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# Jenkins and Fandom

What does Henry Jenkins' beard tell us about contemporary fandoms? This is possibly something you have never considered but don't worry: Mark Dixon has his own theory.

I sometimes wonder whether the personal grooming styles of the named A level theorists are somehow symbolic. What, I ask myself, does Barthes' 1950s slicked-back French coiffuring connote? Is Todorov's untamed thatch indicative of his love of narrative disequilibrium? Do Neale's shapeless cowlicks exude a hidden desire to both embrace and reject the conventions of contemporary hair fashion?

For those of you who have thus far failed to pay attention to the hair-oriented qualities of the named theorists, I would advise that you take a closer look. Jenkins' contribution is especially notable: coiffured in the banjo-playing, moonshine-suppin' style of an all-American gold prospector circa 1830, Jenkins' bearded weave reveals much of his love of folk culture. Folk culture, I hear you

scream. Banjo playing? Patchwork quilting? What does folk culture have to do with contemporary fandoms?

Well, if we take a sideways glance at the furry undergrowth of Jenkins' theoretical writing you will find that he deeply mourns the loss of folk culture, especially folk culture's participatory qualities. For what Jenkins loves most about folk art (beards aside) is its capacity to bring communities together in acts of creative loveliness: acts that often articulate some kind of political message – for folk culture provides us, the ordinary folk, with a voice to question the order of things.

Unfortunately, Jenkins tells us,

**modern mass media spelled the doom for the vital folk culture traditions that thrived in nineteenth-century America' (*Convergence Culture*, 2006)**

Take special note of Jenkins' rather emotive use of the word 'doom' in his description here, and, more importantly, in the way that he contrasts the contemporary mass media with the 'vital' life-giving qualities of nineteenth century American folksiness.

Jenkins' appraisal of the growth of mass media in the 20th Century and its impact on folk culture is comparable,

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That connectivity, Jenkins argues, is powerful, and allows media consumers to work together in choreographed or collective acts of resistance.

perhaps, to the eviscerating presence of Vader's all-powerful Death Star, relegating all those huddled campfires and participatory cum-by-ah singathons to nothing more than a footnote in human social history. Mass media, in this sense, played a vital role in destroying audience creativity. Mass media similarly culled the capacities for ordinary folk to use creativity for the purposes of political messaging.

Or maybe not. Taking his cue from Stuart Hall's revolutionary 'encoding/

# JENKINS' BEARD, CONTEMPORARY FANDOMS & WAKANDA DREAMS

WHAT DOES HENRY JENKINS' BEARD CONNOTE?



FOLK CULTURE CREATIVITY PARTICIPATION

THIS CULTURE PROVIDED A VOICE TO QUESTION THE ORDER OF THINGS



UNFORTUNATELY MASS MEDIA 'SPELLED THE DOOM' OF THESE TRADITIONS



BUT SOME AUDIENCES HAVE USED FAN FICTION TO ADAPT MASS MEDIA STORIES



WE CAN CHANGE AND SUBVERT TEXTS FOR OUR OWN PURPOSES



FAN ENGAGEMENT HAS THE POWER TO SHAPE MEDIA OUTPUT

& ACTS OF 'CIVIC IMAGINATION' CAN PROVIDE A POWERFUL CALL FOR SOCIAL CHANGE!

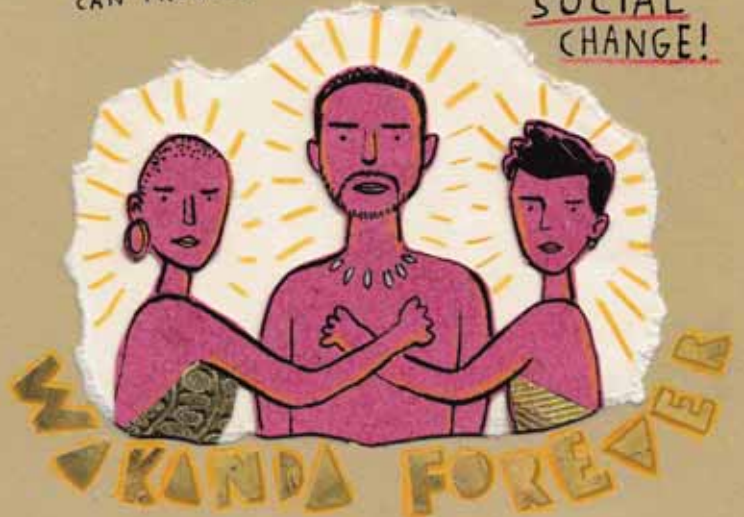


Illustration by Tom Zaino



decoding' essay, Jenkins tells us that some audiences can resist the hypnotic, creativity-sapping effects of the mass media. Some audiences, moreover, reacted to the television revolution with the same creative impulses that were to be found in the American folk tradition. Swapping banjos for fan fiction, audiences used the television shows they consumed as 'creative scaffolding', appropriating the characters and storylines they found in the mass media to tell their own stories. Audiences, in this sense, used fanfiction to adapt mass media stories to their own personal tastes in much the same way that folk musicians of the pre-mass media world adapted their own versions of well-known songs.

Fanfiction also provides concrete evidence, Jenkins concludes, of the way that wider audiences read media products. Viewers, readers and listeners select and negotiate mass media narratives in ways that meet their identity needs. Jenkins further argues that the attention of viewers, readers and listeners fades or intensifies in tune to those narrative moments that offer personal significance. In other words, we take what we want from media texts, adapting the meanings and significance of stories for our own purposes.

Jenkins exemplifies this process via a detailed examination of the slash fanfiction genre, notable for the way its authors reposition lead male heterosexual characters within gay relationships – thus appropriating their heterosexuality to produce softer versions of onscreen masculinity. Jenkins argues that slash fiction is penned by female and gay viewers to construct alternatives to the hypermasculine ideals that the mainstream media so readily produces. In this sense, fan writing is a tool that audiences deploy to experiment with their own identity, using and subverting professional media texts in a way that enables them to imagine alternative versions of themselves.

Jenkins, moreover, was quick to observe that in the era of web 2.0, fan activity moved beyond the margins of cult television shows, with most mass media output now boasting

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some form of online fandom. What's more, digital media platforms gave audiences a whole host of digital tools to reinvent their favourite media. YouTube remixes and parodies, fan art, Facebook groups and superfan wikis have become common currency in the digital age, giving global audiences of all kinds the means to vent and share their media passions. From *Coronation Street* to *Wonder Woman*, fan power is now an integral part of the mass media landscape.

The flowering of digitally oriented fandoms is also significant for Jenkins in that contemporary fans are more able to connect with another. In the pre-web 2.0 world, fan engagement mostly facilitated acts of individual resistance. Fan stories would, of course, be collated and circulated, usually in low-fi cheaply produced print fanzines that drew limited readerships. As such, the ability of fans to work with a collective voice was limited. Conversely, online fandoms enable audience activity to be shared across a global network in real time. That connectivity, Jenkins argues, is powerful, and allows media consumers to work together in choreographed or collective acts of resistance.

The delayed release of the 2019 *Sonic* movie testifies to the collective power of contemporary fandoms to shape media output. Sonic fans, or Furrries as they like to be known, appropriated the erstwhile blue hedgehog in the early 2010s, reconfiguring Sega's blue mascot as an icon of 'rad' rebellion. However, last year's cinematic reboot was threatened with a mass boycott and accompanying review bomb when fans objected to the

design of the film's central character. Paramount Pictures responded with a comprehensive redesign that cost upwards of \$5 million.

Jenkins acknowledges the commercial effects and exploitation of fan power by big name media brands, but he is also interested in the ways that fan activity can be harnessed for purer motives. Jenkins here celebrates fan-based groups like The Wakanda Dream Lab ([www.wakandadreamlab.com](http://www.wakandadreamlab.com)) which engages in what Jenkins calls acts of 'civic imagination'; using the characters, setting and storylines of the hit superhero film *Black Panther* to forward a #blacktivist inspired manifesto for social change and to explore issues of contemporary racism through the use of fan power. Wakanda Dream Lab, in this sense, performs much the same role as that of American folk culture in the nineteenth century – minus the beards – using popular culture and DIY audience-based creativity to nurture a political voice.

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