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NEGATIVE FAN STEREOTYPES (“GET A LIFE!”) AND POSITIVE FAN INJUNCTIONS (“EVERYONE’S GOT TO BE A FAN OF SOMETHING!”): RETURNING TO HEGEMONY THEORY IN FAN STUDIES



“[S]ome people get really obsessed [with TV]; it gets a bit sad.”

“It’s kind of a necessity to get in to it [TV and the media] otherwise you’re bizarre.”¹

These two comments were made by one respondent who I interviewed as part of an Arts and Humanities Research Board (AHRC) funded project on media consumption (see the latter part of the next section for more details on this). What struck me most forcefully about these remarks was the way in which they seemed to fit with ‘common sense’ stereotypes of TV fans being a strange bunch of ‘obsessive’ folk, whilst also indicating a felt compulsion to be part of this broadly ‘fannish’ world and not to be left out of its social interactions. Fandom, for this respondent, seemingly represented both a derided cultural group and a desired affiliation or sense of socio-cultural belonging.

This article is a response to the conundrum thrown up by empirical work on just one audience member: that is, how can TV be felt as

something one has “to get in to” and as something one mustn’t get too interested in? Must we inevitably choose between being deemed “sad” or “bizarre” for being either affectively too close or too far from television and its texts? In what follows, I suggest that this respondent’s sense of normatively positive and normatively negative parameters to television consumption (i.e. ‘be a fan but not too much of a fan’) merits further analysis in relation to theories of hegemony and cultural power.

Gramscian-derived theories of hegemony achieved a dominance of their own in cultural studies of the 1990s.² This dominance was evident in studies of television fandom that placed fans on the agenda of audience theory,³ and it is this conjunction of fan studies and “hegemony theory” that I will focus on.

Theories of hegemony allowed cultural studies scholars to move beyond theories of ‘direct’ ideological domination without sacrificing the analysis of cultural power.⁴ Hegemony’s emphasis on the “winning of consent to unequal class relations”⁵ offered a more sophisticated model of ideology than that which stressed “false consciousness,” recognizing

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the role of ... subordinate groups in producing ways of 'making sense' of the world....[T]he 'hegemony' or power of the dominant groups can only be maintained through a struggle and tension between dominant and subordinate groups ... [where] ... the subordinate groups have found enough concessions to make them accept their domination while the dominant groups' overall structural power base is maintained.⁶

Hegemony indicates "a process whereby the ideas of dominant and subordinate groups (e.g. fan cultures) vie for ascendancy,"⁷ in contrast to the "dominant ideology thesis," which viewed ideology as a spurious representation of the world that subordinate groups "simply lap ... up."⁸ Whether the theoretical meaning of 'hegemony' has remained 'true' to Gramsci, or to the Birmingham School's appropriation of it—indeed, whether such an originary reading is even possible, given ambiguities in Gramsci's accounts⁹—there can be no doubting the pre-eminence of 'hegemony' as a concept in cultural studies,¹⁰ even if it has fallen into disrepute of late.¹¹

In this essay I want to consider the place that hegemony theory has occupied in fan studies.¹² I will introduce critiques of hegemony's use in audience theory before then moving on to analyze empirical data drawn from an AHRB-funded research project which was partly designed to address how people categorise themselves, and others, as media consumers/audiences. Considering one respondent's stereotyped representations of fandom, I will suggest that the concept of hegemony has been prematurely jettisoned in recent work on fans.

POST-HEGEMONIC TV FANS?

In their book *Audiences*, Nicholas Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst separate audience studies itself into three paradigms, two of which I will discuss and contrast here. These different academic approaches are important because while the first of them (the 'Incorporation/Resistance Paradigm') focuses centrally on

hegemony and cultural power, viewing fandom as a 'resistive' activity, and analysing fans as a socially stigmatised group who fail to conform to dominant, hegemonic ideals of 'detached,' normative TV viewing, the second approach (the 'Spectacle/Performance Paradigm') marginalises questions of fandom's resistance to media industries and dominant cultural norms. Instead, this latter approach assumes that being a fan is about articulating consumer pleasures and carrying out unfettered performances of self-identity. It thereby entirely turns away from considerations of cultural power that had defined much earlier work on (fan) audiences. My concern here is that by reacting against the 'Incorporation/Resistance Paradigm' and its emphasis on questions of hegemony, the emergent 'Spectacle/Performance Paradigm' defined and championed by Abercrombie and Longhurst has tended to overly celebrate an assumed 'normalisation' of (fan) audience identities. In *Audiences*, Abercrombie and Longhurst seem to be implying that fans are no longer significantly subject to negative stereotypes—or that if they are, this is an unimportant fact—since being a fan is now an ordinary and mundane cultural act, rather than being unusual/resistive. I will outline Abercrombie and Longhurst's two very different paradigms of audience study in more detail, suggesting that we need to retain a focus on how contemporary TV fandom remains negatively stereotyped in 'hegemonic' discourses.

Abercrombie and Longhurst link the Birmingham School's use of hegemony theory to the "Incorporation/Resistance paradigm" ('IRP'):

The... IRP... defines the problem of audience research as whether audience members are incorporated into the dominant ideology by their participation in media activity or whether, to the contrary, they are resistant to that incorporation....[T]he paradigm is defined by the debate between the two positions and not necessarily by the endorsement of one of them.¹³

Abercrombie and Longhurst then go on to suggest that work on fandom is "better understood within



the SPP” (Spectacle/Performance Paradigm). For them, the SPP is

A response to changes in the nature of the audience and in the experience of being a member of an audience [where] ... the qualities and experiences of being a member of an audience have begun to leak out from specific performance events which previously contained them, into the wider realms of everyday life.¹⁴

From a focus on hegemony in the IRP paradigm, the SPP moves to consider “mundane” or normalised, everyday audience identities.¹⁵ For Abercrombie and Longhurst, fan studies therefore plays a key role in superseding what Stuart Hall terms the “critical paradigm” in

cultural studies, characterised by its reliance on “the notion of hegemony.”¹⁶ *Audiences* argues that such an approach is weakened through its focus on audience responses to single texts rather than considering the ‘media saturation’ of contemporary culture. This critique identifies the difficulty of isolating out one medium in order to identify “television fans,”¹⁷ given that fans tend to carry their investment in a TV show into the cultural consumption of “secondary” texts, e.g. books, magazines, films, and websites. In this context, it makes little sense to isolate out “TV fans,” and I will thus use ‘TV fandom’ and ‘media fandom’ interchangeably throughout this essay. Following on from text- and media-specificity, the IRP model is supposedly further weakened by its emphasis on patterned readings, where different audience interpretations should cluster around a

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14" set
Nippon Columbia Co., Ltd.

14" set
Fuji Electric Mfg. Co.

14" set
Hoyakawa Electric Co., Ltd.

14" set
Fuji Electric Mfg. Co., Ltd.

14" set with stereo phonograph
Nippon Electric Co., Ltd.

‘preferred/hegemonic reading.’ Abercrombie and Longhurst allege that rather than any such patterns of interpretive reading, it is fragmentation which is empirically typical.¹⁸

Other critics have argued for a movement away from hegemony as a concept, suggesting that cultural studies has become a “resistance industry.” Carol A. Stabile’s account of the “resistance/recuperation framework” shares similarities with Abercrombie and Longhurst’s critique of the IRP.¹⁹ The logic of these arguments is that hegemony theory no longer gains a useful purchase on fan/audience experiences, and must be superseded. Against such a stark shift, Garry Crawford suggests that Abercrombie and

Longhurst’s SPP model is not fully adequate to re-theorising fandom.²⁰ Crawford focuses on the place of power within Abercrombie and Longhurst’s work, noting that

Though social power appears crucial to understanding the foundations and stance of many considerations of audiences and fan cultures this ... debate is frequently left under-theorized....Abercrombie and Longhurst’s consideration of power relations is largely restricted to their critique of its centrality to the incorporation/resistance paradigm.²¹

Crawford cautions against the “peripheral nature of social power” assumed by the SPP, and the manner in which power is “subsequently ignored” in this theorization of fans.²² Accepting many of the moves made away from the IRP, particularly regarding the “diffusion” of audience identities into everyday life, and the fragmentation and omnipresence of media consumption, Crawford still seeks to hold onto a model of social power and fandom. He argues for the need to move beyond the IRP and its resistance/recuperation framework

while continuing to focus on the way that fan identities do not merely become a normalised part of everyday life within contemporary settings. The move from IRP to SPP should not be seen as a collapse in questions of social/cultural power, since developments in fan identity identified by Abercrombie and Longhurst and S. Elizabeth Bird “must have important consequences for relations of power.”²³

Seeking, like Crawford, to retain a space for theorizations of power and media/TV fandom, I will analyse a single empirical case study drawn from recent AHRB-funded research.²⁴ Mindful of Abercrombie and Longhurst’s intervention, this research project aimed to avoid approaching

media audiences as pre-defined fans of specific TV shows, instead assessing the wider range of media consumption through which audiences defined/performed their identities. The project focused on both fannish “likes” and non-fan “dislikes,” allowing respondents to demarcate their multiple or “diffused” fan identities.²⁵ Face-to-face, open-ended/semi-structured interviews were carried out with 40 respondents, spending five separate, weekly interview sessions with each respondent, and generating close to 200 hours of interview material. Respondents were recruited through a snowballing methodology beginning with opportunity samples and an advertisement in UK magazine *Cult Times*, which we hoped would recruit fans of cult TV who participated in socially-organised fandom, without fixing in advance the texts that these respondents would be fans of. Respondents’ ages tended to fall into two broad clusters: one group, composed of current and former undergraduate students, were predominantly in their early twenties, while professionals based in London and interviewed by Dr. Jamie Sexton were more typically in their thirties. Both groups skewed toward middle-class demographics, although the overall set of respondents was balanced in gender terms.

The five different interviews we carried out were designed to elicit the range of each interviewee’s media likes and dislikes; to relate memories of media consumption to narrated life stories; to consider constructions of ‘self’ and ‘other’ identity in relation to media consumption; to address whether respondents ‘rationalised’ their media consumption practices; and to allow a self-reflexive space for respondents to amend their previous self-representations and reflect on the interview experience.

I have chosen to focus on one series of interviews in detail because they indicate something useful about fan studies and hegemony theory. The use of a single ‘case study’ to focus on wider issues in cultural studies is not without precedent, having been productively carried out by Ellen Seiter.²⁶ However, *contra* Seiter’s troubling interview, where the major fault-line separating academic interviewers from their interviewees was one of “cultural capital,”²⁷ the interviewee in this instance was an undergraduate student of English

Literature who discussed how she enjoyed reading ‘the classics.’ Both myself as interviewer and this respondent, Charlotte (not her real name), thus displayed an investment in cultural capital. The fault-line provoking a troubling interview instead arose through Charlotte’s repeated derogation of media fans, in contrast to my attempts to value TV/media fandom.

Charlotte is a white, middle-class, Catholic and self-professed “conservative,” aged 21 in early 2003. At the conclusion of her interviews, she remained sure that she did not ever want to be a fan of any TV text. It may seem odd to address fan studies on the basis of one case study of somebody who generally defines her cultural identity *against* that of being a fan. However, along with focusing on fans of singular texts, to date fan studies has focused predominantly on self-professed fans, usually those who take part in socially-organised fandom. Yet we could also learn about the cultural conditions within which fandom is devalued, and consider how fans’ ‘subcultural’ identities are constructed against a non-fan ‘mainstream’ by addressing fandom’s Other: the consumer who is not an engaged fan.

Given that one of Abercrombie and Longhurst’s critiques of hegemony theory lies in “the problem of relating the relatively small-scale conclusions derived from individual empirical studies to the larger-scale social theory of hegemony,”²⁸ it could be said that attempting to redress their lack of focus on power through an individual case study is foolhardy. This objection also misses a number of points. Firstly, hegemony theory indicates that “common sense” accounts offer one way in which power relations are significantly reproduced: hence even an individual case study may profitably access forms of “common sense” wherein the undifferentiated/universal mass of “everyone” could be discursively called up to corroborate specific ideologies. Secondly, such a critique misses the fact that one new case study may resonate with observations made by many other theorists with regards to negatively-stereotyped fan identities or “mainstreamed fandom,” again suggesting the presence of hegemonic discourses.

Having introduced hegemony’s conceptual centrality to the IRP, and its apparent disregard within the SPP, I now turn to analysis of the interviews carried out with Charlotte. The ways

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in which this respondent represented media/TV fandom indicate that fans continue to be pathologised in contemporary culture despite Abercrombie and Longhurst's concern with the diffusion of audience and fan identities into "mundane" everyday life. Aspects of Charlotte's cultural identity as a non-fan also emphasise how she feels compelled to negotiate with fan identities taken to be "dominant"/normative, at the same time as pathologising fans. Co-existing as pathologised *and* normative, TV fandom oscillates in Charlotte's contradictory accounts. But within these conflictual fan representations, social and cultural power remain crucial considerations: here, being a self-identified "non-fan" means discursively evading attributions of fan "obsessiveness," hence self-representing as a morally "good" subject able to display detachment in her cultural consumption. But it also means not always being able to readily fit in within the *milieu* of the contemporary University student. Fan identities thus carry a seemingly hegemonic power as a naturalised consumer role: the non-fan has to "Get a Life!" even while replicating established discourses of devalued fannish 'sadness.' Media and TV fandom operate as cultural category-constructing objects, defining the limits to "correct"—or hegemonic—media consumption *both positively* where "everyone has to be a fan of something," and *negatively*, where "everyone knows" that fans are obsessive. The contradictory co-existence of such discourses suggests that academic narratives of negative fan stereotyping being superseded by normalised or "mainstreamed" fan identities may be somewhat premature and overly optimistic.²⁹

"NEW HEGEMONIC" CONTRADICTIONS IN DISCOURSE: MEDIA/TV FANDOM AS PATHOLOGISED AND NORMATIVE

Charlotte repeatedly emphasises that "the media" is not important in her life. When asked to discuss the "anti-her," an exercise designed to elicit self-representations and forms of Othering, she says:

They'd watch TV all the time and like celebrities and have posters everywhere. They'd be greedy. They'd probably have

a small family and not care much for it. They wouldn't have any morals.... They'd be quite hedonistic and stupid. They ... wouldn't be nice to other people.³⁰

This exercise was a productive way of accessing respondents' self-narratives, since people often felt freer to attack an imagined "anti-them" and thus implicitly perform their self-identity without directly discussing any sense of self. Charlotte included her dislike of the media, and TV especially, in her account, positing that her "inverse" self would be an avid TV viewer and celebrity-follower. She referred to the importance of her large family by suggesting that the "anti"-her would "have a small family and not care much for it." Charlotte's family is clearly extremely important to her sense of self: she frequently discussed her parents and siblings.

Charlotte's disregard for the media, where, as she says, "I don't really have any fandoms"³¹ repeatedly shines through:

My sister was obsessed with it [TV] at one point and would watch virtually every soap. She lives in London now with two of her mates, and the TV is always on. I went to stay a couple of weeks ago and I thought, "well, are we going to do anything, or just watch TV?"...I realised that you spend your whole time in front of it and you miss doing anything. It seems kind of pointless. There's not really much point living really!³²

For this respondent, television is "unreal," as opposed to the substantive world of hobbies and family. When I asked "Do you think peoples' media tastes are important or trivial, and why?" Charlotte responded:

I think people waste too much time on it, and they don't know their own lives basically. I saw the Michael Jackson story [on TV] the other day and there were people ... crying after he touched them, and that's a bit out of hand...[S]ome people get really obsessed; it gets a bit

sad...It doesn't seem like reality; it just seems like escapism to me.³³

Others' fandoms are linked to a troubling "obsessiveness" and an imputed loss of reality in favour of pathological escapism. Charlotte asserts that "I'm not obsessive about anything. I've got interests but I'm not obsessive about it" and continues:

I'm glad that I'm not a fan....They all seem a little loopy, a little crazy!...Amy's on work experience [in the TV industry] at the moment and if she comes across anyone famous, she goes all funny.³⁴

Fans are "loopy" and "obsessive," they "waste too much time" following TV, and so "miss doing anything." This range of discourses may strike readers as being extremely familiar 'lay' critiques of fandom and television: "Television watching can be a touchy subject, precisely because of its association with a lack of education, with idleness ... and its identification as an 'addiction.'"³⁵ This touchiness is doubled in relation to television *fandom*: Charlotte depicts fans in ways that replicate negative stereotypes explored by many cultural studies writers.³⁶

Henry Jenkins has written about the "popular stereotypes" surrounding fans, noting that fans are characterised as "'kooks,' obsessed with trivia, celebrities and collectibles."³⁷ TV fans are typically viewed as devoting "their lives to the cultivation of worthless knowledge[;] ... plac[ing] inappropriate importance on devalued cultural material [and] ... are unable to separate fantasy from reality."³⁸ These negative fan stereotypes found infamous expression in a *Saturday Night Live* sketch where actor William Shatner told *Star Trek* fans to "Get a Life!," criticism that provided the title for Chapter 1 of Jenkins's study of television fans wherein he challenged such stereotypes.³⁹ Previous empirical studies of fan cultures have also demonstrated how fans engage with and reject negative fan stereotypes.⁴⁰ Attacks on fandom in popular media representations, and their repercussions in fans' own talk and attributions of "hardcore" fan identity, have been well-documented.⁴¹ Charlotte's devaluation of



Images like these help to cement the negative stereotypes of fans as obsessive and pathological.

media/TV fans tells us nothing new about how fandom tends to be thought about by non-fans, as she replays a *pattern* of negative discourses on fandom that have been argued to possess general, hegemonic dominance, *contra* Abercrombie and Longhurst's emphasis on interpretative "fragmentation" of audience readings as evidence for the failure of hegemony theory. Charlotte's profound rejection of TV fandom may be related to matters of cultural capital and distinction, as well as to matters of cultural politics, with "the media world" being criticised in conservative terms for supposedly eroding 'the real.' Elsewhere, I have characterised such discourses of devalued fandom

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as “privileging rationality over emotion,” with TV fans “entering a hegemonic struggle over what constitutes “rational” and “proper” behaviour within contemporary media culture.”⁴² Dismissing fandom through the discursive frameworks that Charlotte deploys therefore amounts, on this reading, to reproducing a form of modernist-hegemonic “common sense.”

Indeed, Charlotte indicated a sense of drawing on naturalised “common sense” through her invocation of the depersonalised and universalised term “everyone,” as when she remarked that if an imagined Other knew only that she enjoyed reading fantasy novels “they’d think I was a geek! *Everyone knows* that people who like sci-fi are geeks.”⁴³ Thus a fan stereotype is couched in terms of unchallengeable ‘truth’ by Charlotte’s discursive appeal to an “everyone,” constructing this as a literal form of “common” or shared sense-making. And yet, Charlotte didn’t just reproduce negative fan stereotypes. While happily describing her best friend as “a bit of a freak with all her fandoms,”⁴⁴ Charlotte also lamented that her own non-fandom and lack of interest in TV had been viewed as “a bit strange.”⁴⁵ When discussing whether people’s media tastes were important, Charlotte observed: “It’s kind of a necessity to get in to it [TV and the media] otherwise you’re bizarre.”⁴⁶ The Self-Other construction associated with supposedly modernist-hegemonic “common sense,” that of a rational, normal ‘self’ versus an irrational, “crazy” fan-Other, is thus not univocally carried here. Charlotte discloses that her principled anti-media stand has caused her to be devalued in the eyes of others as not fitting in with an expected consumer-based cultural identity: “that’s just the world that we live in. We’re bombarded with it all so one would just assume that you’re going to be picked up and carried along with it.”⁴⁷

Charlotte is not entirely free to pursue her anti-TV views, feeling a need to show some interest in TV “to be social with anyone else.”⁴⁸ What little television viewing she engages in is framed through a discourse of ‘emotional sharing,’ representing this as a matter of avoiding loneliness. However, despite referring to her attempts to ‘fit in’ by pretending to be a fan of types of pop music when she was younger—“I was very unhappy in the first part of secondary school and I tried to get

interested in stuff that other people were interested in. I tried to be interested in ‘Brit pop,’ but I really don’t like it”⁴⁹ Charlotte repeatedly constructs herself as a kind of ‘good Samaritan TV viewer.’ It is typically *others’* ‘loneliness’ that she assuages by following a morally-guided practice of ‘watching-with’ her family members and friends when they would otherwise have nobody to share favourite TV shows with:

(J): I liked *Pride and Prejudice* ... I watched it a few times with Mum...I feel kind of sorry for her because everyone leaves the room when she puts it on....When I watch films with Amy it’s because I don’t want her sitting in the room on her own. I’ve seen some horrible films because of that. She’d come down the stairs saying “I’ve got a great video, does anyone want to watch it?” Other people would say yes and then pull out, so I’d feel a bit guilty and watch it with her.⁵⁰

And:

(MH): Your other housemate wanted everyone to watch the video, did she?

(J): No, I said I’d watch it because no one else would.⁵¹

Although Charlotte has seen many films on video and many TV shows, these are discursively framed as ‘belonging’ to others such as her mother or her best friend Amy. This process—where TV and video watching is filtered through others, or represented as a display of care—supports Charlotte’s self-construction of highly moral, compassionate femininity. As she puts it, being a Catholic means “to have more of a caring ... attitude towards people.”⁵² TV viewing is thus discursively recontextualised less as a way for Charlotte to ‘fit in,’ and more as a way for her to support family and friends.

This pattern of ‘other-directed’ viewing repeatedly attributes sadness, loneliness and loss to others rather than to Charlotte herself, and so functions to cast any question of her own

loneliness, or sense of not fitting in, into silence. This resembles the reworking of the concept of ‘repression’ that Michael Billig carries out in *Freudian Repression: Conversation Creating the Unconscious*. Billig argues that conversation is habitually structured by agents in ways that open up certain topics and simultaneously close down others:

repression might be considered as a form of changing the subject. It is a way of saying to oneself, ‘talk, or think, of this and not that.’ One then becomes engrossed in ‘this’ topic, so ‘that’ topic becomes forgotten....A replacement topic is needed, if attention is to be shifted.⁵³

Billig suggests that troubling thoughts, and notions which may conflict with cultural norms or constructions of valued self-identity, can be “avoided” by the habitual use of replacement material, hence creating structuring absences in discourse. Charlotte’s ‘good Samaritan TV viewer’ routine appears to replace troubling material—a sense of herself as having to conform, or as potentially being excluded or marginalised for her anti-TV stance—with a highly positive self-representation chiming with her religious value system, and her focus on her family: “I’ve got a strong family base and I don’t have an emotional void that most people have. I’ve never had an idol or anything like that. The only people I’ve looked up to are in my family.”⁵⁴

A discursive shifting of emotional pain becomes clearly visible here, in the remarkable attribution that imagined Others are interested in TV celebrities, unlike Charlotte herself, because they “have an emotional void.” However, set against this construction of herself as emotionally centred in the reality of her family and circle of friends, Charlotte has to work to close down accounts of herself as “a bit strange” or “bizarre” for not being a fan of anything. I asked whether any fellow students, friends, or family members had challenged her ‘non-fan’ status:

(J): Yeah, they go through everything that I’m interested in and say, “You’re a fan of that and you’ve got to be a fan

of something!”....Amy has, and my friends back home have....[O]ne of my sister’s friends ... said that it was a bit strange that I wasn’t a fan of anything and that everyone’s got to be a fan of something.⁵⁵

This strikingly returns to the discursive invocation of “everyone.” “Everyone knows” that sci-fi fans are geeks, just as it seems that “everyone’s got to be a fan of something.” By not conforming to this cultural “frame of reference,”⁵⁶ 21-year-old Charlotte risks being labelled “a bit of a granny” for her tastes, as well as finding it difficult “to be social.”⁵⁷

If Charlotte hadn’t drawn so conspicuously on negative fan stereotypes, her discussion of having to fit in by being a TV consumer/fan could be taken as evidence that audience identities are indeed diffusing through a media-saturated society, and that fandom is no longer the awkward cultural identity it once was.⁵⁸ A one-sided reading of these discourses supports post-hegemony schools of thought in recent fan studies. And yet, in these interviews Charlotte combines what has previously been viewed as a “modernist-hegemonic” discourse devaluing media/TV fandom with contradictory and more positive discourses of fandom as a socially necessary identity, at least within the *milieu* of the University student. This contradiction could be glossed by concluding that fans of certain genres—science fiction—are notably devalued here,⁵⁹ while a more generalised, abstracted notion of fandom is felt to be necessary to underpin social interaction and cultural belonging. Yet this doesn’t entirely close down the discursive contradictoriness of negative fan stereotypes and positive fan injunctions, since Charlotte devalues fandom in general as well as especially criticising “sci-fi geeks,” and is at pains to distance herself from the generalised “obsessiveness” and ‘loss of reality’ of TV/media fans.

How, then, might we explain this co-existence of negative and positive fan representations? I have suggested that the notion of hegemony remains significant in relation to negative fan stereotypes; such patterns in fan representation indicate that cultural power may not operate

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at the level of audience interpretations of singular texts so much as at the level of iterated “common sense” typifications. Abercrombie and Longhurst’s emphasis on the lack of coherence in audience interpretations, and in the supposed fragmentation of readings beyond those predicted by hegemony theory, has little purchase in this instance. Charlotte’s disapproval of TV fandom resonates with widely-documented ways of sense-making that operate to hegemonically devalue fan identities.

But doesn’t the existence in Charlotte’s account of a discourse positively valuing fandom indicate that hegemony theory is now fatally flawed in fan studies and that fandom is becoming normalised? In fact, Charlotte’s discussion of a situation where “everyone’s got to be a fan of something” could almost have been lifted from cultural studies’ celebrations/defences of fan identity. Lisa A. Lewis introduces *The Adoring Audience*, for example, by noting that “we are all fans of something.”⁶⁰ And Kirsten Pullen has recently entitled an essay on fandom ‘Everybody’s Gotta Love Somebody, Sometime...’⁶¹

And yet, I would suggest that there are worlds of difference between these seemingly very similar phrases. For Lewis, such a statement works as a challenge to views operating to devalue fandom. Arguing that “we are all fans” highlights the workings of a dominant discourse which uses the label of ‘fandom’ in some instances and not others, typically not deploying it in relation to high cultural ‘appreciation,’ for instance. There is hence a counter-hegemonic intent, a specific interventionist cultural politics, to such a statement.⁶² By contrast, Pullen’s use of a similar sentiment occurs in relation to her argument that fandom has been “commercialized [and] ... led ...towards the mainstream” as a consumer identity.⁶³ Although fan studies may celebrate this shift—assuming that ‘mainstreamed’ fandom no longer gives rise to fan stigmatizations of old⁶⁴—Charlotte’s contradictory running-together of positive representations of ‘mainstreamed’ fandom and negative stereotypes implies that cause for celebration may be exaggerated. ‘Mainstreamed’ fandom doesn’t at all displace fan stigmatizations here.

I want to suggest that Charlotte’s confluence of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ representations of fandom indicates not the collapse of hegemony theory, nor that fan studies has achieved its aim of positively revaluing fandom, but rather quite the reverse: that hegemony theory remains vital to thinking about fandom, and that cultural studies’ cultural politics of the 1990s may have been outmanoeuvred by ‘new hegemonic fandom’ rather than achieving victory through the rise of a counter-hegemonic position. The untroubling co-existence of contradictory elements of thought is, after all, a cornerstone of theories of hegemonic “common sense.” And in Condit’s reading of hegemony,⁶⁵ where the concept is disarticulated from any essentialised class bloc,⁶⁶ it is argued that “a variety of groups forge concord by accommodating to each other’s interests....The hegemonic worldview that arises does so on the basis of a plurivocal set of interests, not a single dominant interest.”⁶⁷

This gives us a way to think through the dissonance in Charlotte’s representations of TV/media fandom. If different “interest groups” are involved in generating a “plurivocal” hegemonic worldview, we might say that Charlotte displays one dimension of hegemony aligned with her class background and her accumulated cultural capital



(where TV is “stupid” and “rubbish”), alongside another dimension of ‘new fan hegemony’ that is aligned more broadly with the interests of capital. “Crap” TV and its “obsessive” fans fail to accord with the norms of detached, bourgeois high culture, while at the same time “everyone has to be fan” via naturalisations of consumer culture,⁶⁸ and through the inescapability of commercial culture as a “frame” for social interaction.

Refusing to root her sense of moral, agentive selfhood in media/TV/celebrity cultures, Charlotte feels under pressure to conform, and to watch TV with others, which she discursively recontextualises *not* as being about ‘fitting in’ or as somehow being ‘untrue’ to her self-identity, but as a duty of care. Whilst devaluing media/TV fandom through a range of stereotypes, Charlotte partly recognises the legitimacy of such fandom where “everyone has to be a fan.” This by no means places her outside of fields of cultural and discursive power. Rather than “mainstreamed” fandom being normalised in place of prior pathologies⁶⁹, this scenario indicates that fan identities may be becoming contradictorily normative *at the same time as remaining pathologised*. The SPP cannot be clearly viewed

as superseding the IRP in any such account, *contra* Abercrombie and Longhurst’s arguments. Shifts toward “mainstreamed” fandom arguably occur within a new hegemonic and internally self-contradictory “common sense.” To feel, however inchoately, that one *has* to be a fan of something is not at all the same thing as observing that “we are all fans of something”⁷⁰ in the hope of challenging dominant cultural norms.

On the basis of this discussion, I want to suggest that straightforwardly arguing for TV fandom’s “revaluation,” or stressing a “normalisation” of fandom, are actually somewhat problematic gestures. Such approaches feed readily into consumer culture’s naturalisation of what I’d term *normative fandom* or *new hegemonic fandom*, and they also tend to assume a scholarly master-narrative structured by philosophical logic (i.e. positive fan representations can/will replace negative fan stereotypes) rather than approaching contradictory ‘social logics’ of plurivocal hegemony wherein opposed views can be assimilated together.⁷¹ Confronting these contradictory discourses on TV fandom, it may be too early to consign hegemony theory to the dustbin of disciplinary history.

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NEGATIVE FAN STEREOTYPES AND POSITIVE FAN INJUNCTIONS

NOTES

¹ Charlotte, Interview #3 (March 6, 2003).

² Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis, *Enlightened Racism* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1992); Justin Lewis, *The Ideological Octopus: An Exploration of Television and its Audience* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991); David Morley, *Television, Audiences and Cultural Studies* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992); Michael O'Shaughnessy, "Box Pop: Popular Television and Hegemony" in *Understanding Television*, eds. Andrew Goodwin and Gary Whannel (London: Routledge, 1990): 88-102; Andrea Press, *Women Watching Television: Gender, Class, and Generation in the American Television Experience* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991).

³ Camille Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992); Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992); Lisa A. Lewis, ed., *The Adoring Audience* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992); Mary Ellen Brown, *Soap Opera and Women's Talk: The Pleasure of Resistance* (London: Sage, 1994).

⁴ Celeste Michelle Condit, "Hegemony in a Mass-mediated Society: Concordance about Reproductive Technologies," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 11: 3 (1994): 209.

⁵ Tim O'Sullivan, John Hartley, Danny Saunders, Martin Montgomery, and John Fiske, *Key Concepts in Communication and Cultural Studies - Second Edition* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994): 133.

⁶ O'Shaughnessy, 89-90.

⁷ Bernadette Casey, Neil Casey, Ben Calvert, Liam French and Justin Lewis, *Television Studies: The Key Concepts* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 119.

⁸ O'Shaughnessy, 89; see also Lawrence Grossberg, "On Postmodernism and Articulation: An Interview with Stuart Hall" in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, eds. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London and New York: Routledge, 1996): 149.

⁹ See Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971); Joseph V. Femia, *Gramsci's Political Thought: Hegemony, Consciousness, and the Revolutionary Process* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 8; and Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985), 69.

¹⁰ David Harris, *From Class Struggle to the Politics of Pleasure: The Effects of Gramscianism on Cultural Studies* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992); Andrew Tudor, *Decoding Culture: Theory and Method in Cultural Studies* (London: Sage, 1999), 119-26.

¹¹ Nicholas Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst, *Audiences* (London: Sage, 1998).

¹² For a previous consideration of this, see Matt Hills, "Fandom" in *The Critical Dictionary of Film and Television Theory*, eds. Roberta E. Pearson and Philip Simpson (New York and London: Routledge, 2001): 165-170.

¹³ Abercrombie and Longhurst, *Audiences*, 15.

¹⁴ Abercrombie and Longhurst, *Audiences*, 36-7; see also Elizabeth Bird, *The Audience in Everyday Life: Living in a Media World* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003).

¹⁵ Abercrombie and Longhurst, *Audiences*, 37.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

¹⁷ See Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*; Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women*.

¹⁸ Abercrombie and Longhurst, *Audiences*, 33; see Ian Angus et al, "Reflections Upon the Encoding/Decoding Model: An Interview with Stuart Hall" in *Viewing, Reading, Listening: Audiences and Cultural Reception*, eds. Jon Cruz and Justin Lewis (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1994): 266; Cornel Sandvoss, *Fans: The Mirror of Consumption* (Cambridge: Polity Press, forthcoming).

¹⁹ Carol Stabile, "Resistance, Recuperation, and Reflexivity: The Limits of a Paradigm" in *Pierre Bourdieu: Fieldwork in Culture*, eds. Nicholas Brown and Imre Szema (Lanham, Maryland: Rowan and Littlefield, 2000): 56, 57.

²⁰ Garry Crawford, *Consuming Sport: Fans, Sport and Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004): 26-7.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

²² *Ibid.*, 26.

²³ *Ibid.*, 27.

²⁴ See also Matt Hills, "Patterns of Surprise: The 'Aleatory Object' in Psychoanalytic Ethnography and Cyclical Fandom," *American Behavioural Scientist* 48, no. 7 (2005): 801-21.

²⁵ See Jonathan Gray, "New Audiences, New Textualities: Anti-fans and Non-fans" in *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2003): 64-81; Matt Hills, *The Pleasures of Horror* (London and New York: Continuum, 2005), 198-211.

²⁶ Ellen Seiter, "Making Distinctions in TV Audience Research: Case Study of a Troubling Interview," *Cultural Studies* 4, no. 1 (1990): 61-84.

²⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction* (London and New York, 1984).

²⁸ Abercrombie and Longhurst, *Audiences*, 33.

²⁹ See Abercrombie and Longhurst, *Audiences*; Henry Jenkins "Interactive Audiences?" in *The New Media Book*, ed. Dan Harries (London: BFI Publishing, 2002); Kirsten Pullen, "Everybody's Gotta Love Somebody, Sometime: Online Fan Community" in *Web.Studies 2nd Edition*, eds. David Gauntlett and Ross Horsley (London: Arnold, 2004): 80-91.

³⁰ Charlotte, Interview #3, (March 6, 2003), my italics.

³¹ Charlotte, Interview #5, (April 3, 2003).

³² Charlotte, Interview #3, (March 6, 2003).

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Charlotte, Interview #1 (February 13, 2003), my italics.

³⁵ Seiter, 62.

³⁶ See for example Ian Conrich, in *The Cinema of John Carpenter: The Technique of Terror*, eds. Ian Conrich and David Woods (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2004): 103; Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (London and New York, 2002); Matt Hills, "Recognition in the Eyes of the Relevant Beholder: Representing 'Subcultural Celebrity' and Cult TV Fans" in *Mediactive*, Issue 2 (2003): 59-73; Joli Jensen, "Fandom as Pathology: The Consequences of Characterization" in *The Adoring Audience*, ed. Lisa A. Lewis (London and New York: Routledge, 1992); Karen Ross and Virginia Nightingale, *Media and Audiences: New Perspectives* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2003); John Tulloch and Henry Jenkins, *Science Fiction Audiences* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).

³⁷ Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 10-11.

³⁸ Ibid., 10.

³⁹ Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*; see also Matt Hills, "Strategies, Tactics and the Question of Un Lieu Propre: What/Where is 'Media Theory'" in *Social Semiotics*, vol.14, no. 2 (2004): 145.

⁴⁰ See for example, Martin Barker and Kate Brooks, *Judge Dredd: Its Friends, Fans and Foes* (Luton: University of Luton Press, 1998), 73-5; Nancy K. Baym, *Tune In, Log On: Soaps, Fandom and Online Community* (London: Sage Press, 2000), 42-5.

⁴¹ As in Cassandra Amesley, "How to Watch *Star Trek*" in *Cultural Studies*, vol. 3, no. 3 (1989): 338.

⁴² Matt Hills, "Media Fandom, Neoreligiosity, and Cult(ural) Studies" in *The Velvet Light Trap: A Critical Journal of Film and Television*, no. 46 (2000): 80, 83.

⁴³ Charlotte, Interview #3 (March 6, 2003), my italics.

⁴⁴ Charlotte, Interview #5 (April 3, 2003).

⁴⁵ Charlotte, Interview #4, (March 13, 2003).

⁴⁶ Charlotte, Interview #3 (March 6, 2003).

⁴⁷ Charlotte, Interview #4 (March 13, 2003).

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Charlotte, Interview #2 (February 27, 2003).

⁵⁰ Charlotte, Interview #1 (February 13, 2003).

⁵¹ Charlotte, Interview #3 (March 6, 2003).

⁵² Charlotte, Interview #2 (February 27, 2003).

⁵³ Michael Billig, *Freudian Repression: Conversation Creating the Unconscious* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999): 54.

⁵⁴ Charlotte, Interview #4 (March 13, 2003).

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Press, 58-62.

⁵⁷ Charlotte, Interview #3 (March 6, 2003).

⁵⁸ As per the arguments of Abercrombie and Longhurst, *Audiences*.

⁵⁹ See Jostein Gripsrud, "Fans, Viewers and Television Theory" in *Les Cultes Médiatiques*, ed. Philippe Le Guern (Rennes: Presses Universitaires De Rennes, 2002): 117; C. Lee Harrington and Denise Bielby, *Soap Fans* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 135-6.

⁶⁰ Lisa Lewis, *The Adoring Audience*, 1.

⁶¹ Pullen, "Everybody's Gotta Love Somebody, Sometime: Online Fan Community" in *Web.Studies 2nd Edition*, eds. David Gauntlett and Ross Horsley (London: Arnold, 2004): 80.

⁶² See Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*; Jensen, "Fandom as Pathology."

⁶³ Pullen, "Everybody's Gotta Love," 89-90; see also Jenkins, "Interactive Audiences?"; Simone Murray, "'Celebrating the Story the Way it Is': Cultural Studies, Corporate Media and the Contested Utility of Fandom" in *Continuum*, vol. 18, no. 1 (2004): 21; Michele Pierson, *Special Effects: Still in Search of Wonder* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 164-5.

⁶⁴ See Gripsrud, "Fans, Viewers, and Television Theory," 118.

⁶⁵ See Condit, "Hegemony in Mass-mediated Society."

⁶⁶ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.

⁶⁷ Condit, 226; see also E. Graham McKinley, *Beverly Hills, 90210: Television, Gender and Identity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 38.

⁶⁸ William W. Kelly, ed., *Fanning the Flames: Fans and Contemporary Culture in Japan* (New York: SUNY Press, 2004); Eileen Meehan, "Leisure or Labor? Fan Ethnography and Political Economy" in *Consuming Audiences?: Production and Reception in Media Research*, eds. Ingunn Hagen and Janet Wasko (Cresskill: Hampton Press, 2000): 71-92.

⁶⁹ As Jenkins implies in "Interactive Audiences," and Pullen implies in "Everybody's Gotta Love."

⁷⁰ To reiterate Lisa Lewis, *The Adoring Audience*, 1

⁷¹ Condit, "Hegemony in Mass-Mediated Society."