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Brooker, Will. (2002) *Using the Force: Creativity, Community and Star Wars Fans*. New York: Continuum. 288 pp. ISBN: 0 8264 5287 6

Using the Force borrows heavily from theories commonly used in the study of popular media fan subculture, particularly from Henry Jenkin's seminal work on television fan subculture, *Textual Poachers*, which itself draws from Michel de Certeau's characterization of readers of popular texts as "poaching" the texts, or appropriating parts or the whole of them in ways that serve their local interests (1992). Brooker, himself a fan of the Star Wars films, wastes no time in dismissing the view that dedicated fans of the space epic are maladjusted and socially inept "nerds" unable to cope with the daily realities of mainstream life. Rather, following in the work of Jenkins, Brooker characterizes dedicated Star Wars fans as creating and maintaining an interpretive community of fans who appropriate elements of the Star Wars saga to explore alternate realities suitable to their emotional, social, and intellectual needs.

One important way that Brooker breaks from Jenkins, however, is in demonstrating the facet of cultural change over time within this particular fandom. As Star Wars is a twenty-five-year-old phenomenon as of this writing, and Brooker himself was a fan from the very beginning, he seizes upon the opportunity to demonstrate how the interpretation of George Lucas's characters and themes differ depending on the standpoint of when a fan has entered the Star Wars fan community. However, Brooker does not theorize on how the broader, relevant historical context might influence the interpretive practices of at least U.S. Star Wars fans (e.g. the need for clear protagonists like Luke and antagonists like Darth Vader in the post-Vietnam War era; conceptualizing relationships between different ethnicities, or alien species, in the post-Civil Rights era, etc.), preferring to focus more on the age of the fans and whether they began their involvement with

Episode IV: A New Hope from 1977, or the prequel Episode I: The Phantom Menace from 1999 as explanatory factors.

Brooker admits his near-lifelong affinity for the Star Wars films, yet his prior participation in the fan subculture, apart from interaction with his grade school classmates that revolved around the films, remains mysterious. He is largely interested in not alienating the Star Wars fan base. "If a study of fans by a fan cannot be read and enjoyed by those fans, something is wrong," Brooker supposes in his introduction (2002). Brooker felt that it was important for himself to come across as a fellow fan of Star Wars to his participants in order to gain their confidence that he would not characterize them as abnormal eccentrics in his research. This confidence was gained easily by Brooker who spoke with fans eager to talk about their Star Wars-related experiences. As a scholar of cultural studies, Brooker's interest in the subject is understandable on the fan level as well. However, Brooker does not address how his subjectivities towards Star Wars fans might influence his scholarly interpretations of their life-world apart from simply being more sympathetic with their thinking and experiences as fans. This is especially crucial in his examination of George Lucas and his company Lucasfilm as cultural producers who come into conflict with fans who use Star Wars stories in ways not intended by their original creators.

Using the Force could be called an ethnographic study in a nontraditional sense. Brooker "hangs-out" in Star Wars fandom on the Internet as a whole for approximately a year, particularly at major websites such as TheForce.net. However, his objectives are to cover different aspects of the fandom, ranging from largely female fan fiction authors who write "slash", or homosexual romance stories involving male Star Wars protagonists to largely male fan filmmakers who stay closer to George Lucas's cinematic vision in both plot and visual effects. Consequently, Brooker does not immerse himself within a social network per se as much as he keeps contact with various facets of Star Wars fandom, mostly on the Internet. His "real world" contact with Star Wars fans occurs in the London area,

though his interactions with the London fans do not take place over the course of his ethnographic study.

Brooker both perceives himself and acts as a fan in his correspondence with other fans, though he is careful to mention in a few places how his acknowledged role as a researcher may have affected his and his participants' interaction. This is especially so, he says, when he comes armed with a tape recorder or video camera during face-to-face conversations with fans. A more subtle and perhaps more important factor he does not acknowledge is his preference for a role as a dominating interviewer rather than as an inquisitive equal. His selected interview transcripts are full of leading questions that almost explicitly steer participants towards certain responses rather than allowing them to freely expound upon their ideas and experiences. Taken as a participant observation project, Brooker comes across more as a participant in a solitary sense of being a fan of the films, but his observation technique is what could be called a "honey bee" method of going from participant to participant to collect the nectar of fan anecdotes, attitudes and artifacts that usually fit within his interpretive preferences. Short interviewing is a useful method for a fan community as wide and diverse as Star Wars fandom, though its utility increases exponentially when compared to a series of more in-depth encounters with participants that were somewhat lacking.

Brooker is undoubtedly enthusiastic about both the Star Wars films and associated literature as well as the fan community devoted to it. His tone easily shines through to make his book more engaging for even those totally unfamiliar with popular media fans in general. For the average academic reader and for much of a general audience, *Using the Force* is very accessible both for its clear and concise verbiage and its constant engagement with this recognizable aspect of global popular culture. However, Brooker does use some Star Wars-related terms that can be unfamiliar to those who are not fans, a problem he acknowledges and minimizes by keeping such terminology strictly within his interview transcripts where they rightfully come up.

As Brooker's method of covering Star Wars fandom was more piecemeal than holistic, so his chapters are not as connected as they could be, nor are they placed in an order that conveys much of any overall intended pattern. Each chapter arises out of Brooker's correspondence with a different segment of the Star Wars fan community, be it a solicitation of email responses from online fans on why they are fans, a barroom chat with a female fan about her Star Wars fan fiction, or a talk with an 11-year-old boy in his bedroom about what he likes about Episode I: The Phantom Menace. The chapters are connected by the broader idea of fans making up an interpretive community that takes Star Wars in different directions for local purposes, but questions of why might the interpretations differ both amongst fans and across contexts were not explored as much. Consequently, much of the material was, though disjointed, certainly of interest depending on the context that was explored.

Brooker's analysis of his data was usually confined to the end of each chapter; no overall analytical conclusion appeared at the end of the book. Much of his separate analyses confirmed his main thesis that Star Wars fans appropriate rather than consume meanings from the films to produce artifacts and conversations that take the material in new directions that satisfy their own interests while remaining true to the spirit of Star Wars as George Lucas had envisioned it (though Brooker does not, perhaps justifiably, explore Lucas's intent in-depth). His analysis differed from chapter to chapter based upon what those specific interests were and what artifacts and conversations existed that addressed those interests rather than how these concrete things might inform and even challenge this thesis.

As an introduction to Star Wars fandom that adds to the annals of particularistic ethnographic reports that make up much of the literature of cultural studies, *Using the Force* finds a deserved place above much of the fray. It makes up for in breadth of coverage and understanding of the participants what it lacks in detailed ethnographic richness of description. Though I was glad to see another

examination of media fan culture from another academic, I was disappointed that Force did not contribute as much ethnographically to a fledgling part of cultural studies that I am professionally and personally aligned to. I would characterize this work as both a notable contribution to media fandom and an implicit plea to approach this burgeoning area with an intention to obtain an in-depth perspective of fans as cultural actors much in the vein of more traditional methods such as cultural anthropology's use of participant observation with a few community participants over extended periods of time in order to gain more of an emic understanding.

References

Jenkins, H. (1992) *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture*. New York: Routledge.