

**‘First Principles’: *Hannibal*, Affective Economy, and Oppositionality in Fan Studies**  
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Like many academic subfields, fan studies began *in media res*, entering into a cultural studies conversation that was already so advanced it offered an almost complete theoretical framework through which scholars could assert a new semiotics of not just popular culture consumption, but its avid and active fandom. Given the long history of cultural studies debates over the politics of individual agency within hegemonic social and economic structures, this framework was, by definition, oppositional, and in the context of fan studies, it enabled us to talk about fandoms as sites of individual agency within homogenized mass culture. What Melissa Gregg (2009) has called the “affective turn” in fan studies has since generated a broad and nuanced understanding of the role affect plays in fan cultures, independent of any sociopolitical purpose – object relations theory being one especially fruitful line of inquiry. Nonetheless, insofar as fan studies’ earliest structuring framework was inseparable from an oppositionality that continues to cast a long shadow over both scholarly and fan conversations about, in particular, fan/producer relations, I can’t help but feel like we’ve overlooked something important. This is where Hannibal Lecter comes in. [SotLclip]

Fan cultures may well be means or sites of resistance to hegemonic capitalism, patriarchy, and heteronormativity (the exclusion of racism here is intentional), but these are *effects*, not causes, of what underpins fandom in the first place. To put it in Lecter’s terms, the nature of fandom is *love* of a thing; what follows from that love, be it altruistic or antagonistic, comes from our subjective experience of it, and its intersection with other fans’ equally subjective love of the same. Within research of fan/producer relations, emerging

conversations about the economics of affect have begun to illuminate what fans get out of otherwise asymmetrical interactions. My aim today is to push this a little further by considering what happens when we introduce ‘love’, and its ancillaries, into this conversation.

With the intensified convergence of production and fan cultures in the contact zones of social media and such offline spaces as fan conventions and events, some fans – and even scholars – have bemoaned the loss of the ‘fourth wall’ as a bulwark against industry interlopers who would appropriate fandom value systems to their own economic ends. For some, this has resulted in a kind of entrenchment over definitions of ‘fans’ and ‘fandom’ that attempts to fortify this wall from the inside, inoculating fandoms against outside influence through a rhetoric that figures media producers and creators as intrinsically oppositional to fan culture. Thus, in the context of *Hannibal*, if showrunner Bryan Fuller claims the show as [slide] “my fan fiction,” within this framework he is perceived as a fairly typical [slide] ‘fanboy auteur’ attempting to generate the perception of closeness to fandom for his own purposes; if parts of the production team [slide] use fan terminology and culture both on and offline (and it does), this is [slide] ‘appropriation’ intended to “seduce” (Li 2015) fans. And when the show [slide] concludes with the realization of *some* fans’ narrative desires, this too is either [slide] ‘appropriation’ or, from the perspective of the disgruntled, it [slide] ‘panders’ – often to a feminized, emotionally hyperbolic fan culture that ‘good’ fans routinely (and vocally) reject.

Yet, as Matt Hills (2015) argues, understanding such affective appeals in such ways runs the risk of “return[ing] us to the kind of fan studies account that fan studies emerged in opposition to” (190), in which fans are incapable of distinguishing between ‘real’ and ‘manufactured’ fandom authenticity. In response, he outlines a framework of affective economics, [slide] a “dialectic of value where both fans and producers can become self-

reflexively engaged in circuits of exchange and use value” (191). So, for example, [slide] say you have a [slide] fan, a [slide] producer, and a [slide] photo opportunity. In order for the photo op to be worth the fan’s time and money, the producer commoditizes – in this case – himself [slide], implicitly promising a persona consistent with the one he’s established to this point. Anticipating this, the fan decides whether or not to engage in this commodified encounter – to get the photo or not. If she decides to do the thing, it’s not because she’s been successfully manipulated into giving someone else her money. Rather, she self-commoditizes it – she [slide] expects something in return – in this case the pleasure of meeting the producer, exchanging a few words, and taking a picture together. Based on the producer’s so-far consistent performance of an unthreatening, appealing persona with fans, she decides the photo op is more than worth her [slide] £25 and, in this way, both the fan and the producer engage in a ‘circuit of exchange and use value’ – they *both* get something out of their otherwise commodified encounter.

This is a critical intervention in our oppositional understanding of fan/producer relationships as one-sided attempts to capitalize on apparently undiscerning fans. Yet, how does it apply here [slide]? Admittedly, this photo was taken during a fan meet & greet that cost extra to participate in, and it included all the *Hannibal*cast members who were in attendance at this event. And what we received from them was pretty much what we had expected: a few minutes of their time and attention before they moved on to the next table – enough to say hello and talk a bit. But when Bryan [slide] got to our table, increasingly annoyed con organizer and bemused handler in tow, it was 12:20 am (the event had begun at about 9:00 pm), and he was running late because he was giving every table he sat at a good 20 minutes of his attention, and this is what those of us at the [slide] #acafannibal table received as well. *This* [slide - priceless] is the kind of thing that’s difficult to address, even through Hills’s [slide] affective economics; and it’s here

that Lise Dilling-Hansen's (2015) study of the affective economy of Lady Gaga fandom offers some insight into how we might approach such unanticipated phenomena. Like Hills, she foregrounds the value fans take from Lady Gaga's successful performance of authenticity and intimacy, but she does this in terms that reflect more overtly how it *feels* for them: [slide] "what makes a difference to the fans is the extra effort that Gaga seems to put into her performativity by spending time on the fans, caring about the fans, and laying bare her personal struggles for the fans" (online). Considered from the perspective of celebrity studies, this emphasis on the emotional work involved in creating a sense of not just shared affinity, but *identification* with fans, is not unusual. Within fan studies, its applicability suggests a growing need to incorporate the emotional stakes of fan/producer encounters in our research.

So, how might we conceptualize an affective economics that can account for the ineffable pleasures and felt significance of those fan/producer encounters that surpass fans' expectations of value for money? I want to provisionally suggest a framework of 'fuzzy' factors that collectively create, if not an actual community, the *sense* of one as existing between fans and producers. I borrow 'fuzzy' here from its mathematical meaning; 'fuzzy numbers' do not "refer to one single value but rather to a connected set of possible values" (Wikipedia, 2017). Similarly, a [slide] 'fuzzy' affective economy is comprised not only of [slide] authenticity, but also includes [slide] demonstrated respect and [slide] reciprocity as co-variables, the exact composition and overlap of which are each determined by a range of possible sub-variables within a given encounter.

By way of illustrating this, I'd like to look at arguably *the* moment when Fannibals incorporated Fuller as one of their (our) own. It began in a Tumblr 'flower crown' meme based on a tweet made by Harry Styles, which involved photoshopping flower crowns on the heads of One Direction band members. The meme was quickly appropriated by other fandoms,

*Hannibal*[slide] being no exception, and ultimately Fannibals began sporting actual flower crowns [slide] at fan events. Notable among these was the 2013 San Diego Comic Con, where Fuller complimented a fan on her flower crown and she offered it to him: [clip] As Gavia Baker-Whitelaw wrote at the time in *The Daily Dot* [slide], “Putting on a flower crown during an audience Q&A may just seem like a cute nod to an incomprehensible Tumblr meme, but it’s also symbolic of how well the *Hannibal* showrunners are treating their fandom” (online) – in which “how well” encompasses a range of ‘fuzzy’ factors. In [slide] paying this fan a compliment, unprompted, accepting her gift, and placing it on his head rather than on the table in front of him, Fuller hit all the variables [slide] of a successful ‘fuzzy’ transaction. The also-unquantifiable goodwill generated by this encounter set the stage, I would argue, for Richard Armitage’s confession in their 2015 panel that he didn’t understand the whole crown thing. What could have been perceived as an example of a studio-manufactured moment of ‘affinity’ was instead perceived by fans as a kind of charming guilelessness. [clip]

So that, when Fuller describes *Hannibal* as [slide] “my fan fiction,” we *could* read it in the same vein as similar pronouncements by other showrunners. But in the context of both his [slide] longer statement and this ‘fuzzy’ framework, we can equally discern the care he takes in paying attention to what *matters* to fans: “I will try but I don’t think I’ll be able to accurately articulate my appreciation for the enthusiasm of this fanbase that has taken this show, made it their own and created parallel worlds of fan fiction to this work of fan fiction – because that’s very much what this show is. I feel like it was a unique experience of myself as a fannibal, writing the show as I imagined it – it was my fan fiction – and then sharing it with other fan fiction writers who then elaborated on it in their own ways. It was a wonderful communal experience.”[slide]

There is an argument to be made that Fuller performs transformative fandom authenticity through *Hannibal*'s own fanfictionality. But considered through a fuzzy economics of affect, I would argue that his demonstrated openness to and enthusiasm for fanworks has been at least as significant – if not more – in successfully communicating his own fannishness to Fannibals; not least because it is precisely this iteration of fan culture that is so routinely and vociferously rejected by ‘serious’ producers. This is exemplified in Fuller’s contributions to the fan-initiated Kickstarter for *RAW*, a printed anthology of fanfiction and art, where he not only [slide] tweeted articles about it for greater visibility, but also backed the project for an unspecified amount. Ultimately, the Kickstarter [slide] raised six times its \$16,000 goal, and while there was some handwringing within online fan press over the fine line it walked between gift and capitalist economies, *RAW* editor Aimee Fleck explained, [slide] what enabled them to Kickstart the project in the first place was [slide] “the acceptance of and excitement about fanwork on the part of the show’s creators ... I felt like it was possible because of the openness of the shows [sic] creators [slide] about accepting and validating fanwork. I think that [slide] fans have felt a lot of respect and understanding from the cast and crew of *Hannibal* as to what we do and *why we do it*” [slide] (2016).

We are wont to think of the emotional side of fandom as both incalculable (and thus difficult to account for) and insufficiently critical as a scholarly lens, particularly where positive emotions are concerned. However, I want to suggest that incorporation of ‘love’ and all its attendant [slide] fuzziness in fact opens up the possibility of richer, even unanticipated, critical avenues. If some fans feel an intimacy with Fuller, does this extend to all Fannibals; and, if not, how does love of *Hannibal* and/or Fuller interact with, for example, feelings of distance from the ‘core’ fandom? Does this intimacy void discussion of commodification and asymmetry, or does it

add a layer of complexity to what we already know? Is an (arguable) need for [slide] scholars' fannish self-reflexivity in doing such research a liability to fan studies, or might it foreground the ongoing usefulness of a fan-scholar subjectivity?

#### Works Cited

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