cultural Studies

Cultural studies in the 1960s were deeply influenced by Marxism, especially by his political economy analysis, class theory, and historical materialism[3], which believes that a society's

economic organization fundamentally determines its social institutions. However, overemphasis on structuralism, wholeness and its deterministic role blinded cultural studies scholars to the complexity of specific experiences, subtle differences, and even human agency, causing determinism and reductionism[4]. In the 1980s, Antonio Gramsci developed cultural hegemony seen by cultural studies scholar as a refreshing perspective.

In agreement with the basic principle of Marxism that the economic base determines the superstructure, Gramsci dialectically connects the economic base and the superstructure, arguing that the two are more interwoven and interrelated in actual historical development[5]. Cultural hegemony is not purely about oppression and domination. The ruling group competing for cultural leadership is not able to eradicate the opposing side, so compromises, concessions and submissions still exist. According to Gramsci, cultures are neither something “authentic” (spontaneously emerging from “below”), nor something which is simply imposed from “above,” but a “compromise equilibrium” involving both “structure” and “agency[6].” Popular culture studies should shed light on not only cultural producers, but also readers’ and listeners’ strategies of appropriation and reconstruction in their consumption of mass-produced cultural products. The Gramscian turn points out the dynamics of oppression and resistance in popular culture, allowing scholars a new perspective. After the Gramscian turn, Stuart Hall proposes three possible major positions when it comes to audience decoding, namely preferred (sometimes called dominant), negotiated, and oppositional and outlines how audience actively interact with texts, transcending the Frankfurt School’s oversimplified view of passive audience. As important theoretical support, the turn enables scholars to look into the agency, participation, complexity, and production of fans in cultural consumption.

2.2. De Certeau’s Textual Poaching

Michel de Certeau, one of the most important founders of fan studies, highly values the initiative and agency of cultural consumers, arguing that consumers are able to create their own meanings when consuming cultural products and subvert the rituals and narratives that institutions try to impose on them. He emphasizes consumption over production. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau suggests that the act of daily consumption is in fact a form of production, also known as “consumer production” or “secondary production[7].” De Certeau believes that consumers are able to personalize or transform the products imposed by the dominant economic order. Contrary to Foucault’s emphasis on the omnipresence of disciplinary power, de Certeau focuses on consumer resistance and their anti-disciplinary practices.

De Certeau uses military terms such as poaching and guerrilla to describe consumers’ creative reproductions of and active resistance to cultural products. Against the background of industrialization, it is producers and institutionalized interpreters who regulate and control the production and circulation of meaning, and possess “the mastery of language” and dominate a “scriptural economy” which limits oral communications of “multiple voices[8].” Unable to fully escape from the products offered by capitalists, consumers tend to creatively and rebelliously poach what’s useful and pleasant to them from such products and compete with producers for ownership of a text and control over interpretation. De Certeau’s notions of secondary production of textual meaning and consumers as cultural poachers escaping institutional control provide a new way of thinking for fan studies, from where Jenkins built his ideas of participatory culture.

3. Main Takeaways from Textual Poachers

In *Textual Poachers*, focusing on texts and phenomena related to fans with a prudent approach to fan identification, culture and communities, Jenkins uses a new ethnographic research method to observe the complexity and ambivalence of participation in fan culture.

3.1. Identity Transformation of Fans as Poachers: Text Rereading and Appropriation

Arguing that fans are not as passive as previously thought in popular culture studies, Jenkins develops a detailed analysis of fans' social status and cultural behavior and reevaluates the complex and multi-layered relationship between mass media and consumers. As a source of addiction and obsession, fans' favorite cultural products could also cause displeasure and dissatisfaction, leading fans to have intense interaction with media[9]. Since mainstream narratives in popular culture cannot satisfy every demand of fans, in their rereading or subversion of the content, fans tend to tailor it to their unique preferences and make alternative interpretations of the original content.

Inspired by de Certeau's behavior description of consumers as poachers, Jenkins sees fans as manipulation-resistant creators and rational receivers and proposes that fandom is a participatory culture which transforms the experience of media consumption into the production of new texts[9]. Fans have discussions or create their own cultural productions based on the popular texts they consume. The original meaning may be saved or changed and their cultural and social identities are constructed during the process. Questioning the ability of mass media to limit readers to certain meanings, he acknowledges the identity transformation of fans into poachers who are no longer consumers in the traditional sense but producers of textual meanings.

In addition, Jenkins acknowledges the power divide between fans as poachers and authors, writers, media companies as land owners[9]. Socially disadvantaged and marginalized by popular culture, few fans have direct access to the means of popular cultural production or strong influence over capitalists and producers. Though they enjoy a certain degree of autonomy, they can only compete as poachers with their opponents on a very unequal footing.

3.2. Participatory Culture in Fan Communities: A Utopian Society of Nomads

Jenkins argues that as critical consumers of media culture, fans attract outsiders to join and broadens their active and creative fan community through rewriting and appropriation. Fandom provides a unique cultural place where fans poach, interpret, reconstruct texts produced by institutions, transforming mass culture into a popular culture[10]. Fans develop poaching into a legitimate art form: participatory culture.

The participatory culture of fandom builds new texts, cultures, and communities from media consumption, constantly producing meanings out of cultural materials that others see as insignificant and worthless[11]. Interpretation and reconstruction of textual meanings and rereading and appropriation of the original texts are forms of fans' resistance to the dominant culture, mundane values, and capitalism. Fans present their unique views on reality in their seeming frenzy with their individualistic behaviors transforming spectatorship into participation[10]. Fans as poachers and nomads construct a utopia governed by their own values where underground aesthetics are respected.

In participatory culture, active cultural poachers transform textual productions and artistic expressions from a privilege of professionals and intellectuals into shared enjoyment among amateurs. Stuart Hall's Theory of Encoding/Decoding proposes that popular meanings are fixed and classifiable while Jenkins believes that meaning production is fluid and less hierarchical in participatory culture and fans are not simply poachers; they are also "nomads," always in movement whose artistic expressions are highly individualistic and based on individual preferences. Fans as nomads constantly advance upon another text, appropriate new materials and make new meanings, creating a diverse, inclusive and balanced participatory cultural atmosphere in their utopia.

3.3. A Mixture of Disappointment and Expectation: Fan Communities Built on Shared Interests

Aware of the dissolving boundary between the ethnographer and the research subject, Jenkins uses newer forms of ethnography to examine fans and their culture from within the fan community in an empathetic and nonjudgmental way. He sees fandom as a new kind of community built on similar consumer behavior and taste, where people with shared interests, perceptions and convictions gather together without ulterior motive. He argues that when consuming mass culture, fans are also textual producers, capable of making alternative interpretations of the original text or producing meanings consistent with such interpretations. Their productions are meta-text, considered intellectual property owned by the fan community. As a subculture, fandom is complex and diverse, featuring specific modes of reception and a range of critical and interpretive practices which lay the foundation for social activities of its members. Characterized by their unique aesthetic traditions and practices, fans make distinctive cultural products. Fandom functions as an alternative social community[9], thriving outside of the formal social, cultural and political institutions and making huge efforts to establish its ideals and group identity as part of its culture. Jenkins argues that fan communities are different from others in that they actively create new entities. Members do not focus on one text, but rather wander between texts, creating new meanings and fan communities around new themes or unearthing intertextuality between texts to expand the scope and appeal of the existing communities.

Through the production of fan fiction, fan video and filk, fan communities express their dissatisfaction with the vulgar consumer culture and fight for textual ownership and control over interpretation of the original texts. Questioning the credibility and authority claimed by institutional practices, fan communities refuse to submit to the “mundane” social norms. Existing on and beyond social realities, the more humane and democratic space provided by fan communities helps members escape from mundane constraints. However, Jenkins also acknowledges that a poached culture, a nomadic culture, is also a patchwork culture, an impure culture, where much that is taken in remains semidigested and ill-considered. The institutions of fandom allow the expression both of what fans are struggling against and what they are struggling for; its cultural products articulate the fans’ frustration with their everyday life as well as their fascination with representations that pose alternatives[9].

4. Textual Poachers for Today

Text Poachers is a classic of fan studies against the background of traditional media. Its unique theoretical perspective has opened new directions for fan studies, and its main ideas are still strongly relevant today, providing important insights for current fan studies and theoretical applications.

Jenkins' research in *Text Poachers* focuses on the fan communities of traditional media, such as movies and TV series. Although fans’ participation in text interpretation and content creation in various ways broadens their influence and contradicts the passive audience theory, they are still on an unequal footing and have little influence on media’s decision-making while media enjoy a dominant position in the process of transmission and reception. In the era of digital media powered by Internet technologies, fans can better participate in the reworking, rereading and appropriation of various cultural products. As poachers, they expand the influence of the original texts. Since now fans enjoy greater autonomy, the power relations between media and audience are reversed, which means that media need to pay more attention to the nomadic poaching of fans and respond to their wants reflected by their behavior when making decisions.

The participatory culture of fans described by Jenkins means a combination of fans' individualistic preferences and the original texts. Fans' creativity allows the marginalized subculture of fandom to come into view. New digital media have lowered the threshold for fan participation, no longer limiting cultural productions by fans to circulation within subcultural communities. Platforms and channels for cooperation and connection make new forms of participation and cooperation possible, transforming fans into cultural producers with access to the mass audience. Diverse cooperation expands the depth of participatory culture and its influence on reality, inspiring those cooperating with fans to pay attention to the deeper meanings in the unique and appealing subculture and help its development move in the right direction.

For lack of better technologies, in the era of traditional media, communication within fan communities and circulation of fan cultural production were slow and inefficient, preventing group members from sharing the same ideals and having a sense of belonging. Online communities facilitate connections within fan communities and large-scale collaboration on texts which takes advantage of knowledge accumulation and collective wisdom [12]. Real-time and efficient communication helps fan communities have tighter bonds. More bonds can not only benefit subcultures, but also promote public values and social consensus to help build communities in the mainstream society. The underlying mechanism of fandom is applicable to the construction of a better society.

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