Sacralising fandom?
From the 'loss hypothesis' to fans' media rituals

Matt Hills,
Aberystwyth University

Abstract

Parallels and connections between media fandom and religion have continued to fascinate theorists, with recent work equating the two phenomena in a variety of ways (e.g. Mills 2013; Wilson 2013). This piece argues that the 'fandom = religion' formulation tends to hinge on a range of discursive constructs, both of the "fan experience" (since empirical audience study is rarely drawn on here), and of "contemporary society" assumed to be dis-enchanted, secularized and/or marked by "liquid modernity". As a result, what I term the "loss hypothesis" tends to frame 'fandom = religion' via functionalist concepts of religion, whereby traditional religiosity, and a secularized loss of faith, are displaced and replaced by media fandoms. Arguing against this discursive construct, I suggest that one way out of functionalist narratives may be to focus on fans' sacralising media rituals, drawing on the work of Nick Couldry (2002). However, whereas Couldry proceeds via an analogy with Durkheim's approach to the sacred/profane boundary, I argue instead that fan communities can contest and defer the border between 'media world' and 'ordinary world', making their versions of the sacred/profane binary rather more fractal, plural and mobile than a classical sociology of religion or a neo-Durkheimian position might imply.

Pour le résumé en français, voir la fin de l'article

*****

Potential relationships between media fandom and religion continue to intrigue cultural theorists, and to resonate within popular discourses of "cult" (Diffrient, 2010). Within the past year, Intellect's new *Fan Phenomena* book series has included Anthony R. Mills's (2013) chapter on '*Buffy*verse fandom as religion', while Elizabeth Wilson's collection of essays *Cultural Passions: Fans, Aesthetes and Tarot Readers* has suggested that

> Fandom is often compared to religion; and it *is* a kind of religion… 'Religion' comes from the Latin verb meaning 'to join back together' and thus implies a collective experience, which fandom is: an audience, often huge, passionately committed to the success of the performer(s). Like the adepts

of any religion, too, fans participate in outward, collective ritual (Wilson, 2013, p. 177–8).

Also on the subject of cult media fandom, Michael Gilroy-Sinclair has self-published a play, *Blue Box Messiah* (2013), which considers whether *Doctor Who* fandom is a religion. The equation of fan practice and religious devotion has a certain appeal. After all, it allows fandom to be linked to an historical arc whereby "origins of fandom are located in the sacred myths of the ancient world. The first fans were the Maenads ('the raving ones') or Bacchantes, the followers of Dionysus (Bacchus)" (Wilson, 2013, p. 177).

Emily Edwards' analysis of *Metaphysical Media* draws on the notion that fans are able to evade linear or 'ordinary' time in favour of a kind of Dionysian escape: "film and television (…) suspend the flow of historical time for audiences, removing them from linear time and projecting them into the mythic, archaic moment" (2005: 27). The result is that "fans can see *Star Wars* (…) replayed over and over again, even as moments of their own lives disappear. The paradox is that time can be annulled, but there is never enough of it" (2005, p. 29). Such (alleged) fan experiences may grant moments of Dionysian intensity, accessible at the touch of a 'play' button, but nevertheless, as Mathijs and Sexton (2011, p. 140) suggest, "historical time" ticks on and has to be returned to, making the Dionysian escape something of a "placebo".

The notion of cult fandom, particularly, as Dionysian has gained some purchase. Ernest Mathijs and Jamie Sexton's *Cult Cinema: An Introduction* also makes the connection, suggesting that "key aspects of the metaphor of Dionysus resonate with the kind of experience film cultism is said to include, namely the experience of time ungoverned" (2011, p. 134). But perhaps the key phrase here is "said to include". For equations of fandom and religion are typically speculative, disconnected from empirical audience study and asserted through theorists' discursive framings of fandom. When David Lavery (1991) attempts to align cult film experiences with Gnosticism then he produces a very neat narrative of fandom, as Mathijs and Sexton observe:

> David Lavery (1991, p. 187–199) offers one attempt to look beyond the "discursive mantra" and answer the "why are you a fan of this?" question. In Lavery's argument (…) what cult cinema and its audiences really want (…) [are] glimpses of "cosmic meaning", the kind of feeling of collective belonging that the individualization, commodification and enculturation

8

of belief systems is said to have pushed out of people's everyday reach (Mathijs and Sexton, 2011, p. 132).

But this imposed narrative hinges on assumed loss. No audience study or empirical analysis is presented for what I'll call the 'loss hypothesis'; it is merely given as a support for Lavery's position, somehow taken for granted. Equations of fandom and religion tend to start from this move. And Gilroy-Sinclair's play about *Doctor Who* fandom enacts it very directly, but we can hardly assume that cultural theory is more sophisticated on the point. Analysing secular magic and its appeal, Simon During adduces a related problem. He identifies, and seeks to resist, what he calls "an influential theory of modern culture":

> Compensation theory holds that modern culture (which turns around fiction and spectacle) nourishes secular magic as a substitute for loss of supernatural presence (…). In performances and in narrative alike, enlightened culture is energized by the freedom which follows the eviction of God from the world, and at the same time channeled into providing (magical) surrogates for a lost contact with the supernatural (During, 2002, p. 62).

This is strongly akin to the loss hypothesis underpinning discursive equations of 'fandom = religion'. During adopts a strategy from discourse psychology to argue that compensation theory

> assumes that belief in supernature or magic is a deep psychological condition, rather than a relation to the sense of a proposition or a judgment which alters according to context. (…) [I]t is not that we do not know whether or not we believe, but rather that we cannot examine our interiors to find "belief" at all. To accept this at the level of cultural theory (…) is to recognize that the loss… upon which compensation theory depends is a construct (2002, p. 62).

Following During, I would argue that the loss which 'fandom = religion' hinges on is, likewise, a construct. It assumes that fandom compensates for contemporary society's disenchantment and the absence of "cosmic meaning", adopting an implicitly or explicitly functionalist view of religion whilst at the

9

same time accepting modern disenchantment as an *a priori* given. The narrative that's produced is curiously incoherent, however: if fandom can so readily re-enchant contemporary culture then how can it be said that audiences are alienated and cut adrift from communal energies at all? How can fandom compensate for absence via presence, when the latter displaces and contradicts the former? The same difficulty afflicts Zygmunt Bauman's reading of media-derived communities, which he terms "cloakroom" communities (2000, p. 200). These temporary groupings are brought together by and around spectacle. And despite Wilson's argument that "to this day fandom is a product of theatrical spectacle in the widest sense" (2013, p. 178), Bauman allows no space for fandom and its ongoing communal "vitality" (Mills, 2013, p. 140) in his dismissal of cloakroom communities. This "sad view of audiences (…) suggests (…) they are mistaken in believing in the illusion of togetherness [generated] (…) through their attentiveness and imaginative and emotional involvement" (Hill, 2011, p. 181). In order to sustain his seemingly *a priori* narrative of "liquid modernity" without settled or iterated solidities of communal belonging re-emerging, Bauman has to negate the possibility of ongoing fandom. For him, audiences gather only for the duration of a spectacle (2000, p. 201).

Bauman's "cloakroom communities" fail to offer compensation for the loss of solid identity and community, but the need for such compensation remains present in a "liquid" sociocultural context. This sociology, just as much a discursive construct as 'fandom = religion', refuses to make the leap into redemptive audience groupings, instead sticking at the level of failed salvation and temporary, illusory audience communities. Of course, 'fandom = religion' usually acts as a counter to "sad" views of the audience. It portrays fandom positively, as in Mills's three-part equation where "use of language (…) ritual (…) [and] participatory" culture supposedly align the two phenomena (2013, pp. 139–140). Even within this gambit, though, Mills concedes that his third point of comparison is weak since "the connection between fandom and traditional religion is a bit more tenuous (…) *Buffy*verse fans (…) rebel against the official canon (…). This subversion is much more difficult to accomplish in a traditional religious context" (2013, p. 140).

If transgressive fanfic challenging canon is often the order of the day among media fandoms, such transgression is hardly common within religion. Schisms and shifts in doctrine do occur over time, but to think of religious adherents as "textual poachers" from the Koran or the Bible seems rather a stretch, and even if professional theologians may act as poachers, they do so within a prescribed role. Mills's first point of comparison also falls by the wayside since any profession or subculture will tend to possess its own jargon –

10

this can hardly be taken as a unique property of religion which is emulated by fans. Indeed, of Mills's tripartite schema, it is only ritual that appears to represent a sustainable point of intersection:

> Just as Christianity would have most likely died out without the systematic remembrance of Jesus through the rituals of baptism and Eucharist, so too would *Buffy* and *Angel* be little more than old television series were it not for the fan community which still brings vitality to the *Buffy*verse through various practices (2013, p. 140).

An emphasis on ritual occurs elsewhere in 'fandom = religion' discourses, for example in Justin Smith's analysis of fans of *The Wicker Man*:

> cult fandom is rather like forms of religious practice: textual iconography, contextual debate and ritual observance constitute the focus of a shared emotional landscape (…) [M]embers of the *Wicker Man* newsgroup (…) use their ritual practice not only as a resource of self-expression but (…) as a way of defining their essential difference (2010, p. 212).

But can we accept that fans' "ritual practice" is akin to religious ritual? In his book *Media Rituals*, premised on a re-reading of Durkheim, Nick Couldry goes out of his way to deny that media-based and religious rituals can be equated: "unlike (…) religious rituals, we cannot look for media rituals in a single confined space, such as the church (…). Media processes are too dispersed across space for that" (2008, p. 51). And again:

> Unlike religious ritual, which is usually enacted against a complex background of explicit and shared beliefs, media rituals are not played out in an even, consensual space (…) ritual acts of 'pilgrimage' carried out by a *media* person are treated with respect by the media, but carried out by a non-media person [they] are mocked (2008, p. 87–88).

At the same time, Couldry is careful to avoid any implication that "contemporary media is somehow 'like' religion, let alone performing a similar 'function' to that once played by religion" (2009, p. 43). What is intriguing is that, despite all these codicils, Couldry's argument hinges on the fact that media

11

rituals produce, iterate and naturalise a powerful binary "between anything 'in' or 'on' or associated with 'the media', and anything which is not" (Couldry, 2008, p. 47). This may not be institutionally or discursively 'religious', but it proceeds "via an analogy with Durkheim's account of the emergence of the sacred/profane distinction and how ritual practice reinforces that distinction" (Couldry, 2009, p. 45).

There is thus a question of whether media fans may relate emotionally to media spaces and people as, in some sense, sacred or sacralised, *precisely due to the cultural power of the media rituals* that Couldry underlines (although he also sidesteps the question of audiences' emotional relationships to these rituals). Couldry repeatedly highlights the "ritualized boundaries (…) between everyday space and media space" (2008, p. 85), whether this is about people stepping on to the set of *Coronation Street* or tracing locations used in filming. If religious rituals hinge on a sacred/profane boundary then fans' media rituals appear to be vitally premised on the "myth of the mediated centre" explored by Couldry; "an invisible, but symbolically significant, barrier between ordinary world and media world" (2008, p. 85). This is just as true for fan conventions as it is for acquiring autographs spontaneously when a celebrity is spotted; it is just as significant for watching location filming or visiting commodified spaces such as the '*Doctor Who* Experience' in Cardiff Bay.

However, fans' rituals may also depart from any strict sacred/profane distinction; perhaps neither Durkheim nor Couldry's work is nuanced enough to capture the gradations and fine-grained fan-cultural evaluations that symbolically cluster around the media world/ordinary world boundary. For example, visiting the '*Doctor Who* Experience' may not be as valued as going on a set tour of the TARDIS; and touring the TARDIS but not being able to touch the console may, in turn, be less valued than fully exploring and interacting with the set. Far from one media/non-media boundary there are a range of fan-cultural or fan-ritual zones here which edge closer to the media world. The TARDIS of the '*Doctor Who* Experience' is, after all, a "simulation of being in the TARDIS", whilst being on the set itself moves symbolically closer to providing "a taste of what the cast of the series experiences" (Forde 2013, p. 68). But far from a boundary that is stepped across, the media world/ordinary world continually and almost fractally recedes. Have visitors to the '*Doctor Who* Experience' crossed this boundary when they cross the threshold of the building, or when they enter the walk-through? Or do they only cross the boundary into the Doctor's world when the walk-through's cinema screen splits open and one has the uncanny experience of walking across the plane of the screen? (Beattie, 2013, p. 179). Or is it when one is ushered into

12

the TARDIS reproduction? Perhaps boundary-crossing is deferred even then, in favour of a yet more sacralised visit to Studio 4 of the Roath Lock facility, permanent home to the TARDIS set itself.

The issue here is that *media space is always bigger on the inside*. Fans may move closer to the media world, but as fans of a fictional text they can never get wholly 'inside' – unless perhaps they happen to be actors, and the experience will then be a professionalized one, rather different from the fan's fantasised entrance to a media world. Couldry, following Durkheim by analogy, appears to figure the media world/ordinary world boundary as a construct that can be spatialised, naturalized and worked over, but he does not fully address it as something that can also be shifted and deferred via fan practices. If fans' rituals are analogous to religious ritual, here they become so on the basis of an alluring absence (rather than via the 'loss hypothesis'). The sacralised media world always recedes and can never quite be grasped or ultimately entered into. This is a fan-culturally projected "boundary", a mobile sacralising border that fans can nonetheless work over and contest within their communities.

Rather than engaging with fan experiences, the "'fandom = religion'" discourse all too often creates a master narrative of (atomized and secularised) society along with (compensatory and functionalist) fandom marked by the 'loss hypothesis'. Mathijs and Sexton are quite correct to observe that in *Fan Cultures* (Hills, 2002), I avoided "addressing the substance of the cult experience: what *kind of experience* exactly are cult audiences after that could possibly be in line with religious cultism?" (2011, p. 132). But I did so deliberately and for a precise reason: I didn't want to narrate a functionalist or compensatory master-narrative of neoreligious fandom. What Mathijs and Sexton call "the substance" of fan experience is usually – if not always – speculatively imposed by theorists. This imposition arrives either as a consequence of no audience study having been conducted, or as a result of audiences' inarticulacy and inconsistency when they are asked to put sacralised, powerfully-felt experiences into discourse.

If I have not previously addressed such "substance" – although here I've pondered one possible mode of fan experience which fractally defers its sacralised text-space rather than being 'substantively' attached to one identifiable sacred/profane or media world/ordinary world binary – then it is because I remain wary of the discursive moves made in the name of 'fandom = religion'. Writers in cultural studies such as Simon During and Nick Couldry are, I think, right to be wary of discursive equations that typically import a host of assumptions about 'society' and the 'contemporary world'. Elizabeth Wilson's analysis of fandom and religion goes further than most in making the

13

point that *fandom differs discursively from religion*, no matter how many parallels writers can summon up: "Established religions are fenced off from other forms of discourse, placed in a category that cannot be challenged, having managed to define themselves as *beyond argument*" (2013, p. 178). What this highlights is the need to continue focusing on issues of cultural and symbolic power (Couldry, 2008 and 2009) rather than patterns of similarity and difference between fandom and religion *per se*. And, I would say, there is an associated need to remain focused on *discourses of fandom and religion* rather than positing (speculative) substances which probably say more about the theorist's commitments to methodology or the sociology of religion or a specific fan culture than they do about the 'object' of study (Beaudoin 2008 and 2009).

But Elizabeth Wilson also cautions us to think carefully about exactly what we're equating with what. Fan studies may, understandably, want to start from the position of theorizing fandom, but this fan-centred approach assumes that fandom could or should be explained in terms of other cultural phenomena (religion; love; play). This misses the possibility that other phenomena could themselves be understood via insights and theories developed by fan studies, whether this is politics and its affective relationships, or people's consumption of high culture rather than popular culture (why is there so little work on 'theatre fans'?). Wilson inverts the typical 'fandom = religion' discourse by wondering whether, if religion could be destabilized from its position as unquestionable, "it would become clear that every religion is a form of fandom, however blasphemous this may seem to the religiously minded" (2013, p. 179). What this less fan–centred standpoints suggests, along with the critical, discursive approach I've set out here, is that 'fandom = religion' will continue to provoke discussion, analysis and new attempts at equation between (or complication of) the two terms. I've started to suggest here that a focus on fans' media rituals may represent one way forward, but this issue of *Kinephanos* proffers a healthy range of other considerations and provocations…

Bibliography

Bauman, Zygmunt. *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 2000.

Beattie, Melissa. 'The "*Doctor Who* Experience" (2012—) and the Commodification of Cardiff Bay' in Matt Hills (ed) *New Dimensions of Doctor Who*, London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013: pp. 177-91.

14

Beaudoin, Tom. *Witness to Dispossession: The Vocation of a Post-modern Theologian*, New York Orbis Books, Maryknoll, 2008.

-- 'The Ethics of Research in Faith and Culture: Scholarship as Fandom?' in Christopher Deacy and Elisabeth Arweck (eds) *Exploring Religion and the Sacred in a Media Age*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2009: pp. 23—41.

Couldry, Nick. *Media Rituals: A Critical Approach*, London and New York: Routledge, 2003.

-- 'Media Rituals: From Durkheim on Religion to Jade Goody on Religious Toleration' in Christopher Deacy and Elisabeth Arweck (eds) *Exploring Religion and the Sacred in a Media Age*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2009: pp. 43—54.

Diffrient, David Scott. 'The Cult Imaginary: Fringe Religions and Fan Cultures on American Television' in *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television,* Vol. 30, No. 4, 2010: pp. 463–485.

During, Simon. *Modern Enchantments: The Cultural Power of Secular Magic*, Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2002.

Edwards, Emily D. *Metaphysical Media: The Occult Experience in Popular Culture*, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005.

Forde, Teresa. '"You Anorak": The *Doctor Who* Experience and Experiencing *Doctor Who*' in Paul Booth (ed) *Fan Phenomena: Doctor Who*, Bristol: Intellect, 2013: pp. 62—71.

Gilroy-Sinclair, Michael M. *Blue Box Messiah*, Kindle ebook, 2013.

Hill, Annette. *Paranormal Media: Audiences, Spirits and Magic in Popular Culture*, London and New York: Routledge, 2011.

Hills, Matt. *Fan Cultures*, London and New York: Routledge, 2002.

Lavery, David. 'Gnosticism and the cult film' in J.P. Telotte (ed) *The Cult Film Experience*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991: pp. 187—99.

Mathijs, Ernest and Sexton, Jamie. *Cult Cinema: An Introduction*, Malden and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.

Mills, Anthony R. 'Buffyverse Fandom as Religion' in Jennifer K. Stuller (ed) *Fan Phenomena: Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Bristol: Intellect, 2013: pp. 134—143.

Smith, Justin. *Withnail and Us: Cult Films and Film Cults in British Cinema*, London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2010.

Wilson, Elizabeth. *Cultural Passions: Fans, Aesthetes and Tarot Readers*, London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013.

15

Biographical notice

Matt Hills is Professor of Film and TV studies at Aberystwyth University. He is the author of five books, including *Fan Cultures*, *The Pleasures of Horror* and *Triumph of a Time Lord*. He is also the editor of *New Dimensions of Doctor Who*. Matt has published widely on cult media and fandom, and his recent work includes contributions to edited volumes such as *Fan Culture: Theory/Practice* and *A Companion to Media Authorship*, along with forthcoming articles for *Journal of Fandom Studies* and *Transformative Works and Cultures*. Matt is an Associate Editor of *Cinema Journal*.

Résumé

Les liens et les similarités entre la culture des fans et la religion continuent de fasciner les chercheurs. Plusieurs travaux récents s'affairent à établir des comparaisons entre les deux *phénomènes*, et cela, de diverse manière (Mills 2013; Wilson 2013). Cet article présente l'argument comme quoi la comparaison fandom/religion s'appuie sur des constructions discursives venant à la fois de l'expérience des fans (ici les études empiriques sur les audiences servent rarement de cadre théorique) et sur le désenchantement supposé de la *société contemporaine* et de sa sécularisation marquée par la *modernité liquide*. Conséquemment, ce que je nomme *l'hypothèse de la perte* constitue une tendance fonctionnaliste inspirée des sciences religieuses qui tend à consider l'équation fandom/religion de manière à compenser la perte de la religiosité traditionnelle par la sécularisation. Cette religiosité perdue se serait, selon cette perspective, déplacée dans la culture médiatique des fans. J'opterai, au contraire, pour une autre approche, et cela, en proposant plutôt une perspective sur la sacralisation des rituels médiatiques par les fans, un angle inspiré par les travaux de Nick Couldry (2002). Toutefois, là où Couldry procède par analogie avec l'approche durkheimienne de la frontière sacré/profane, j'argumenterai plutôt que les communautés de fans peuvent contester et même différer dans le temps la frontière entre le *monde médiatique* et le *monde ordinaire*, et cela, en établissant eux-mêmes leurs propres versions binaires (ou dialectique) sacré/profane à plus petite échelle, plus diverses et mobiles que la sociologie des religions classique ou la position néo-durkheimienne le conçoivent.