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BOOK REVIEW:

*Fake Geek Girls: Fandom, Gender, and the
Convergence Culture Industry*

Aino-Kaisa Koistinen

Scott, Suzanne. *Fake Geek Girls: Fandom, Gender, and the Convergence Culture Industry*. New York UP, 2019. ISBN 978-1479879571.

In 2016, I visited Cardiff University for a conference entitled “Fantasies in Contemporary Culture”. As I had recently become interested in convergence culture, fandom studies, and transmedia storytelling, I decided to take the opportunity to venture into the unknown while I was in Cardiff – that is, to engage in a fan practice unfamiliar to me by visiting The Doctor Who Experience, a themed interactional exhibition for the franchise. So, I set foot into the building, took some pictures with the Daleks in the lobby, and stepped into the blue box – it was bigger on the inside! – to ride along with the Doctor in the TARDIS. To my great surprise, a variety of emotions flashed through me and I found my eyes watering. It was not only memories of the *Doctor Who* TV series but also my personal experiences of watching it with the people I hold dear that came rushing into my embodied consciousness. The reaction, nevertheless, was a surprise, a shock even; for I had never considered myself “that kind of a fangirl”.

The reader may wonder what this has to do with Suzanne Scott’s monograph, *Fake Geek Girls: Fandom, Gender, and the Convergence Culture Industry*. The answer is: everything. Reactions like mine to the concept of “fangirl” are, indeed, what Scott’s book is all about as it tackles the place of women and fangirls in today’s digital fan culture(s). Scott establishes how fandom is produced and regulated in a deeply gendered manner by both the convergence-culture industry and fandom itself. To put it simply, both fans and the convergence-culture industry are engaged in a continuous negotiation of

acceptable and desirable forms of fandom – and, in that respect, also fan identities. By analysing several discussions in media/fandom, Scott provides an ample amount of evidence for how the role of “fangirl” is deemed as undesirable, unreal, unwanted – the wrong kind of fandom. Often female fans are shunned specifically because of their female “fannish affect” (134–36), which is seen as excessive and undesirable. My reaction to the emotional response evoked by the Doctor Who Experience also testifies to how fangirls are considered too emotionally invested in fandom. Even as a woman, feminist, and scholar, I had internalised this idea of emotional female fandom as something to avoid – in any case, something to which a respectable academic surely could not belong. The memory of visiting The Doctor Who Experience thus stayed with me while reading *Fake Geek Girls*.

Throughout the book, Scott provides compelling analyses of the complex roles of women in fandom. How should women negotiate their place in a fan culture often hostile to them? What immediately strikes the reader as an important contribution to studies on fandom, gender, and the media is how *Fake Geek Girls* introduces the role of both producers and media-makers (i.e. the convergence-culture industry) and fans (the users/consumers of this industry) as together producing the contemporary spreadable media culture as one not accepting of female fandom. Scott argues that the concept of “fan” tends to connote “male” partly due to the fact that convergence-culture privileges male forms of fandom. Men tend to engage in affirmative fandom that does not challenge the status quo between producer and user whereas women are more prone to transformative forms of fandom such as slash fiction, fan vids, fan art, and “crossplay” (cross-gender cosplay) that challenge, mix up, and rewrite the canon of a particular franchise. Transformative fan works have even resulted in copyright lawsuits, which makes it clear that affirmative forms of fandom are preferred by the convergence-culture industry. This preference then helps to create an idea of the ideal, affirmative (and thus mostly male) fan, which has led to discrimination against female fans. At its worst, this discrimination has resulted in serious forms of harassment. Scott dubs this phenomenon of rendering women as undesirable fans in digital fandom as *spreadable misogyny*. In digital fandom, this form of misogyny is visible, for example, in the “fake geek girl” memes (i.e. images of geek/nerd women accompanied by derogatory phrases such as “fake geek girl”) that are circulated to diminish women’s status as fans. I find the concept of spreadable misogyny highly relevant not only to research in digital fandom, but to broader studies on online misogyny – e.g., dealing with populist and conservative discussions of gender.

Fake Geek Girls is divided into six chapters, plus an introduction and a conclusion. The introduction, with its tongue-in-cheek title “Make Fandom Great Again” (an obvious Donald Trump reference) introduces and contextualises the debate – or “war” – around fandom within the current political landscape. In this “fan culture war”, minority fans are justifiably demanding more-varied representations, which is met with claims of “a censorial rise of ‘PC culture’” (3). By taking into account this broader context in addition to the developments of the convergence-culture industry and fandom, *Fake Geek Girls* successfully interrogates women’s role in contemporary digital fandom in a complex and thorough manner. Scott’s book thus highlights how the misogynist attitudes spreading in contemporary culture, such as the alt-right movement, should not be overlooked when studying the hostility towards

women in fandom. Moreover, her introduction situates these debates in the context of feminist fandom and feminist fan studies. The aims of the book are stated clearly in reference to both feminism and the current political/cultural landscape, as Scott writes that “this book is centrally concerned with how androcentric conceptions of fan culture have become entrenched despite fan studies’ characterization of fandom as decidedly feminine and potentially feminist space” (4). Indeed, Scott discusses the history of fan studies and the field’s connection to feminism in the first chapter, “A Fangirl’s Place is in the Resistance: Feminism and Fan Studies”. The focus on both the contemporary and historical aspects of fandom and (feminist) fan studies makes the book particularly suitable for teaching purposes – and for anyone interested in feminist media/fan studies.

The following chapters then deal with issues such as the privileged role of the fanboy in the current media landscape (Chapter 2), spreadable misogyny (Chapter 3), the convergence industry’s co-opting of fan labor (Chapter 4), the gendered politics of fan professionalisation (Chapter 5), as well as fashion and pinning (i.e. Pinterest) as (post)feminist geek culture (Chapter 6). The chapters bring to the fore how questions of identity politics remain a relevant object of study in media and cultural studies. In other words, *Fake Geek Girls* makes visible both the harmful and empowering aspects of adopting (or being appointed) a specific (fan) identity category, as well as how these identities are constructed within complex cultural contexts. Particularly interesting is Scott’s discussion of the “fangirl” concept and the power relations and positive/negative implications related to it. In Chapter 5, Scott raises the question of who gets to be a “fangirl”. Suggesting that male fans have co-opted the concept and identity of fangirl, Scott claims that in today’s fan culture it is easier for a male fan to adopt both the role of fanboy *and* the role of fangirl (168). This is a telling indicator of the power relations inherent in today’s fan culture. Whereas male fans may find an emancipatory effect in adopting the position of the emotionally invested fangirl, the female fan a similar position risks exclusion from the fan community.

Scott’s discussion of fashion’s potential to serve as a kind of “girly geek culture” in Chapter 6 is also illuminating. Even though fashion has the potential to function as a female-targeted and empowering practice, Scott reminds the reader that engaging in “everyday cosplay” (i.e. fannish outfits sold to consumers) is vastly different to cosplaying everyday (200–02) – not to mention that not all fans can afford fashionable fannish consumer items. Thus, fashion may work to delimit and police female fan identity. In the same chapter, though, Scott finds potential in how the practice of pinning supports the construction of female fannish identity (albeit only certain kinds). According to Scott, “If Pinterest is, as many have argued, an aspirational space, it might also be wielded to offer an aspirational vision for the convergence culture’s valuation of female fans” (196). There might be hope for all those fangirls after all! However, as Scott herself notes, the book could have provided more examples of transformative fan works and their role in changing the misogynist media landscape.

Finally, the conclusion, “Fan Studies OTP: Fandom and Intersectional Feminism”, argues that we should remember the relationship of feminism and fandom as the “*original* true pairing” in fan studies, and calls for more feminist and intersectional analyses in today’s fan studies (223, 228–33). Along these

lines, in terms of intersectionalism, there is one shortcoming in the book, which Scott herself acknowledges: the book does not really engage with intersectional questions of race, age, class and dis/ability, for example, but limits its focus mostly on gender. An intersectional approach would have provided a more nuanced analysis of the power structures inherent in the “fan culture war” – how spreadable misogyny affects different people differently and what kinds of fan positions are available, for instance, for fans who do not subscribe to a gender binary. However, Scott reflects on this in both the introduction and her conclusions – and there is really only so much one book can do. In the introduction she argues that even though the fangirl/fanboy binary is problematic, we should not just move beyond it without studying it – an argument that I can surely support. In the conclusions, on the other hand, Scott negotiates her “aca-fannish fragility”, meaning her attachment to mostly white feminist studies, which has led to this book’s focus on gender instead of other axes of identity (228–33). I thus believe that we can expect more intersectional insights on geek culture from Scott in the future. By bringing to the fore important discussions related to the scholar’s own position in research, the concluding chapter also places the book within feminist discussions of situated knowledge(s). The idea of knowledge as situated and positional is central to feminism, and in the time of fake news and relativist claims that scientific knowledge no longer matters, *Fake Geek Girls* serves as an example of what situated knowledge means in feminist research: careful reflection on the role of one’s own position in knowledge-production.

To sum up, Suzanne Scott’s *Fake Geek Girls* is a clearly argued and insightful work that I would recommend to everyone interested in contemporary media culture, feminism, and identity politics. Because SF and fantasy are well-represented in fandom, the book will also be of interest to *Fafnir*’s readers. That said, I found the book a difficult read. This is not to say that it is written in an uncomprehensive manner – far from it – and I struggle to pinpoint what made this reading experience, while certainly interesting, a slightly difficult one. One reason might be the minor repetitions found in the book. However, these repetitions also work as a useful reminder of the book’s main arguments. Another reason was perhaps just the subject matter. No matter how interesting I found the research, it can be emotionally difficult to delve into the world of spreadable misogyny. I would nevertheless claim that, due to this very difficulty, we need studies like *Fake Geek Girls* that make us see the gendered power structures in today’s digital culture we might otherwise choose to ignore.

Biography: Aino-Kaisa Koistinen (PhD in Contemporary Culture, Title of Docent in Media Culture) works as a postdoctoral researcher in Contemporary Culture at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. She has studied a variety of media texts ranging from European policy documents to science fiction television and transmedia storyworlds. Koistinen is the chair of the Finnish Society for Science Fiction and Fantasy Research, a member of The Monster Network, an affiliate member of the Posthumanities Hub at Linköping University, and the School of Resource Wisdom (University of Jyväskylä).