

Enunciative Fan Production and Social “Flows”

Enunciative Fandom and/as Literacy (Or, #WheresGamora)

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John Fiske’s seminal 1992 essay “The Cultural Economy of Fandom” delineated three types of fan productivity. The first, semiotic productivity, or the interior process of making sense of one’s identity and experience using resources from popular culture, is by definition difficult to study. Fan studies has historically focused on the second category, textual productivity, analyzing the creation and circulation of fans’ transformative works such as fan fiction, art, and video. This roundtable focuses on Fiske’s final category of “enunciative fandom,” or how fans articulate their affect, either through “fan talk” or sartorial display.

In the era of livetweeting and mass-produced fan fashion, enunciative forms of fan expression are simultaneously the most visible to and the most valued by media industries. I would also contend that they’re the most capable of fostering and enforcing hierarchies and facilitating boundary policing within fan communities, and thus increasingly important to study alongside fans’ ascendancy as promotional partners within convergence culture. In short, not all “fan talk” is spoken in a language that media creators and industries understand. Some fannish voices will inevitably be louder than others. Media industries, creators, and social media platforms are increasingly guiding conversations, both in form and content. A t-shirt might have the ability to enunciate out attachment to, or intimate knowledge of, a particular media property or character, but such fashionable “enunciations” are frequently determined by what merchandise is made available to us.

Parsing what fans produce, whether enunciative or textual, has always required certain fannish literacies that are often incredibly specific to particular reading practices or ships, and laced with jargon. But show-sponsored hashtags and merchandise are equally (if not increasingly) responsible for how we articulate our affect, and are equally coded to reveal desired demographics that might, in turn, be used to make presumptions about who can or can’t speak a particular fannish language. A witty, if depressingly accurate, articulation of this tendency can be found in the two-panel webcomic [“Am I Right Ladies.”](#) by Meg Lovell, which satirizes a response to a male and female fan wearing the same Green Lantern t-shirt. The response to the man, simply “Cool Green Lantern shirt, dude,” is juxtaposed with the fannish interrogation inflicted on the female fan, who is aggressively forced to articulate/defend her knowledge of the property.

For the remainder of this provocation, I’d like to focus on the recent social media campaign #WheresGamora, both because it offers an ideal site to begin exploring intersections in Fiske’s dichotomous definition of enunciative fan productivity and because it carries broader implications about how enunciative fandom might facilitate presumptions about fannish literacies. The hashtag

campaign #WheresGamora emerged just days after the August 2014 debut of Marvel's *Guardians of the Galaxy*. The film, which broke box-office records, also spawned a wave of news stories expressing surprise at the number of women who purchased tickets (44% by exit polling estimates, a record for the Marvel Cinematic Universe). Around the same time, [reports began to emerge](#) about the conspicuous absence of the only female "Guardian," Gamora, from official merchandise featuring the other four male members of the team. In one especially stunning example, *Guardians of the Galaxy* party supplies appear to choose representing Peter Quill's starship over the film's only female lead. Retailer The Children's Place responded to criticism on social media by sending an email to one customer, stressing that they "rely on advice from our licensors," before asserting that the t-shirt in question is "a boy's shirt, which is why it does not include the female character Gamora." Here, Marvel's enunciations about their perceived/desired fan base have both a direct impact on the sartorial enunciations of young fans, and speak volumes about the generic gender essentialisms that pervade fan merchandising.

#WheresGamora presented a moment of convergent social flows, in which enunciative critiques of the film's merchandising merged with celebratory tweets about the character and discussion of the film's female co-screenwriter, Nicole Perlman (another MCU first), before eventually dovetailing with ongoing discussions of gender, comic book culture, and superhero franchising. It also suggests that enunciative fandom, at least in my view, is increasingly a literacy issue, in which both media industries and media fans are tentatively attempting to learn each other's language, in order to communicate more effectively. Scholars must not only track these efforts to learn each other's language, but also be attentive to how fannish "literacies" are constructed and codified, interrogated or incorporated, to perpetuate longstanding divides within digital fan culture.