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Conference Report

Sources of Historical Fan Research

ABSTRACT

The workshop “Sources of Historical Fan Research’s Self-Image, 1860–1920,” organized within the framework of the DFG (German Research Foundation) research project “Fan Mail to Danish Film Stars in the 1910s: Exploring the Agency and Practices of Early Film Fans,” followed the project’s first conference in October 23-25, 2024 (cf. Eltrich 2025). The focus of the day was the exploration of various methodological approaches to researching historical fan cultures. A central challenge stems from the study of audiences whose members have long passed away and were rarely included in official archival practices.

KEYWORDS

historical fandom, 1860 fan mail, fan studies, methodology, fan letters

AUTHOR

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Since research in fan studies tends to focus on contemporary fan cultures, much of its data consists of interview material, participant observation in situ, and field notes gathered in online spaces. However, when attempting to research historical fan cultures, one must not only identify alternative sources but also adapt traditional research methods and grapple with archival gaps and ethical questions.

The workshop “Sources of Historical Fan Research,” held on May 9, 2025 at the Erich Auerbach Institute at the University of Cologne, aimed at broadening the field’s scope accordingly. Speakers from Germany and abroad were invited to present innovative approaches of investigating historical fandoms. The event was linked to the broader research project “Fan Mail to Danish Film Stars in the 1910s: Exploring the Agency and Practices of Early Film Fans,” funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG). The workshop also served as an extension of a university course that had been taught by the event organizers Stephan Packard and Stephan Michael Schröder as a cooperation between the Institute for Media Culture and Theatre and the Department of Scandinavian and Finnish Studies at the University of Cologne. As the organizers explained, the invited speakers were not asked to deliver traditional academic lectures but rather to reflect on their working methods and research approaches.



Diana W. Anselmo (Institute for Technology and Architecture, ISCTE, Lisbon): “Technologies of Intimacy: Film, Photography and Early Female Audiences”

Anselmo presented her research on fan scrapbooks (cf. Anselmo 2023) created by moviegoing girls during the rise of Hollywood’s star system in the 1910s—an underexplored primary source. These scrapbooks, which Anselmo finds in private collections, at women’s colleges, in municipal historical societies, and even on eBay, are multilayered multimedia artifacts. They often contain personal photos, diary entries, pressed flowers, and newspaper clippings, offering unique insight into the emotional bonds between fans and stars as well as their personal collection and individual knowledge.

Anselmo’s analysis of the tone and content of fan mail revealed that early Hollywood stars were seen as surprisingly approachable. Moreover, the letters suggest that female nonconformity, kinship, and sa-

me-sex and queer attraction played significant roles in historical fan cultures. Anselmo's work not only diversifies fan research but also contributes to a more inclusive history of film reception.

Annie Fee (University of Copenhagen): “Putting Fan Letters to Work: What Addresses Reveal About Working-Class Female Film Fandom in Interwar France”

Following Anselmo, Annie Fee introduced a mapping technique she used to study female moviegoers in 1920s Paris (cf. Fee 2015), focusing on their motivations and everyday interactions with movie culture. By triangulating data from fan letters, film programmes, and the 1925 Paris census (including names, birth dates, occupations, and household data), Fee traced the cinema habits of women in the 18th arrondissement—a working-class, ethnically diverse area with the city's highest concentration of cinemas.

Her research highlights the aspirations of trade union members, schoolgirls, sales clerks, and seamstresses, some of whom wrote to actress Sandra Milovanoff, well-known for her movie role in the series *Les Deux Gamines* (1921). The letters not only included praise and requests for autographs, but the girls also attached photos of themselves in order to have Milovanoff evaluate their own acting prospects. However, as Fee made clear, this exchange of pictures could also be read in a more erotic manner. Fee also uncovered cinema's role as a site for political engagement, where labor disputes and strikes were organised—events in which these young women actively participated.

Vanessa Ossa (Cologne Game Lab): “Origins of Marvel Fandom”

After the lunch break, the workshop's perspective shifted to more recent histories. Vanessa Ossa discussed her research on the Marvel fandom. Despite the comic book series' success, Ossa identified a surprising gap in the archive: although the comics can be found and read online on the Marvel website, the archived materials do not include paratexts such as fan letters, fan club addresses, advertisements, or the *Bullpen Bulletins*. This news and information page featured career developments, awards, and miscellaneous news from the Marvel community, including the prestigious “Stan's Soapbox” column. In this column, Marvel's creative head, Stan Lee, reflected on the Marvel philosophy, entertainment news, theories of storytelling, and even sociopolitical issues.

The legacy of the comics is thus being told without the dialogue that once shaped the connection between editors and readers—dialogue that was invoked, for example, when editors polled readers about title preferences (*Spider-Man vs. The Amazing Spider-Man*). Readers also sent mail to correct or criticize the comic book staff by pointing out errors, e.g., when Spider-Man had been drawn wrong. Ossa concluded that by deliberately omitting this social content, Marvel is shaping—and perhaps even reducing or quietly erasing parts of—its own history. As the project is still in its early stages, Ossa plans to investigate this aspect further.

Vera Cuntz-Leng (Department of Media Studies, Philipps University of Marburg): “Fleeting Fictions”

Vera Cuntz-Leng continued the discussion of archival practices. In her presentation, she shared insights from her long-term monitoring of fan fiction platforms online. Fan fiction and the platforms that host it are usually created and maintained by non-professionals. But even if hosted by a company, they are the



subject of shifting user trends: While certain platforms have grown and some fan fictions have become seminal within their communities, others—such as MySpace, LiveJournal, Dreamwidth, and fanfiction.de—have become nearly obsolete. This decline is evident in their shrinking user bases and decreasing numbers of published works.

There are various reasons why authors delete their fan fiction. Occasionally, authors remove their fan fiction from platforms in preparation for publication. Some authors wish to dissociate from the material itself, while external factors—such as legal threats or developments in the source texts—can also play a role. For example, when J.K. Rowling, the author of *Harry Potter*, one of the most dynamic fandoms—publicly expressed anti-trans views, this prompted not only an exodus of fans from the fandom but also the deletion of fan fictions, as fans chose to sever their connection to the author. These developments do not only affect the fan fiction community. The deleted fan fictions leave gaps in the archive that change the research situation, e.g., by making it more difficult to trace trends and aesthetic developments in fan fictions retrospectively.

Sophie G. Einwächter (Department of Media Studies, Philipps University of Marburg): “Archives of Everyday Life: How Fan Cultural Sources Help Us Trace the Short-Lived Footprints of Popular Culture”

The workshop concluded with Sophie G. Einwächter’s presentation. Although working with more recent fan cultures from the 1980s onward, Einwächter identified similar challenges as scholars researching earlier periods. Popular culture becomes ‘historical’ rather quickly, leaving scholars dependent on ephemeral, unofficial archives.

Einwächter highlighted the role of fans as self-appointed archivists, especially in the absence of institutional preservation despite commercial success (cf. Einwächter 2015). For cultural studies scholars, for example, it can prove challenging to get insight into the look and feel of some of the TV shows popular in the 1980s, as not all of them have been digitized. However, she found openly accessible clips on privately-run fan websites, which had digitized VCR recordings. These “Autonomous Archives” or “Community Archives” (cf. Moore/Pell 2010; Gilliland/Flinn 2007) often rely on affect, media engagement, and niche interests by fans rather than academic rigor. Even Amazon.com emerged as a surprising archive. User reviews for the DVD of the discontinued series *Moonlight* (2007-2008), for example, preserved not only purchasing patterns but also emotional responses to the show’s cancellation, offering a lens into a phenomenon that Rebecca Williams (2015) calls “post-object fandom.”

Conclusion

The workshop highlighted the shared methodological challenges in reconstructing the reception practices of fans—whether the sources are 40 or 140 years old. Archival work that is concerned with these kinds of cultures is inherently fragmented and paradoxical: it suffers both from the absence of material and the overabundance of unstable digital content. Fan studies aiming at the exploration of historical reception must thus develop new source bases and research strategies, while expanding its understanding of cultural memory to include unintended or non-traditional archives. The upcoming anthology, *Admirers, Fanciers and Devotees: The Early History of Fandom* (2026), edited by Daniel Cavicchi and Stephan Michael Schröder, promises to be an important next step in this evolving field.

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