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Agency in Fan Studies. Materialities, Algorithms, and »Tiny Ontologies«

1. Introduction

There are few topics in fan studies that are more diffuse than agency. While the field highlights the performative, communicative, and transformative functions of fan culture, agency is seldom conceptualized further than as a creative practice or a choice. What can a conceptual ›lens‹ like agency bring to a domain like fan and audience studies? How can its connections to networks, affordances, and capacities help us understand fandom better, not just as a community but as a system? These questions are not only relevant for the field itself but also for related disciplines such as new media studies. While fans are often understood as active audiences, the nature of their activity, and how this activity interlaces with other entities such as technologies, is undertheorized.

Agency is not just a buzzword but a critical concept with methodological implications. It captures the dynamics of networks and communities that take shape around stories and platforms. In such a paradigm, action and practices are less foregrounded in favor of interaction and relationships within complex systems. This contribution interrogates the concept of agency and what it can bring to the study of audiences. I explore how agency has been framed in fan studies and dive deeper into what discourses like ›new materiality‹ can add to current research on active audiences. In doing so, this contribution offers a lens to examine characters, interfaces, and other types of actors that are in networks together.

In this contribution, I argue that we need to examine agency as a foundational concept in key areas of media studies. While I apply the term to fan studies, I believe that the importance of agency is exemplary for a turn in media studies towards systems, networks, and new materialities. In an increasingly complex media landscape, co-constructed through code, algorithms, and interaction, we need a paradigm shift. The focus of this contribution is largely theoretical and concerned with a conceptual turn in media studies and its sub-fields. Through different case studies drawing from fan culture, I illustrate the need for agency in media studies. One of the cases, for instance, discusses the material aspects of cosplay, a practice in which fans recreate the outfits of existing fictional characters. Agency is a difficult concept in this case, which involves different technologies, materials, and narratives. Studying such practices requires new methodologies of close-reading as well as a type of literacy that moves beyond the textual.

Overall, agency is framed in three ways in this contribution. First, the concept can be applied as a ›tiny ontology‹, which acts like a prism and allows us to study different aspects of a network. Second, it evokes a *post-human* approach, thus including non-human actors, such as algorithms. Third, agency has the radical potential to include imaginary and virtual actors, such as characters and interfaces. I conclude by framing fandom as a practice best captured as a ›dance of agency‹ (see PICKERING 1995). Several small case studies act as theoretical probes to reflect on this ›dance‹. Costumes, Tumblr algorithms, and fictional characters demonstrate the importance of studying agency in fan studies more systematically.

Though the focus of this contribution is on one field within media studies, I hope that its attention to systems and materialities can create crossovers with platform studies, gender studies, and character studies. In the new media landscape, having silos will not do. What we need is interdisciplinary work that goes beyond traditional divides and boundaries.

2. The Discourse of Agency in Fan Studies

While fan studies implicitly address agency, it is seldom conceptualized and theorized in the field. Rather, agency is commonly used as a colloquial term that denotes the subjectivity of the fan and moments where the fan self-consciously engages with the object of their devotion. There are different interpretations and discourses of agency within the field.

First of all, the agency of fans is often implied or evoked through other concepts (e.g. creativity, community-building). In a study of porn consumers as fans, for instance, Alan McKee brings agency into the picture. He argues that agency is often associated with the concept of *fans*, which denotes active consumers and communities. Typical porn consumers, in contrast, are framed as the opposite of fans in popular discourse, namely as passive, addicted, and lacking agency. In McKee's study agency acts as an analytical lens that normalizes viewers of pornography and turns the spotlight towards their activities, communities, and practices. In general, thinking through agency in fan studies is essential for McKee: »Fan studies is the study of agentic cultural consumption« (2018: 518).

Agency in such cases is used to denote the conscious practices, choices, and acts of fans. For example, in a plea for autoethnography and longitudinal approaches to fandom, Ross Garner (2018) writes that scholars should consider »the intersection of a variety of factors including personal biography and demonstrations of agency, as well as wider contextual factors« when studying fan culture. Agency here is equated with moments of a fan's capacity to act rather than to passively consume media content.

Moreover, agency in fandom also pertains to characters and their fictional bodies. Francesca Coppa frames agency as having a degree of creative choice within fan criticism and fan productions to rewrite characters. In her analysis of slash fan fiction, Coppa argues (2018: 198): »Canon matters and fans make choices.« Through case studies of different slash pairings, she reveals that audiences mediate complex and intimate feelings through characters and their bodies. Coppa discusses the body of Bucky Barnes from the Marvel Cinematic Universe, for instance, which is ambiguous and sports an »eye black« that can be interpreted as a double-coded »war paint and mascara wrecked from crying« (COPPA 2018: 197). Characters such as Bucky offer different points of identification to the female fans that she studied. The bodies of characters in self-created homoerotic fiction are then not »neutral« bodies but bodies that capture a range of interpretations and feelings that women can relate to. The agency of a character – understood in Coppa's work as related to subjectivity and embodiment – thus affects the fan.

While agency is understood as paradigmatic of fan studies, it is important to consider whose agency is being studied. Rhiannon Bury understands participatory culture as a continuum and argues that the agency of many subjects is forgotten in fan studies. She writes: »Those fans who are not part of a community are also legitimate subjects of study as are those

practices on the ›less‹ participatory end of the continuum« (BURY 2017: 130). A crucial question is indeed whose agency it is that fan studies considers and what groups might be excluded from the analysis on the basis of identity, language, or culture.

In contemporary critical theory, agency is not only associated with human subjectivity, embodiment, but also with related practices. Anne Jamison has touched upon this topic in her analysis of fan fiction as assemblages, a term used by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987) to describe collections of things and their interactions. Jamison theorizes the networks and infrastructure that underpin fan fiction, which is not a stable archive. She writes:

»Fan fiction as assemblage allows us to imagine a system too heterogeneous to be accurately characterized from within a single discipline. Assemblage theory can help identify instances in which component parts of the fanfic assemblage ›exercise their capacity‹ and therefore enable new assemblages not previously possible [...]. We can talk about tropes as having an agency and influence in a story without erasing the writer's sense of telling her own story and consider how different platforms produce different kind of stories, pages, and organizational conventions« (JAMISON 2018: 537).

As Jamison rightly argues, creative networks and assemblages are crucial to fan fiction. I would even argue that other parts of fandom equally function as assemblages, where different actors are configured in ways that go beyond the textual, such as interfaces and code. In this sense, the idea of ›assemblage‹ comes close to what I am arguing in this contribution, namely that we need a turn towards agency to explore the multi-sided aspects of today's media culture.

What is important to consider in my argument is that I read systems like fandom not just as socio-technological assemblages but as socio-technological *imaginaries* given shape by narratives. This includes not just the narratives that exist but also the fans' imagination and consensus (›fanon‹), individual fantasies (›headcanon‹), and paratexts that the industry releases, such as spoilers. Some ideas about characters and stories are sticky and lead to affective responses and tension in reception. These imaginaries are a golden thread in this argument. In this sense, my understanding of systems or assemblages is a material landscape that is always connected to narratives and rich with affective potential.