

## Jonathan DeCarlo—Fan Meta

When I went to the Fan Studies Conference, I have to admit that I had no idea what to expect. I have never been to a big academic conference before, so I felt like this would be a super interesting experience to see for the first time. I was also kind of terrified that I would end up being bored, as much as enjoy the readings for class, I didn't want to sit three lecturers just meander through their papers in Powerpoint fashion, but I was pleasantly surprised at what the conference was actually like. While some of the panelists were more entertaining than others, they all had some really interesting ideas about fandom and I felt like I came away really learning something by the end of the panel.

The panel that I decided to go to was the first panel of the day on day 2 of the conference, which was titled *Fan Meta*. I was immediately drawn to this panel because the word I've always found the concept of meta really interesting, and I wanted to hear what these three panelists had to say about how their texts related to the overall idea of meta and meta-analysis. To me, the word meta means a lot of different things, and I'm going to list off a few of them. In terms of films and tv, "meta" means that something within the texts references another thing that happened either in the text or outside of the world of the text. Deadpool is a prime example of this kind of "meta" as the character is constantly referencing things and events both in and outside the Marvel universe, and it has grown to become part of his charm over the years. The other version of "meta" that I'm familiar with is in the world of gaming especially within online games like MMO's and other live-service games. In this sense of the word, "meta" means that something aligns with the unwritten rules of the game. In this case, the meta can change wildly based on if the creators of the game tweak certain values of the game or if the community finds a more viable option. An example of this version of "meta" come from the game *Dark Souls 3*, where in order have a

“viable” character for in-game PvP, you have to have a character that is a minimum of Soul Level 120 so that your health and damage output are scaled to other players. When it comes to what kind of “meta” this panel was more in line with, I would have to say that it was the second version of the word. Now, I’m going to explore two of the three papers that made up this panel in depth and relate them to what we’ve been talking about in class.

The first panelist in the *Fan Meta* panel was Adrienne E. Raw, a graduate instructor at the University of Michigan. Raw’s paper was called *Mediating Fan and Fandom: Social Roles of Discourse in Online Fan Spaces* and dealt with how online discussion boards and other nexuses of fan interaction totally changed how fans interact with their text and with each other. Raw said at the beginning of her panel “Fandom has been my constant companion since elementary school, a solace for my book-loving, story-telling and introverted self,” and I immediately felt a connection with her on that level, as I have been the same way with fandom for about as long as I can remember. She went onto say that she didn’t know exactly what she wanted to write about fandom, but didn’t have any idea what she wanted to write about until she started doing a study on how fans interact with their texts and other fans of their texts on social media.

Using Tumblr as her source, Raw began delving into the world of fan discourse on Tumblr, and the paper that she presented to us was a collection of her preliminary findings. One thing that I really appreciated about Raw’s paper is that it took all kinds of discussion, whether it be memes, discussions of tropes or takedowns of problematic aspects of a text and put them all in the same category of “fandom discussion”. I think that if she were to only focus on one specific kind of discussion for this study, I think she wouldn’t be getting the full picture, so clumping all these various discourses together give a much larger pool to work with. To carry out her study, Raw

asked fans on Tumblr to talk about how they view “fandom discussion” and what role it has in the fan community. Through her study, Raw found that there were seven major processes that “fandom discussion” performed in the fan community, these being building community relationships, building interpersonal relationships, fostering criticism, questioning relationships to the canon, self-reflection, opening up new perspectives on a text or its fan offshoots, and allowing fans to achieve a sense of history when dealing with a fandom. For the time allotted in the panel, Raw only talked about the first role in detail and this didn’t hamper my understanding of the other six ideas she came up with.

Using one of her participants’ quotes, Raw pointed out that this fan was still involved with the *Supernatural* fandom only because “it’s incredibly validating to see that other people agree with me, and that there are others that see the problem and the absurd double standards”. This quote in particular really reminded me of something out of Jenkins’ section regarding gossip, especially the part talking about scandal. Jenkins writes that “fans offer moral judgements about the scandals that surrounding interpersonal relationships within the series...” and I think that the quote that Raw included is a modern-day example of this phenomena (Jenkins 80). What I mean by this is that fans will always talk about things that surround their specific media texts.

Whenever something happens in a fandom that doesn’t sit well with fans, you can be sure that fans will talk about it, and this is what Raw is trying to explain to her audience. It is this kind of discourse between fans that shapes how the text is perceived, and what divisions can form within the fandom. Raw would go on to talk more about how other types of “fan discussion” shaped community while I enjoyed listening to it, it felt sort of incomplete because she only talked about one specific process.

The second of the lectures was my personal favorite and was presented by Dr. Charity Fowler, an English Professor who teaches classes on media, science fiction and many other topics. The title of Dr. Fowler's essay was called *Welcome to the Party? It's a Real Bisexual Alien Blast around here: Fan Meta on Representations of Bisexuality and the Specter of Biphobia*, and it dealt with the representations of two bisexual characters in the shows *The Magicians* and the reboot of *Roswell, New Mexico*. Right from the beginning, I knew that I was going to have fun with Dr. Fowler's lecture, especially from this quote "despite the high prevalence of slash fan arguments that claim that a great many male protagonists are sexually fluid or even bisexual, we don't really see that on our screens that much". As someone who wants to see more bisexual male representation in media, I have to agree with Fowler on this point here and what's really annoying about this is that on a lot of shows, especially CW programs, the women are basically written as bisexual unless otherwise stated while males always fall into the macho straight or token gay categories with only about two exceptions. That is the "specter of biphobia" that she mentions in the title of her piece. Now, while I haven't watched either show that Fowler mentioned in her paper, and I probably won't watch them after, I totally understood where her paper was coming from and identified with many of the people she talked about in her piece.

As I said before, Fowler's piece focused on two male bisexual characters from two different shows and examined their impact on the fan communities of the respective shows. The two characters that Fowler focuses on were Eliot Waugh from *The Magicians* and Michael Guerin in the reboot of *Roswell, New Mexico*. One thing that Fowler immediately pointed out to us is that both Eliot and Michael aren't just side characters, they are part of the main cast of the series and are involved directly in the events of the show. To this end, Dr. Fowler wanted to explore the fan

reaction to these two characters and their relationships on their respective shows, so like Adrienne Raw, she turned to Tumblr. In her research, Dr. Fowler found that the meta of the discussion surrounding these two characters wasn't necessarily based on the rules of the text but was much more heavily based on fan's personal experiences and their direct responses to what was going on in the texts.

One quote that really stood out to me during Dr. Fowler's presentation is from one fan who said that the writers should be able to understand what the relationship between Quentin and Eliot means to fans and that they are happy that it is being shown but they are hesitant to think that the writers will do right by the fans and bring the relationship to a satisfying conclusion. I feel for these fans, because this would be something that I would be afraid of if I was in their position. In a way, I feel that this is similar to what Sara Gwenllian-Jones writes on slash fiction and its relationship to cult tv, saying that "familiarity with a series produces in viewers a number of general expectations per episode," and I think this totally relates to the fans of these two shows (Gwenllian-Jones 82). These fans want so badly for these characters to have the ending that they deserve, and I think Dr. Fowler did a great job of highlighting this point in her lecture and bringing to light a big issue with representation in the entertainment industry these days.

Both of these talks were examples of how a text can radically impact how it is seen by its fans, and how that fan reaction can change how others view the text in the future. I think that both of these talks were prime examples of how cult texts have a huge impact on the larger media industry and the discourse that comes from these impacts. I someday hope to follow in the

footsteps of some of these fans and contribute my own voice to the discussion in one of my own fanfandoms, hopefully changing it for the better.

#### Works Cited:

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