

The Death of the Reader?

Literary Theory and the Study of Texts in Popular Culture

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Concerns over meaning and aesthetic value have continually haunted media and cultural studies. In many ways the field of fan studies epitomizes these concerns. The relative neglect of the question of aesthetic value (see also Hills 2007) has made the field of media and cultural studies (hereafter cultural studies) a popular target as a “Mickey Mouse” subject. On the one hand, this is, quite literally, true: fan studies have focused on popular texts from horror films via sports events to, indeed, comics. Beyond this, however, the notion of a “Mickey Mouse” subject implies a lack of depth and theoretical rigor. It is on this level that it remains most hurtful, especially when such criticism is reiterated by those in neighboring disciplines such as literary theory. Echoing such themes and pointing to structuralism paving the way for the rise of cultural studies, Eagleton accuses the new discipline of taking advantage of the fact that,

methodologically speaking, nobody quite knew where *Coriolanus* ended and *Coronation Street* began and constructed an entirely fresh field of enquiry which would gratify the anti-elitist iconoclasm of the sixty-eighters. [. . .] It was, in its academicist way, the latest version of the traditional avant-garde project of leaping barriers between art and society, and was bound to make its appeal to those who found, rather like an apprentice chef cooking his evening meal, that it linked classroom and leisure time with wonderful economy. (Eagleton 1996, 192)

If Eagleton's words were addressed to the discipline as a whole, nowhere do they reverberate more loudly than in fan studies. Fan studies have indeed eroded the boundaries between audiences and scholars, between fan and academic more than any other field (see Hills 2002; Tulloch 2000). To Eagleton, the blurring of these formerly distinct categories has led to a decline in analytic depth and an ideological stagnation: "what happened in the event was not a defeat for this project, which has indeed been gaining institutional strength ever since, but a defeat for the political forces which originally underpinned the new evolutions in literary theory" (1996, 192). Eagleton's critique raises a number of important questions: have fan studies unduly neglected aesthetic value and thus become complicit in the decline of literary quality and theory alike? Have sociological studies of fan audiences in their emphasis on the micro over the macro, on fans in their subcultural context over wider social relations, undermined progressive traditions and forms of radical enquiry, as Bryan Turner (2005) has recently suggested? Are fan studies unwittingly part of a revisionist wave that has suffocated the final sparks of 1960s radicalism? Or is Eagleton's critique just the bitter *réplique* of a scholar who in the shifting sands of history sees the scholarly foundations of his discipline running through his hands, witnessing the dunes of social, cultural, economic, and technological relations upon which all intellectual projects are built shifting from his field of inquiry to another?

In order to answer these questions by comparing the traditions and aims of literary theory with those of fan studies, we need to find a point of—if not compatibility—convertibility between these two fields. This point is found in the shared essence of both disciplines: the analysis and interpretation of meaning in the study of texts and their readings.

Texts and Textuality

While both disciplines share a focus on texts and the meanings that evolve around them, they already diverge in their definition of what actually constitutes a "text." Our common understanding of texts is rooted in the idealization and imagination of closed forms of textuality that have shaped the study of written texts from the rise of modern aesthetics in Enlightenment philosophy via the Romantics, who "denied any influence from previous writers and asserted the text's utter uniqueness" (Gray 2006, 20), to Edmund Husserl's phenomenological search for the author's pure intent in literary texts.

“Textual studies” have thus, as Gray notes, “a long history of fetishizing the text as a solitary, pristinely autonomous object, and this notion of textuality has exerted considerable pressure, particularly on literary and film studies” (2006, 19–20). In fan studies, however, the task of defining the text has been rather more complex. To understand the origin of this difficulty, we need to briefly draw the admittedly crude distinction between form and content. Take the following textual fragment or statement: “My name is Dr. Serenus Zeitblom, Ph.D.” To those who share English as a common language, the content of this brief sentence appears clear, but it is quite impossible for anyone, myself included, to describe its content in any form other than its meaning or, even if I could, to communicate this content to others. When I summarize the content of this statement as “someone is called Serenus Zeitblom, and he has a doctorate in philosophy,” I am already describing the *meaning* I have generated in the act of the reading. All encounters with textual structures thus require ideational activity that inherently ties the text to its reader. No text (and content) exists independently (see Fish 1981; Holub 1992; Iser 1978).

This is, of course, hardly news. Yet, while we cannot separate content from meaning, we can observe how meaning changes in different forms of communication. If we set the same utterance or textual fragment into different contexts, its meaning, or at least its possible meanings, change. In the case of face-to-face interaction—let’s say we meet someone on the street who introduces himself with the above words—the *someone* who is or claims to be Serenus Zeitblom is effectively limited to the person who has been seen or heard to make this statement. Here, the reciprocity of the text limits its possible meanings. The reader of this chapter in contrast will have found it more difficult to identify who the name points to when reading the above statement. The utterer of these words does not correspond with the author, leaving you with countless possibilities as to who the possessive pronoun in “my name” refers to. It is this fundamental difference in form between written and spoken texts that Paul Ricoeur accredits with what he labels as “difficulties of interpretation”: “in face-to-face interaction problems [of interpretation] are solved through a form of exchange we call conversation. In written texts discourse has to speak for itself” (1996, 56). Our observation that texts change meaning through their form, in conjunction with Ricoeur’s assessment of the changing role of authorial intent in written texts, points to two important differences between fan texts and literary texts. First, in study-

ing media audiences, we are confronted with a variety of different textual forms around which fandom evolves: alongside written texts, these include audio and sound, visual texts, audiovisual texts, and hypertexts.

The second difference concerns the way fan texts are formed across these media. Here, I owe the reader three belated definitions of “fans,” “texts,” and “fan texts.” In my earlier work, I defined “fandom as the regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text” (Sandvoss 2005a, 8). In its inclusion of both texts and narratives, this definition mirrored a level of uncertainty. While we all have a sense of who fans are, conceptualizing the textual basis of their fandom seems far more difficult. Hills (1999) distinguishes between popular texts (fictional) and popular icons (factual) as possible fan objects. On the level of the author, this distinction is of course correct. In the cases of literary fandom (see Brooker 2005) or fandom based on television shows, texts are written or controlled by copyright and license holders; they are in one form or another authored. In contrast, we do not describe popular icons such as musicians, actors, or athletes, or other fan objects such as sport teams, as deliberately authored texts. Even where those in the center of the public gaze aim to maintain a public and hence staged persona, fans’ interests often focus on what lies behind the public facade, as is exemplified in the title of celebrity biographies from *The Real David Beckham* (Morgan 2004) to Albert Goldman’s ([1988] 2001) notorious *The Lives of John Lennon*. However, the popularity of such biographies already signals that we cannot rely on authorship as a defining element of textuality; indeed, the success of these books is often not based on their actual author, who may be unknown to readers, but on the subject—the object of fandom. Whether a given fan object is found in a novel, a television program, or a popular icon, fan objects are read as texts on the level of the fan/reader. They all constitute a set of signs and symbols that fans encounter in their frames of representation and mediation, and from which they create meaning in the process of reading. Consequently, what is needed is a broad definition of texts that is not based on authorship, but on texts as frames of realizable meanings that span across single or multiple communicative acts, including visual, sound-based, and written communication. Yet, what the example of celebrity biographies shows is that we need to reflect on textual boundaries too. As we remove authorship as the essence of textuality, the notion of the single text that can be distinguished from other texts becomes impossible to maintain, as it is now not by the producer but by the reader that the boundaries of texts are set (Sandvoss 2005a, 2005b).

The capability of media audiences to define textual boundaries is inextricably linked with their media of delivery. The home-based and mobile media through which most fan texts are consumed—television, radio, magazines, walkmen and iPods, the Internet—are firmly entrenched in the structure of everyday life in late industrialism, embedding the act of reading in a social and technological context that is not only nonreciprocal (Thompson 1995), but in which textual boundaries at the point of production are evaded through the technological essence of such media as spaces of flow (see Williams 1974; see also Corner 1999). Television finds its true narrative form in seriality (Eco 1994), while the hypertextuality of the Internet forces the reader/user into the active construction of the text's boundaries. Moreover, through notions of genre and the capitalist imperative of market enlargements that drives them, textual motives from narratives to fictional characters and popular icons are constituted and reconstituted across different media. A sports fan will read and watch texts in reference to his or her favorite team on television, on the radio, in newspapers, in sport magazines, and, increasingly, on the Internet; soap fans (Baym 2000) turn to the World Wide Web and entertainment magazines as part of their fandom; the fan of a given actress will watch her in different films but also follow further coverage in newspapers or read the abovementioned celebrity biographies. Fan objects thus form a *field of gravity*, which may or may not have an *urtext* in its epicenter, but which in any case corresponds with the fundamental meaning structure through which all these texts are read. The fan text is thus constituted through a multiplicity of textual elements; it is by definition intertextual and formed between and across texts as defined at the point of production.

The single “episodes” that fans patch together to form a fan text are usefully described by Gray, drawing on Genette, as “paratext” that “infringes upon the text, and invades its meaning-making process” (2006, 36). As the fan text takes different forms among different fan groups—namely, the audience sections “fans,” “cultists,” and “enthusiasts,” with their different use of mass media, which Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) describe—the balance between *urtext* and paratexts changes. In Gray's words, to the degree that “we actually consume some texts through paratexts and supportive intertexts, the text itself becoming expendable” (2006, 37). What follows is a radically different conceptualization of “texts” than in literary theory. Individual texts at the point of production are part of a wider web of textual occurrences and the meanings derived from them. These textual elements are read in the

context of other texts. Intertextuality is thus the essence of all texts. While many contemporary fan texts such as *The Simpsons*, on which Gray focuses, or *South Park* are based on parody and thus more ostensibly intertextual than others, meaning construction through text *and* context does not by itself allow us to distinguish between literary and mediated texts. The field of comparative literature, for instance, draws on the long-standing tradition of motive and theme research. Yet in each and every case, the textual field in which the individual text is positioned will allow the reader to construct different meanings.

On a most obvious level, this relates to existing knowledge. Those readers with an interest in twentieth-century German literature will not have been quite as clueless about who the abovementioned Serenus Zeitblom was. They will have recognized the sentence “My name is Dr. Serenus Zeitblom, Ph.D.,” as the opening sentence of the second chapter of Thomas Mann’s *Doktor Faustus*, in which the narrator, Serenus Zeitblom, apologizes for his belated introduction. It is then a form of preexisting interest or what we might call an object of fandom (the work of Thomas Mann) that allows us to create meaning through contextualization that will have remained hidden to other readers—just as if the sentence in question had been “My name is Slim Shady,” different paratexts would have come into play for different fan groups. Beyond this, Mann’s *Doktor Faustus* serves as a lucid example of intertextuality in literary works in their literary and multimediated context: “the life of the German composer Adrian Leverkühn as told by a friend,” as the subtitle of its English translations goes, is an adaptation of the Faust motive—the selling of one’s soul to the devil for earthly talents, powers, or knowledge—that spans through all forms of textuality in European literature and storytelling, beginning with the late medieval German myth via Goethe’s *Urfaust* to Bulgakov’s *Macmep u Mapzapuma*, poetry (Heine’s *Der Doctor Faust*), theatre such as Paul Valéry’s fragment *Mon Faust*, music by Berlioz, Wagner, Liszt, and the *Einstürzenden Neubauten*, filmic adaptations, including Murnau’s *Faust: Eine Deutsche Volkssage*, to comic supervillains such as DC Comics’s *Felix Faust*, to name only a few.¹ Beyond such direct adaptations, the Faust motive resurfaces in a plethora of popular texts including George Lucas’s *Star Wars*. Yet, Mann’s *Doktor Faustus* is not only part of an intertextual web; it also, like Mann’s preceding work, is based on an ironic gesture of the narrator, the by now familiar Serenus Zeitblom, which takes back the narrative and the pretense of representing the real; a gesture

in Mann's work that according to Adorno (1991) reflects the crisis of the narrator in the modern novel as a direct consequence of the proliferation of new modes and media of representation, namely, film (see also Benjamin 1983). The difference between intertextuality in mediated and literary texts is thus one of degree rather than kind. For both sets of textuality, the crisis of the text (in its boundaries at the point of production) is thus the crisis of the narrator as literary and actual figure: the author him- or herself.

The fan scholar, coincidentally, is thus no more or less an "apprentice chef" than the philologist. Both rely on intertextual knowledge to interpret text and context. To the degree that the fan text is constituted on the level of consumption, the reading position of the fan is actually the premise for identifying the text and its boundaries—rather than to an apprentice chef, the fan scholar compares to a restaurant critic, who to do his job also needs to know how to cook.

On a wider point, our reflections of what constitutes a text coincide with the critical reflections on authorship and textuality in structuralism and post-structuralism. The study of fans further underlines a process of growing intertextuality, multimediated narrative figures, and multiple authorship that has eroded the concept of the author that, as Barthes (1977) notes, reached its zenith in the formation of high modernity as the culmination of a rationalist, positivist capitalist system. It is indeed Barthes's analysis of Balzac's *Sarrasine* that accurately prefigures the condition of textuality as decentered and refocused on the level of the fan/reader I have sought to describe here:

A text is not a line of words releasing a single "theological" meaning [. . .] but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash[. . .] A text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations, dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author. The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. (Barthes 1977, 146–48)

If the poststructuralist turn in Barthes's work furnishes us with a conceptual basis for the study and analysis of fandom, it is his earlier work and structuralism in general that allowed cultural studies to extend the study of interpretation and meaning beyond literary texts. As Eagleton notes re-

sentfully (1996, 192), “structuralism had apparently revealed that the same codes and conventions traversed both ‘high’ and ‘low’ cultures, with scant regard for the classical distinction of value.” When Eagleton laments the disappearing boundaries between *Coriolanus* and *Coronation Street*, he has thus already identified the guilty party. Eagleton’s critique of course fails to acknowledge that the formation of structuralism was itself a reaction to changing forms of textuality that much of literary theory had been unable to address, continuing the study of literary texts as if they existed in splendid isolation. This, however, is not to dismiss Eagleton’s concern over value out of hand. Many studies illustrate how fans themselves—from Tulloch and Jenkins’s (1995) and McKee’s (2001) *Doctor Who* to Cavicchi’s (1998) Springsteen and Thomas’s (2002) *The Archers* fans—are concerned with value. Yet, if Eagleton’s comparison between cultural studies and literary theory is ill judged for lacking recognition of the multiple methodological grounds for the rise of the former and the inability to address new forms of textuality of the latter, his warning that in its heightened emphasis on structuralist and poststructuralist approaches cultural studies has lost the vocabulary to evaluate texts is less easily dismissed.

The Death of the Author and Audience Activity

The notion of intertextuality has been pivotal to fan studies from their very beginning. Jenkins (1992, 67), in the context of new technological developments such as VCRs, explored the notion of “rereading.” Jenkins differed from Barthes’s description of the irregularity of rereadings, noting that they are commercially attractive to the television industry. This distinction between reading and rereading belongs to the less widely recognized aspects of Jenkins’s work, not least because he admits that it is difficult to maintain, since in an intertextual-structuralist approach, reading and rereading are the same phenomenon. However, terminology aside, Jenkins finds himself in fundamental agreement with Barthes’s model of reading. In his canonical work of the first wave of fan studies, a basic model of fan textuality thus emerges that has come to prevail until today. As fan studies found new conceptual grounds throughout the 1990s describing fandom as a form of spectacle and performance (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998; see also Lancaster 2001), as a manifestation of subcultural hierarchies (Jancovich 2002; Thornton 1995), or as a transitional space (Harrington and Bielby 1995; Hills 2002),

the implicit assumption remained a model of textuality that distinguished between “exceptional texts” and “exceptional readings” and that allocated the specificities of fandom on the side of the fan reader rather than the text. With few exceptions, studies of fan audiences have challenged the idea of “correct” or even dominant readings. Hence, fan studies with their critical attention to the power of meaning construction not only underline Barthes’s pronouncement of the terminal state of the modern author but also inherit its inherent ideological stance:

Once the author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile. To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on the text [. . .], literature by refusing to assign a “secret,” an ultimate meaning to the text (and to the world as text), liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases—reason, science, law. [. . .] [T]he birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author. (Barthes 1977, 147–48)

This self-proclaimed radicalism, which has marked poststructuralism and fan studies alike, fostering relativism in aesthetic judgment as radical rejection of positivism and science, is, according to Eagleton (1996), based on “straw targets.” Eagleton sees poststructuralism as rooted in the specific historic moment of disillusionment, as 1960s oppositional movements were uncovered as complicit in the very structures they set out to overthrow, hence leading to a total rejection of all structures and thus the concept of truth: “an invulnerable position, and the fact it is also purely empty is simply the price one has to pay for this” (Eagleton 1996, 125).

Here, Eagleton has a point, not least because if all that fan studies can do is to highlight the relative value of all texts and the inherent supremacy of the reader over the text, the field has reached its conceptual and empirical frontiers. What, however, are the alternatives? Fan studies drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1984) have too convincingly unmasked forms of judgment based on authenticity and originality—which persist among fans as well as scholars—as means of social and cultural distinction (and domination) for a return to textual critique on such grounds to be considered a possibility. If it is only in these terms that we can maintain a distinction between *Coriolanus* and *Coronation Street*, it is a distinction not worth making.

The Death of the Reader

If we cannot locate aesthetic value of texts in themselves—and Eagleton’s (1996) discussion of hermeneutics admits as much—yet do not want to abolish questions of value altogether, it needs to be located elsewhere. The author, pronounced dead in post-structuralism, and in any case conspicuously absent in most mass-mediated forms of textuality, has proven an unsuitable basis for textual interpretation and evaluation. However, if we can distinguish texts and meaning creation as radically as Jenkins’s (1992) distinction between exceptional texts and exceptional readings suggests, the reader appears to be a no-better indicator of the aesthetic value of texts, since exceptional readings would thus appear to be based upon forms of audience activity quite independent of texts themselves. If we cannot locate aesthetic value in the author, text, or reader alone, it is in the process of interaction between these that aesthetic value is manifested. Hence, we need to define the act of reading in a manner that may appear obvious but has profound normative consequences. By defining the act of reading as a form of dialogue between text and reader (see Sandvoss 2005b), in fandom and elsewhere, we enter into a wider social and cultural commitment as to what texts are for and what we believe the uses of reading to be.

In doing so, I want to turn to Wolfgang Iser (1971, 1978), who, like other reception theorists (see Jauss 1982; Vodička 1975), moves the focus of literary theory from the text to the processes of reading. The premise of Iser’s argument is that texts only acquire meaning when they are being read. The process of reading, however, is no simple realization of prepacked meanings controlled by the author, but rather an interaction in which the structures and figures of the text collide with the reader’s (subjective) knowledge, experiences, and expectations, all in turn formed, we may add, in an intertextual field. In this process of dialogue between text and reader, meaning is created as the reader “concretizes” the text. Hence Iser focuses on textual elements of indeterminacy that only come to life through the interaction with the reader: textual gaps and blanks. In contrast to hermeneutical approaches, including the work of Ingarden (1973), who similarly speaks of “spots of indeterminacy,” textual gaps have no theological, metaphysical function but are constituted and filled in each individual act of reading. In their recognition of the absence of inherent meanings and universal aesthetic value, Iser and fellow reception theorists thus actually share fundamental assumptions with Barthes’s

work. Yet, in contrast to the poststructuralist approaches to textuality that have given birth to fan studies, Iser establishes a firm basis on which the aesthetic value of a given text can be assessed. According to Iser, the act of concretization is underscored by readers' inherent striving to "normalize" texts. The notion of normalization is in turn linked to textual gaps: in their attempt to concretize textual gaps, readers are required to draw on their own knowledge and experiences—on what Jauss (1982) has described as "horizon of expectation." It is therefore an inherent aspect of all ideational activity to align the Otherness encountered in the text, its alien elements, as closely with our past experience as possible. If we are successful, the text is fully normalized and "appears to be nothing more than a mirror-reflection" of the reader and his or her schemes of perception (Iser 1971, 9).

We must not, as Eagleton does, confuse Iser's observations with normative claims. Eagleton denounces normalization as a "revealingly authoritarian term," suggesting that a text should be "tamed and subdued to some firm sense of structure" as readers struggle to pin down "its anarchic 'polysemantic' potential" (1996, 71). Eagleton's adventurous reading itself tests the boundaries of polysemy, as in fact, Iser argues the opposite: normalization is an inherent aspect of cognition and all ideational activity, but one that the text can evade. It is precisely the ability of a text to avoid normalization in which its aesthetic value lies. While readers strive to normalize texts, the question is to what extent texts will let them do so. If a text is readily normalized, it "seems trivial, because it merely echoes our own" experience (Iser 1978, 109). Conversely, those texts that profoundly contradict readers' experiences and thus challenge our expectations require a reflexive engagement that reveals "aspects (e.g. of social norms) which had remained hidden as long as the frame of reference remained intact" (Iser 1978, 109).

In this formulation of aesthetic value as defamiliarization lies a profound challenge to mediated textuality and fan texts in particular. The obstacles to normalization in literary texts, such as *Doktor Faustus*, are rooted in a range of narrative and metaphorical techniques that depend on defined boundaries at the point of production—and hence the persistence of, if not the author, then at least his or her chosen narrative form. In mediated texts, as I have argued above; these boundaries are eroded. As the object of fandom corresponds with a textual field of gravity, rather than a text in its classical sense, readers gain new tools to normalize texts and to reconcile their object of fandom with their expectations, beliefs, and sense of self. As

the fan's semiotic power extends beyond the bridging of textual gaps to the inclusion and exclusion of textual episodes, fan readers exclude those textual elements that impede the normalization of the text and fail to correspond with their horizon of expectation (see Scodari 2007; Johnson 2007). It is thus that Elvis can be claimed as an object of fandom by white supremacists and black soul singers alike (see Rodman 1996), that sport teams serve as spaces of self-projection to fans with varying habitus, beliefs, and convictions (Sandvoss 2003), and that Springsteen fans find themselves in his lyrics (Cavicchi 1998). These fan texts are void of inherent meaning and thus no longer polysemic, but what I have described elsewhere as "neutrosemic" (Sandvoss 2005a)—in other words, they are polysemic to the degree that the endless multiplicity of meaning has collapsed into complete absence of intersubjective meaning.

In all conceptualizations of fandom spanning from the early work of Fiske to the present day, fandom as a form of audienceship has been defined by its use: as a tool of pleasurable subversion, as the rallying point of communities, as focus of audiences' own textual activities or performances, serving a range of psychological functions or as semiotic space of narcissistic self-reflection. Yet, in this emphasis on audience activity, fan studies have neglected the act of reading as the interface between micro (reader) and macro (the text and its systems of production).

If aesthetic value is based on transgression and estrangement, the reading of fan texts strives for the opposite: familiarity and the fulfillment of expectations. Iser's work translates thus into a fundamental question in the study of fan texts: can the reader survive the death of the author? The fate of the author and reader are rather more intertwined than Barthes suggests; the process of reading as an act of communication spans like a line between two poles—one depends on the other. When the author is eradicated from the text, when all gaps disappear, the meaning that fans create is no longer based on reading but on audience activity. However, the disappearance of the author and fundamental redrawing of textual boundaries at the point of consumption are rarely complete, as is evident in fans' frequent sense of disappointment with their fan texts. Most texts—mediated or literary—can neither be fully normalized and thus emptied of all alien elements, nor truly fantastic, evading all forms of concretization. The extent to which (fan) texts thus reflexively challenge our perception is a matter of degree and one that requires a different answer in each and every case of text-reader interaction.

Two conclusions follow. First, fandom as a mode of reading sits uneasily with the aesthetic principles of reception theory. It constitutes a particular form of engagement with the text that presupposes familiarity and in which our expectations are more rigid, our determination to construct meaning in reference to the function of fandom greater than in other processes of reading. However, it does so in relation to no specific texts, but applies across the spectrum of textuality from romantic poetry to television cartoon programs. We can judge a text's aesthetic value thus only in relation to its reader.

In turn, this means that manifested in the act of reading, aesthetic value nevertheless persists and remains a category worthy of exploration in all forms of textuality from literary to fan texts. It is admittedly a functionalist definition of value and one that Eagleton (1996) dismisses with the same vigor as he attacks poststructuralism. While the latter is disregarded for its hollow political gesture, the functionalism of Iser faces the opposite charge: according to Eagleton (1996, 71), the value of estrangement is rooted in a "definite attitude to the social and cultural systems [. . .] which amounts to suspecting thought-systems as such" and is thus embedded in liberalism. This much is true—and it is equally true that those who do not share such a broad vision of emancipation through communication, those who do not share a belief in the necessity of reflexive engagement with our social, economic, and cultural norms and conditions may quickly dismiss such aesthetics, however curious a position this may be for anyone with the loosest affiliation to the Enlightenment project, not least those drawing their conceptual and ethical inspiration from Marxism—cultural studies and Eagleton included.

Yet this is precisely the lesson that emerges from the study of fan texts and my attempted synthesis between cultural studies and literary theory: the empirical study of fan audiences over the past two decades has indisputably documented the absence of universal and inherent aesthetic values of texts. However, to remain true to its own roots, our discipline needs to find new vocabulary and concepts to analyze aesthetic value in its function: the process of reading. Here, studies of fan audiences can learn as much from literary theory as vice versa: in a state of constant audienceship in which we consume mediated and fragmented texts and reconstitute textual boundaries in the act of reading in an intertextual field, we need to formulate aesthetic categories that avoid the absolutism of traditional textual interpretation as much as the relativism of poststructuralism and deconstructionism. Aesthetic value can thus neither be an objective category with what have been unmasked to

be subjective criteria; nor can we afford the aesthetic (and ultimately social and cultural) indifference of conveniently abolishing aesthetics by relegating them to a subjective category with subjective criteria. Instead, the synthesis of fan studies and reception aesthetics enables us to explore aesthetics as a *subjective* category with *objective* criteria. In doing so, fan studies will not avoid ridicule for analyzing texts and their audiences that to some appear trivial; but it will move further towards exploring why fan texts mean so much to so many people and the meaning of this affective bond between text and reader in a mediated world.

Note

1. For a critique of intertextuality, and Kristeva's work in particular, see Stierle (1996).