Matthew J. Smith

Pilgrimage to Hall H

Fan Agency at Comic-Con

Several years ago, I found myself waiting in one of the ubiquitous lines that one must endure as part of the Comic-Con International experience in San Diego, California. I had been leading a student-centered field study for over a decade by that time and enjoyed my share of chance celebrity encounters throughout the convention center (including everyone from "Bright Knight" Adam West to, of all people, CNN's Larry King). However, the most remarkable of these took place while I was waiting to see a DC Universe panel in Room 6DE, one of the cavernous halls that host thousands of excited fans. By way of definition, a "panel" at Comic-Con is a program with topic experts, oftentimes celebrities, industry insiders, or fans themselves, presenting to an audience. Because of the panelists' recognition – or the juicy insights they promise to tease – there are typically more people who want into a panel than can fit even into these unusually large rooms and so lines form to access these experiences. Such lines can stretch on for some length and often there are disappointed attendees who never make it into a given panel. Thus, Comic-Con regulates these lines with some effort, carefully marking where they form and policing adherence to obeying the rules of staying within them through line managers. In this instance, I had worked my way up to the very front of the line, just before the panel presentation was about to commence. With several hundred additional fans at my back, I patiently awaited an open seat that would allow me to enter the room. Suddenly a hefty middle-aged man approached the gatekeeper from the opposite direction and asked to be allowed in. He explained to the Comic-Con volunteer who stood guard at the door that he was on the upcoming panel. Incredulously, she declined to let him in. At a loss, he pulled out his business card, flashed it, and said, "I'm Mike Carlin with DC." She was unresponsive to his identification. He looked deflated, and in that moment, I stopped being a silent observer and became a vocal advocate. As a longtime reader of DC Comics and a dedicated Superman fan during Carlin's run as editor of the series in early 1990s, I recognized the man even before he had introduced himself. "Ma'am," I addressed the gatekeeper. "This gentleman is Mike Carlin. He's a vice president with DC Comics." I no sooner finished my testimonial then she waved Mr. Carlin right in. In gratitude he handed me his card with a buoyant "Thank you" piercing his lips as he rushed in to join the panel. (I subsequently made good use of that card and had the opportunity to interview Mike for several projects.)

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While I have looked back fondly upon that episode in the years since it happened, I had not previously reflected on the importance of what had transpired in terms of fan agency until I began to write this contribution. The volunteer corps who help manage lines – and so many more tasks that enable Comic-Con to run smoothly – are primarily made up of fans. In exchange for several hours of service, these volunteers earn admittance to Comic-Con activities on the other days of the week. The Room 6DE gatekeeper probably knew a lot about different aspects of popular culture, but she perhaps did not possess an encyclopedic knowledge of comic book executives, and so she had little reason to otherwise trust a random person approaching her out of line. In fact, her job was to maintain order. But she clearly took a fellow fan's endorsement over some business-card touting man. My credibility seemed to be vested in little more than my willingness to make my way through the snaking line that led to her door, but that was just enough to win her approval and, consequently, Mike Carlin's passage. Like the volunteer gatekeeper, I was a fellow fan, and I believe she likely perceived my credibility to supersede that of some random guy trying to cut the line at Comic-Con. On that day, my fandom gave me a persuasive power that no business card could supersede. In the 9–5 world a business card might open doors for you, but at Comic-Con it is your time in line that makes your credible. While this encounter with Mike Carlin was a memorable moment in my history as a fan, it also proved to be a memorable moment in my exercising fan agency.

Fandom at Comic-Con

This chapter reflects on the state of research into fan agency, notably as it grapples with issues of self-identity, power, and gender, all as practiced at San Diego's Comic-Con International, the largest tradeshow and fan phenomenon in North America. Over the course of its fifty-year history, San Diego's Comic-Con International or SDCC, as it is often abbreviated, has grown to become the premiere pop culture event in North America. Although Comic-Con has focused on comics, film, and science fiction fandoms since its inception, San Diego's geographic proximity to Hollywood has made it a particularly convenient destination for high profile representation from the film industry in recent decades. But it is the capacity crowds of 130,000 attendees each year that have amazed me since my first trip to the legendary show in July 2006. That visit inspired me to begin to offer a field study program for students interested in examining the dynamics between the cultural industries and the fan communities they cater to, and I have had the honor of seeing Comic-Con through the eyes of well-over 100 student

participants over a decade and a half of annual journeys, or as I like to think of them, pilgrimages. I mean no disrespect to any religion in selecting that term, but the comparison is an apt one in my experience: Fans travel to San Diego filled with every bit of zeal and through every kind of challenge to have an experience that for many is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Like other pilgrimages, the journey to Comic-Con may change the pilgrim traveler, giving them a heightened awareness of their role in popular culture; or it may merely reify their participation in the religious consumption of products and intellectual property offered up by the cultural industries. Of course, the global COVID-19 pandemic led to the cancelation of SDCC in 2020 and 2021 (as events switched to a series of "Comic-Con @ Home" programs online). Up until that point, students from across the country (as well as a few from Canada and India) helped me appreciate multiple aspects of Comic-Con, from the rigors of line culture via the joys of cross-gender role play (or "crossplay") to some of the most obscure subcultural aspects embedded within and around the San Diego Convention Center (e.g., Disney pin collectors crashing the Con).

When Jan-Noël Thon, Vanessa Ossa, and Lukas R.A. Wilde invited me to speak about "Agency in Fan Cultures" as a part of the 2020 ComFor (the German Society for Comic Studies) conference, I began to think not only about what I have learned from my students' experiences but also about the growing body of published work examining San Diego Comic-Con as a cultural phenomenon in and of itself. My colleague Ben Bolling and I contributed to this trend back when we published *It Happens at Comic-Con: Ethnographic Essays on a Pop Culture Phenomenon* with McFarland in 2014. In it we share select essays by students who participated in the first several years of my field study program. The book examines everything from the etiquette of waiting in line to the rhetorical choices comic book publishers make when addressing their fans. But even before we published these initial reflections on the phenomenon of fandom, the godfather of fandom research, Henry Jenkins, had already offered his initial reflections as a participant observer a few years earlier. As Jenkins (2012) defined it, Comic-Con is each of the following: an invasion, a homecoming, a publicity event, a jury, a consciousness-raising session, a costume party, a networking event, a marketplace, a life support system, a classroom, and a ritual. It is "a gathering of tribes" (Jenkins 2012, 23), and is far more than the homogenous cosplay exercise so often portrayed in the mass media. (One of my student participants once estimated that merely one in ten attendees participated in costume play.) Rather, Comic-Con is the "meeting point between transmedia commercial culture and a grassroots participatory culture" (Jenkins 2012, 23). That is, Comic-Con creates the intersection point between the cultural industries and the fans who consume, adore, and adapt their intellectual property.

Jenkins characterization of Comic-Con as a "gathering of tribes" (2012, 23) is an apt metaphor. Over the years, my students and I have been repeatedly asked if the Con has strayed too far from the comics that gave the event its namesake. Longtime attendees who clearly evidence a bias towards comics will ask us if the attention of Hollywood in particular has diluted the Con's perceived purpose to service comics fandom. However, I respectfully point out that the convention's founders stated at least three fandoms were being honored from the start, namely comics, film, and science fiction. This, in fact, is in keeping with the vision of one of SDCC's founders, Shel Dorf, who had been an organizer for the Detroit Triple Fan Fair prior to his relocation to Southern California (Comic-Con 2009). The "triple" fandoms in question were of course comics, film, and science fiction. Clearly, servicing a multitude of fandoms was baked into the mix from the start. Implicit in the question, though, is a regret that the Con has somehow sold out to Hollywood at the cost of depriving comics of their due.

While it may be true that the audiences for film programs at SDCC are among the largest, there are quantifiably more slots given to the comics panels than any other genre at the convention. Starting with the publication of its 2011 paper program, SDCC organizers began to color-code a scheduling grid to indicate whether panels were targets for comics, animation, movies, television, games, book/genre fiction, or other popular art forms. While functionally this is an eye-catching way to guide the average readers towards their favorite programming, at the time I could not help but read this move as a rhetorical retort to the nay-sayers who claimed Comic-Con had strayed too far from its namesake. A quick scan of the last available programming book from 2019 shows that the convention continues to devote a majority of panels to the comics industry (e.g., "Comic Creator Connection All-Stars") and comics-related topics (e.g., "Breaking Borders: Chicano Popular Arts and Comics") (Sassaman 2019). But this colorful patchwork image also supports Jenkins's claim that this is a single event serving more than one fandom; it is not the gathering of *a* tribe but the gathering of tribes.

Fandom and Agency

Given the widespread media attention it has won, Comic-Con is likely the most visible outward display of fandom's social tendencies. Media outlets from *Entertainment Tonight* to *Conan* telecast from the site, and magazines like *TV Guide* and *Entertainment Weekly* publish special editions to honor it; and while celebrity news may be the cornerstone of their coverage, the interaction with

and among the fans is also spotlighted. In his recent book *Getting a Life: The Social Worlds of Geek Culture*, Benjamin Woo (2018) points out that fans are drawn to social activities. While geeks may value the acquisition of knowledge and the building of collections as defining characteristics of their status, they also regularly seek out social interactivity. For Woo, one "gets a life" by participating in such social activities. Indeed, much of the Comic-Con experience is about meeting, sharing, and celebrating with others among one's tribe or tribes. I certainly saw this in the panels designed to reunite communities, such as the "Annual Jack Kirby Tribute Panel." Year after year, I would observe familiar faces gathering to remember one of comics' greatest creators, Jack Kirby, co-creator of many of comics' most enduring icons – from Captain America to the X-Men. My students also informed me about some of the late night, off-program gatherings that they attended. Some participants were motivated by a desire for chance celebrity encounters, while others simply were driven by the joy of hanging out with people who shared their interests. SDCC ongoing popularity is further evidence of a desire among fans to socialize beyond what they may do within their local communities or even online. The convention first sold out admission passes in 2007 and has consistently done so each year through 2019. But the social aspect is really only half of the equation when it comes to Comic-Con.

While the opportunity to engage with one's fellow fans may be a significant draw for many participants, the tradeshow aspects of the Con are also appealing. As Jenkins explained, Comic-Con positions fans at the forefront of producers' promotional campaigns; they are empowered to become media influencers, as those in the cultural industries seek the Comic-Con "bounce" (Jenkins 2012, 27), the bump in favorable public perception that comes from discerning favor of the Comic-Con crowd. This much is evident to even the most casual visitor to San Diego during SDCC each summer. Pole banners proudly proclaim the convention's arrival on every lamppost leading from the airport to downtown; television networks like Fox purchase "wraps" that encircle and cover the trolley cars to promote their latest television series; and film companies commission customized window clings to transform downtown hotels into twenty-story billboards for upcoming film releases – all to win convention attendees attention and favor. The fans favorable reaction and subsequent word-of-mouth (or word via tweet) promotion are believed to help drive a contagious popular reaction to forthcoming properties.

Melanie Kohnen (2019) provides a particular perspective into how fan agency is exercised in examining the social media bloggers who write about the SDCC experience. In an in-depth case study of two such blogs, the *SDCC Unofficial Blog* and *Crazy 4 Comic-Con*, Kohnen notes that "[t]he ever-shifting experience of SDCC is the text of which con-bloggers are fans" (2019, 93). In other words, these

bloggers are not focused on passing along the industry buzz – or promoting the cultural industry's anticipated "bounce" – so much as documenting how fans go about gaining access to the Comic-Con experience, or as some have phrased it, a quest to navigate "line-con." Kohnen notes that while most other fan studies look at the relationship of fans to texts, Comic-Con is about space and time, and more like a pilgrimage likened unto music and film festivals. These blogs focus on mastering space and emphasize memory-making (e.g., getting into Hall H, a venue where some of the most high-profile panels are featured). Bloggers are good examples for considering fan agency as they can be affirmational fans (those that, say, celebrate their favorite creators) as well as transformational fans (those that use the blog to launch their own careers like Tony Kim's fashion line, Hero Within).

Indeed, the body of scholarly work into Comic-Con demonstrates that fans are far from mere dupes for the cultural industries. They are active receivers – and in turn shapers – of meanings from the event. Agreeing to attend Comic-Con is far from agreeing to surrender one's sense of perspective or ability to reshape the materials produced by the cultural industries, although that power is not *always* equally distributed between the parties.

Power Redistributed and Reified

Although some bloggers have proven capable of capitalizing on their expertise thanks to the Con, Erin Hanna cautions that, for most members of the fan community, this collaboration between cultural industries and fans exhibits an uneven power dynamic, which falls decidedly in favor of the media industries:

> [I]n bringing audiences ever closer to the media they consume, these interactions also perpetuate an underlying power structure that allows the media industries to capitalize on an increasingly engaged consumer base while reaffirming their own economic and cultural power as producers. (Hanna 2014, 12)

According to Hanna, the cultural industries seek to deploy the fans as a part of their shadow labor economy, and fandom itself is defined not necessarily by *in*clusivity but *ex*clusivity: "[E]xclusivity is not defined by the presence of a special experience or a special group, but by the power to produce absences, and by what and who is excluded" (Hanna 2014, 80). For its part, SDCC has sold out of event tickets for much of the past decade, clearly creating a limited experience when compared to demand. The lucky attendees overcome exclusory boundaries to participate in Comic-Con, and become "tastemakers" accordingly.

In further support of a perspective on unbalanced power, Ann Gilbert (2018) argues that Comic-Con reinforces the role of conspicuous consumption among fans. The industry practices "hail" consumers and affirms that the *good* fan is the *consuming* fan. Participation in SDCC is actually consumption, and fans reinforce the promotion of the industry. This is evident in the way programs are scheduled at Comic-Con. The successive panel line-up, which one is often obliged to sit through in order to access one's preferred panel, introduces fans to other properties of the sponsor, encouraging audiences to consume more media. For instance, there were several years where I would show up at Ballroom 20 several hours early for a presentation about my favorite CW television series such as *Arrow* or *Flash*, and consequently was party to preceding panels for other Warner Brothers content beforehand. As established in my opening anecdote, if I chanced waiting until the CW panel I was interested in was scheduled to start, I might find a line dozens deep of other fans hoping to see their favorite show that was scheduled later in the same room. It is a very circular experience: You wait to see shows you are not interested in while the person next to you sits through the program waiting for their favorite. In these programs, the panelists on stage praise fans for their loyalty and reward them with exclusive access. Attendees have the privilege, as one fellow fan put, to breathe the same air as the celebrities; they also have access to more information than other fans. (Admittedly, the internet and the increased coverage by media has made the latter increasingly less coveted.) Moreover, the trade floor is a series of storefronts, where fans are given promotional items to "wear, carry, or collect" (Gilbert 2018, 325). But these giveaways aren't replacements for the products they are asked to buy; rather, by brandishing these giveaways, attendees become walking advertisements. Such exclusives "are rewards that cannot be bought, but must be earned through loyalty, devotion, and luck" (Gilbert 2018, 327). For example, the Lego Group has not only sold Comic-Con exclusive sets over the past decade on the tradeshow floor, but they have also distributed exclusive mini-figures to fans. These mini-figures cannot be purchased in any other venue (save the resale market), and so accessing them is uniquely a reward for Comic-Con attendance.

Gilbert (2017) also speaks of this asymmetrical power imbalance, but recognizes that fans are not mere dupes. Comic-Con can represent an allocation of authority in the producer/fan dynamic; both parties have complimentary interests. The power is uneven, but all sides see the benefits: "[P]articipants of SDCC are cognizant of the roles they play in rearticulating dynamics of fan/producer relationships" (Gilbert 2017, 357). Buying and acquiring are a part of fan identity, with Comic-Con exclusives bringing with them a particular "cachet" for attendees. Almost all of the exclusive information made available to attendees quickly comes out online, but the thrill of being present matters: "[L]ive experiences bear greater

symbolic capital" (Gilbert 2017, 362). Gilbert goes on to explain that Comic-Con is populated by paratexts that help market the cultural industries' products. These paratexts are there to test audience engagement *and* promote long-term marketing. Fans are perceived as bellwethers for how audiences will receive new media products, and so producers want to enlist fans in becoming marketers themselves. In exchange, fans get to pursue fannish pursuits like cosplay and commerce instead of mundane responsibilities like housework and office paperwork. Of course, producers downplay what they reap, and fresh content is a reward for fans.

By way of example, I point to copious amounts of Con-related swag that has, regrettably, accumulated in my basement after 15 visits to San Diego. Among the items that I have been freely gifted, perhaps the most relevant to Gilbert's (2017) point are the wearable items, which can transform wearers into walking billboards during and after the Con. The most prevalent and utterly shameless of these are the "swag bags" given away by Warner Brothers at check-in since 2010. The bags are 22 inches tall and 19 inches wide and feature a host of different Warner Brothers properties on them each year (e.g., various permutations of the *Batman* franchise, *The Big Bang Theory*, or *Supernatural*). Tens of thousands of Comic-Con participants strap these monstrosities on their backs and wander the San Diego Convention Center and through the city's Gaslamp District for the duration of the event, openly marketing whatever selection of intellectual property is pasted on the obverse side of the bag. But even here, we see fandom reassert its potential power to reshape media content, literally. Early on in the distribution of the bags, a number of talented tailors began to take the raw material of these bags and refashion them into dresses overnight. Young women would show up the second day of the convention adorned in a mini-dress made of the bag's raw materials. In later years, I saw all manner of repurposing of this material into items worn or carried by fans, from handbags to full-on suits. There's also a very active culture of trading the unaltered bags among attendees that I, too, have participated in. Admittedly, fans may well have found new ways to repurpose Warner Brothers' giveaways, but that did not necessarily diminish the impact of having Warner Brothers' brands exposed by an agreeable fandom.

The Feminist Critique

As some scholars have noted, the rewards of attendance and participation are not equally distributed because not all fans are equally valued, and most especially female fans. As Kohnen (2014) has indicated, industry panelists often reassure the audience that they are fans, too; however, many of these insiders are

fanboy auteurs who service "affirmational fandom." That is, they affirm those who support the dominant, typically masculine narrative. Fans who challenge the dominant reader, notably feminists, are not welcomed and some are even mocked. In one of saddest instances in Comic-Con history, male protestors vocally discouraged fans of the romantic vampire film series *Twilight* from participating in the 2009 Con, confronting *Twilight* fans with negative signs and verbal taunts as the *Twilight* fans waited in line to see the cast of the popular films. One of my student participants, Melissa Miller (2014), wrote about the backlash she observed at the 2011 event and the media framing of it, noting strategies that *Twilight* fans used to reframe the narratives told about them. Likewise, other fans who would adapt a given narrative (e.g., fan-fiction writers) are often encouraged to stay out at the margins rather than be considered one of the tribes welcomed into the convention.

Suzanne Scott (2019) has written at length about the growing industrial and fan-cultural efforts to marginalize female fans over roughly the past decade. In her book *Fake Geek Girls*, Scott examines

> how the mainstreaming of fan culture has been marked by a backlash from (predominantly white, cishet) male fans, reflecting the growing cultural influence of the alt-right and Men's Rights movements, and refracting the media industry's gendered messaging about which 'fans' they value within convergence culture. (2019, 4)

Some male fans claim the culture is purely male and some marketers want the gendered differences to persist. Scott points out that Jenkins's *Convergence Culture* (2006) highlights that intellectual property owners sometimes chide fans for creative impulses, but that he neglects to define that exercising creativity can be one of the ways female audiences most often interact. As Scott (2019, 10) notes, it is a trope in fandom literature to knock down the Frankfurt School for dismissing fans as dupes of the cultural industries.

Certainly, there are numerous elements of SDCC that can be read as perpetuating a masculinist culture. The regularity and numerousness of young women portraying "Slave Leia" in their cosplay selections underscores a climate that objectifies women for the viewing pleasure of men. (The costuming involves the bikini-like outfit Carrie Fischer wore in *Star Wars: Return of the Jedi* [1983] while a prisoner in chains of the crime lord Jabba the Hutt.) In fact, numerous cosplayers are dressed to draw attention to their bodies in ways that fulfill stereotypical expectations about gender objectification. In seeming opposition to fulfilling the culture's expectations is the subversive efforts of "crossplayers" who costume play a character that is typically not the same gender as they are. Thus, a man might portray the female character of the Black Widow or a woman might dress as the male character Captain America. Such creative exploration of the meaning

of the original characters calls into critique our collective gendered expectations (Thomas 2014), but it is certainly beyond what the intellectual property owners would sanction. Marvel would be unlikely to embrace or endorse this transmutation of its intellectual property.

Conclusion

As I have attempted to articulate here, the dynamics of fan agency at Comic-Con are complex. Like Chaucer's mythical travelers on their pilgrimage to Canterbury, the stories of the pilgrims on their way to San Diego Comic-Con are varied, interesting, uniquely tailored to their personalities, sometime bawdy, and worth reconsidering. As a growing body of literature can attest, Comic-Con provides a forum for the exercise of agency, but that exercise can be co-opted by corporate interests that seek to exploit it, or it may be pushed back upon by chauvinistic voices shouting down its free and innovative practice. There is clearly more yet to learn about these practices, as they are exercised and as they continue to develop, and that is why I am pleased to be a part of a forthcoming research initiative called "Storming the Con." Coordinated by Ben Woo at Carleton University, the research team will pull on the expertise of scholars like the previously cited Gilbert, Hanna, Kohnen, Scott, along with Shawna Kidman and games studies expert Felan Parker to explore producer-intermediary-audience relations in the mainstream commercial arts through the lens of San Diego Comic-Con. Plans are to conduct a group ethnographic investigation of Comic-Con in 2023 and expand our understanding of fan phenomena in the context of its largest gathering. I look forward to supporting the work that my collaborators will generate from this initiative and return with greater details about those findings in subsequent ComFor presentations. Ideally, those travelers will shed even more insights into the pilgrimages to Comic-Con.

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