

Undoing inter-national fandom in the age of
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Undoing Inter-national Fandom in the Age of Brand Nationalism

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Undoing Inter-national Fandom in the Age of Brand Nationalism

Koichi Iwabuchi (bio)

While studying the "fan" has become well established in media and

cultural studies, we need to remember that "fan" is a discursively constructed taxonomy of those who are assumed to share certain cultural attributes. To follow Raymond Williams, we could say: "There are in fact no fans. There are only ways of seeing people as fans."¹ A fundamental feature of the fan might be defined as a passionate devotion to a particular media text or icon, but the term is often used to objectify those people and their activities with an element of judgment, be it negative or positive.

For example, "fan" may negatively connote someone who looks bizarre and unsocial (even a potential criminal), as was the case with *otaku* in Japan. Against such a degrading view, as we know well, serious studies of fan activities and cultures have been developed. Such studies positively reconceptualize those devoted people in terms of their creative consuming and their appropriations of the original texts and icons, activities that blur the assumed boundaries of production and consumption. Thus "fan" could be understood as an imaginative prosumer (producer-consumer) and approreader (appropriator-reader) who does not just passively consume media texts but actively and creatively participates in their cultural signification processes. **[End Page 87]**

However, while it successfully overcomes the earlier degrading view, as least academically, this positive reformulation of "fan" exhausts its critical potential when it automatically and uncritically reproduces what "fan" means, who fans are, and what they do, without contextualized field research and a sophisticated understanding of their activities. (This is actually a widely recognized problem with media cultural studies). After all, as this volume aims to contest, the term "fan," even in its positive senses, can easily become a received taxonomic category that preframes our understanding and our research questions in an objectifying manner. Thus some have cautioned that many studies of fans mechanically adopt a ready-made analytical formula that tends to romanticize their creative activities. Some also argue that studies of fan culture are losing their idiosyncratic merit as the line between fan and

audience thins and blurs. More and more people now enjoy indulging themselves with a playful commitment to a particular object of media culture, thanks to the development of digital communication technologies and of marketing strategies aimed at niche tastes.

This is not to say that studies of fans and fan culture are no longer significant. The various ways people ardently engage with particular media texts still merit serious academic investigation. But we need to formulate good critical questions at the outset, rather than just reconfirming the creativity of their activities and the pleasure of identity construction. We need a serious consideration of the sociohistorical contexts in which people passionately consume/appropriate media texts, and of the cultural politics and cultural economy involved in their active consuming practices. We must consider issues such as self-empowerment in terms of marginalized identity politics (gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, nation, and so on), coping with the tyranny of everyday life in the neoliberal world, the manifestation of a more participatory media culture, and the transnational audience/fan alliance against the control of media culture production and distribution by global media culture industries. Through engagement with such contextualized, critical studies of fan cultures and activities, we could avoid reproducing "fan" as a fixed taxonomy and instead show the significance of understanding committed media culture engagements in everyday life.

In relation to these issues, it seems to me that there is another urgent problem that deters us from undertaking critically contextualized studies that go beyond an objectifying understanding of "fan." It concerns the **[End Page 88]** inter-nationalized understanding of cross-border flows and consumption of media cultures. Here I put the hyphen between the "inter" and "national" to highlight the reworking and strengthening of the national in tandem with the intensification of cross-border media culture flows. What is at stake here is not the degradation or romanticization of fans but a disregard for the complicated processes of people's media culture consumption. As

KOICHI IWABUCHI



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