"Bitches Ain't Gonna Hunt No Ghosts": Totemic Nostalgia, Toxic Fandom and the *Ghostbusters* Platonic

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Abstract

In March 2016, the trailer for Paul Feig's *Ghostbusters* reboot debuted online and suffered the unfortunate accolade of being the most disliked trailer in YouTube history. Popular news media, including professional, pro-am, and amateur commentators, picked up on the resulting online kerfuffle as clear indication that there is something rotten in the state of fandom. Feig himself frequently turned to the echo chamber of social media to denounce fans as "some of the biggest arseholes I've ever met in my life". Addressing fans that singled out the reboot as "ruining my childhood," Feig poured fuel on the fire by criticising such a perspective as merely the product of "some whacked-out teenager," overdramatic, pathological and, perhaps more pointedly, "toxic". In so doing, Feig—and, by extension, the cast of the *Ghostbusters* reboot—replicated and re-activated traditional stereotypes of *the fanboy*—living in his mother's basement and obsessing over trivial entertainment.

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This article takes the claims of "childhood ruination" seriously to examine what is at stake for fans of the original *Ghostbusters* film. Despite the organs of online media heavily criticising fanboys as misogynistic relics and sexist heathens, often in aggressive ways, I argue that fans' affective, nostalgic attachment to the first *Ghostbusters* film—the "primary cinematic text" (Bernard, 2014)—forms a crucial component of fans' "self-narratives" (Hills, 2012) and "trajectories of the self". By drawing on empirical work on "nostalgic narratives" conducted in the psychology field, I argue that it is not simply toxicity that drives these fans to defend the fan-object from being colonised by an invading text, but, rather, what I am terming as *totemic nostalgia*, a form of protectionism centred on an affective relationship with a text, usually forged in early childhood. Threats to the *Ghostbusters* totemic object, then, "can thus be felt as threats to these fans' self-narratives" (Hills, 2012, p. 114).

Keywords

Toxic fan cultures; ghostbusters; totemic nostalgia; gender; reboot (Source: Unesco Thesaurus).

"Ninguna vieja va a cazar fantasmas": nostalgia totémica, *fandom* tóxico y los Cazafantasmas

Resumen

En marzo de 2016, el avance de la nueva versión de los Cazafantasmas de Paul Feig debutó en línea y sufrió el desafortunado honor de ser el avance más detestado en la historia de YouTube. Los medios de comunicación populares, incluyendo los comentaristas aficionados, semiprofesionales y profesionales, observaron a partir del escándalo en línea resultante que había una indicación clara de que existe algo podrido en el estado del *fandom*. Feig recurrió frecuentemente a la cámara de eco de las redes sociales para denunciar a los fans como "de las personas más imbéciles que he conocido en mi vida". Dirigiéndose a los fans que calificaron a la nueva versión como una "arruina infancias", Feig le echó leña al fuego al criticar esta perspectiva como el simple producto de "un adolescente demente", sobreactuado, patológico y quizás, más explícitamente, "tóxico". Al hacerlo, Feig — y, por extensión, el reparto de la nueva versión de los Cazafantasmas — replicó y reactivó los estereotipos tradicionales del fan que todavía vive con su mamá y que se obsesiona con el entretenimiento trivial.

Este artículo toma con seriedad las declaraciones de la "infancia arruinada" para examinar qué es lo que se encuentra en juego para los fans de la película original de los Cazafantasmas. A pesar de que los órganos de los medios de comunicación en línea critican a los fans como reliquias misóginas y paganos sexistas, a menudo de manera agresiva, lo que argumento es el apego afectivo y nostálgico de los fans a la primera película de los Cazafantasmas — el "texto cinematográfico primario" (Bernard, 2014) — lo que forma un componente crucial de las "autonarrativas" (Hills, 2012) y "trayectorias del yo" de los fans. Basándome en trabajos empíricos sobre "narraciones nostálgicas" realizadas al campo de la psicología, argumento que no es simplemente toxicidad lo que impulsa a estos fans a defender el objeto del fan de que sea colonizado por un texto invasor, sino más bien lo que llamo *nos-*

talgia totémica, es una forma de proteccionismo centrado en una relación afectiva con un texto, usualmente forjado en la primera infancia. Las amenazas al objeto totémico de los Cazafantasmas, entonces, "puede percibirse como amenazas a las autonarrativas de estos fans" (Hills, 2012, p.114).

Palabras clave

Culturas de fans tóxicos; Cazafantasmas; nostalgia totémica; género; nueva versión (Fuente: Tesauro de la Unesco).

"Nenhuma mulher vai caçar nenhum fantasma": nostalgia totêmica, *fandom* tóxico e os Caça-Fantasmas

Resumo

Em março de 2016, o trailer da nova versão dos Caça-Fantasma de Paul Feig debutou online e sofreu a infelicidade de tornar-se o trailer mais detestado na história do YouTube. A mídia popular, incluindo os comentaristas amadores, semiprofissionais e profissionais observaram, a partir do escândalo online resultante, que havia uma indicação clara de que existe algo podre no estado do *fandom*. Feig recorreu frequentemente à câmara de eco das redes sociais para referir-se aos fãs como "alguns dos maiores imbecis que conheci na minha vida". Dirigindo-se aos fãs que qualificaram a nova versão como uma "destrutora da infância", Feig avivou o fogo ao criticar tal perspectiva como o produto meramente de "um adolescente doido", sobre atuado, patológico e talvez, mais explicitamente, "tóxico". Ao fazê-lo, Feig — e, por extensão, o elenco da nova versão dos Caça-Fantasmas — replicou e reativou os estereótipos tradicionais do fã que ainda mora com a mãe e que se obceca com o entretenimento trivial.

Este artigo encara com seriedade as declarações da "infância arruinada" para examinar o que é que está em jogo para os fãs do filme original dos Caça-Fantasmas. Apesar de que os órgãos da mídia online criticam os fãs como relíquias misóginas e pagãos sexistas, com frequência de maneira agressiva, o que argumento é o apego afetivo e nostálgico dos fãs ao primeiro filme dos Caça-Fantasmas — o "texto cinematográfico primário" (Bernard, 2014) — o que forma um componente crucial das "auto narrativas" (Hills, 2012) e "trajetórias do eu" dos fãs. Baseando-me em trabalhos empíricos sobre "narrações nostálgicas" realizados no campo da psicologia, argumento que não é simplesmente toxicidade o que impulsiona estes fãs a defender o objeto do fã de ser colonizado por um texto invasor, mas sim o que eu chamo de nostalgia totêmica, é uma maneira de protecionismo focado em uma relação afetiva com um texto, usualmente forjado na primeira in-

fância. As ameaças ao objeto totêmico dos Caça-Fantasmas, então, "podem sentir-se como ameaças às auto narrativas destes fãs" (Hills, 2012, p. 114).

Palavras-chave

Culturas de fãs tóxicos; Caça-Fantasmas; nostalgia totémica; gênero; nova versão (Fonte: Tesauro da Unesco).

Ghostbusters in (Development) Hell

Released on June 8, 1984, the original *Ghostbusters* film swiftly attained the status of *cult blockbuster* (Hills, 2003) and became a cultural cornerstone, especially for first-generation fans. The success of the film, both in critical and commercial spheres, spawned a transmedia franchise comprised of multiple incarnations, such as: animated TV spin offs, *The Real Ghostbusters* (1986–1991) and *Extreme Ghostbusters* (1997); a bevy of video games, the most popular among fans being *Ghostbusters: The Videogame* (2009), which featured the canonical quartet, Bill Murray, Dan Akroyd, Harold Ramis, and Ernie Hudson, lending their voices and likenesses for the in-game avatars, and which Akroyd described as "essentially the third film" (Tibbetts, 2014); several comic book series procured by different license holders (Marvel, IDW); various Lego "adaptations" (Wolf, 2014), such as the iconic Ecto-1 mobile and the equally iconic Hook and Ladder firehouse; several themed Universal Studio attractions, including *Streetbusters* (1991), a seasonal "transbranded" (Hills, 2015) mash-up, whereby the Ghostbusters team tackle the menace of Tim Burton's Beetlejuice; and, of course, a clutter of "non-narrative" elements (Harvey, 2015) and paratextual frames (board games, toy ranges, associated paraphernalia). Yet, despite the panoply of adaptations and reconfigurations within what we could term, in deference to Will Brooker (2012), the *Ghostbusters matrix*, the original film remains firmly ensconced as the primary text—the source—from which secondary transmedia vehicles are launched. Within the hierarchy of texts, then, the original Ghostbusters film stands at the summit.

A sequel, *Ghostbusters II*, was released in 1989 but, for many fans, failed to re-capture the spirit of the 1984 zeitgeist. During the 1990s, reports began circulating about a third feature film. Written by Akroyd and *Coneheads* collaborator, Tom Davis, and allegedly titled *Ghostbusters 3: Hellbent*, the script featured the original team being transported to an alternative New York. Bill Murray, however, refused to sign on and the plans entered, rather appositely, that liminal non-space known in the industry as "development hell." Fast-forward to 2011, and Akroyd, again championing the potential for further franchise development, appeared on *The Dennis Miller Show* and

promoted another script, *Ghostbusters: New Blood*, which would pass along the torch to a new generation (the "new blood" of the title):

> For a while, the concept for the third movie was that we'd cleaned up all the ghosts in New York and the Ghostbusters were out of business. But that's not where we should be going. We should have new Ghostbusters doing their thing, being handed the torch by the old. Once people start thinking along those lines, we're going to be able to keep it alive. (Akroyd, as cited in Wallace, 2015, p. 222).

After over a decade of false starts and promises, the passing of Harold Ramis (who played spores, moulds and fungus hobbyist, Egon Spengler, in both Ghostbusters films) led to the demise of a third live-action film as a viable option. Coupled with Murray's continuing refusal to don the proton pack once more, the Ghostbusters film franchise seemed to be nothing but a spectre, haunting the fringes of popular culture but, effectively, trapped in limbo. Understanding that replacing both Murray and Ramis with new actors would be unacceptable for many Ghostbusters fans—called "ghostheads," in fan vernacular—*Bridesmaids* director, Paul Feig, suggested a new strategy as a way out of the liminal dungeon: to reboot the *Ghostbusters* film series with a new team, all of them female, and narratively disconnected from the canonical original. Choosing to wipe the slate clean in order to "begin again" (Proctor, 2018), however, raised the hackles of many a ghosthead, who then turned to web 2.0 to vent their chagrin at what was perceived to be a disgraceful violation of what I term the *totemic object*, that is, a primary text that opens up a mnemonic conduit to an idealized history of "nostalgic narratives" (Vess et al., 2012) comprised by "intimations of selfhood" (Jenkins, 2004) and "trajectories of the self" (Giddens, 1991).

In March 2016, fan outrage reached an apex in the days following the online debut of the *Ghostbusters 2016* trailer (hereafter GB '16), which swiftly became the most disliked film trailer in YouTube's short but impactful history. Online news media picked up on the story and orchestrated a cultural firestorm, primarily hinged on a minority cluster of misogynist comments, often given oxygen by Feig's discursive interventions on social media. Fandom is "home to some of the biggest assholes I've ever met in my life," said Feig, and publicly accused avid fans on social media for ped-

dling "vile misogynist shit" (as cited in Child, 2015, n.p.). In the process, Feig singled out those fans that vilified the reboot as ruining one's childhood, a common (fan) complaint when a totemic object is threatened by external incursion:

> The biggest thing I've heard for the past four months is, "thanks for ruining my childhood." It's going to be on my tombstone when I die. It's so dramatic. Honestly, the only way I could ruin your childhood is if I got into a time machine and went back and made you an orphan. I figured it's some wacked out teenager. (Feig, as cited in Riley, 2016)

This article takes the claims of childhood ruination seriously as a way into theorizing what I mean by "totemic nostalgia," which is non-toxic, and the way in which this might extend into malicious "toxic fan practice." I show that fans' nostalgic narratives, formed by an intense and affective relationship with the totemic object are valuable "texts" in their own right and help shine a light on resources of "meaning-making" drawn upon and produced by fans (Routledge, et al. 2012). GB '16 provides an apposite case study to critically examine the formation of nostalgic narratives centred on a totemic object.

This article does not intend to cheerlead or chastise these behaviours as this would undoubtedly lead to unhelpful binaries between "good" and "bad" ways of being a fan. Following Hills' suggestion in the opening pages of the seminal *Fan Cultures*, I refuse to construct "decisionist" narratives "which attack or defend sections of fandom" and usually "hinge on making political decisions as to the 'goodness' or 'badness' of fan cultures" (Hills, 2002, p. xii). Instead, I adopt a suspensionist position,

> which refuses to split fandom into the "good" and "bad" and which embraces inescapable contradiction (the ugly?). This means approaching the contradictions of fan cultures […] as essential cultural negotiations that can only be closed down at the cost of ignoring fandom's cultural dynamics. (Hills, 2002, pp. xii–xiii)

The article is split into two sections, the first of which addresses and theorises totemic nostalgia as a form of "risk management" and a source of self-narrative, self-continuity and ontological security (Hills, 2002, 2012).

The subsequent section considers the way in which totemic nostalgia may negatively blossom into bullying, harassment and abuse in online spaces which, in turn, provides grounds for theorising toxic fan practices. In the conclusion, I raise important questions regarding research practices and consider a future for fan studies that grapples with the barbed wire of online fan cultures.

Totemic Objects, Nostalgic Narratives, and Ontological Security

According to Svetlana Boym (2001), nostalgia

> is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy. Nostalgic love can only survive in a long-distance relationship. A cinematic image of nostalgia is a double exposure, or a superimposition of two images—of home and abroad, past and present, dream and everyday life. The moment we try to force it into a single image, it breaks the frame or burns the surface […] the sentiment itself, the mourning of displacement and temporal irreversibility, is at the very core of the modern condition. (p. xiv)

Historically, nostalgia has been viewed, as with fandom, as a pathological condition, a "disease of an afflicted imagination" (Boym, 2001, p. 4) that produced a smorgasbord of symptoms and ailments: "nausea, loss of appetite, pathological changes in the lungs, brain inflammation, cardiac arrest, high fever […] marasmus and a propensity for suicide" (p. 4) as well as "a lack of manliness and unprogressive attitudes" (p. 6). Coined by Swiss doctor Johanne Hofer in 1688, nostalgia was a "curable disease" and required medical intervention using leeches, opium, "warm hypnotic emulsions" and, more radically, "by inciting pain and terror" (pp. 3–5). Beginning in the seventeenth century, Europeans frequently reported "epidemics of nostalgia" (p. 6), which eventually spread across the Atlantic and into North America during the Civil War. In this way, nostalgia was thought of as an enormously negative influence, a debilitating psychological and physiological malaise to be purged from the self.

The contemporary view on nostalgia is, thankfully, less dramatic, virulent, and pathological. Recently, a programme of research in the psychological sciences "advances the notion that nostalgia, a sentimental longing for the past, is one resource that enables people to attain and maintain the perception that their lives are meaningful" (Routledge, et al. 2012, p. 451). Rather than a "curable disease," then, nostalgia is an affirmative psychical bulwark, a "meaning-making resource" and a "resource for the self" (Vess et al., 2012 p. 281) both of which counteract "self-discontinuity and restores self-continuity" (Sedikides, et al. 2015, p. 52). This emergent research provides a valuable framework for theorising (fan) nostalgic narratives as augmentations and aggregations of the individual self, of "the potent connection between reflecting nostalgically on the past and maintaining a meaningful conception of one's current life" (Routledge, et al. 2012, p. 454). However, rather than a neat binary fragmenting past and present selves of childhood and adulthood cracked in half, nostalgia represents a dialectical confluence of temporal identities. Put simply, it is "a mode of temporal thought" that collapses distinctions between past and present. Generally speaking, nostalgic narratives "feature the self as an active and central player" and "carries a predominantly positive affective signature" (Vess et al., 2012, p. 274). Empirical evidence demonstrates that nostalgia is associated with "affectively warm concepts" (Vess et al., 2012, p. 274), such as childhood (whether romanticized, imagined or not), and provides a route to understanding the way in which fans' affective relationship with a totemic object can function as an ontological buffer against perceived threats and external incursions. This requires some explaining.

In what is perhaps the most positive, and indeed highly romanticized, representation of fans in media culture, the documentary film, *Ghostheads* (Mertens, 2016), is a sincere and earnest look at a select group of Ghostbusters fans for which the franchise property is a fundamental aspect of their everyday lives. One fan, Tom Gerdhardt, recounts a mundane existence working in a local pizzeria that he remains committed to in order to provide food and essentially produce for his family:

> Everyday I'm here, at my job, I'm nobody, I'm an average Joe. On weekends when there's events we want to partake in and I'm in my

gear? I forget about work and I don't feel like I'm a nobody that I feel all week long. When I throw on my flight suit, then I'm truly me. (as cited in Mertens, 2016)

Here, Tom manoeuvres between different binary selves: between the "false" identity of the blue collar, pizza dude, and his "true" identity as a passionate and dedicated ghosthead. Like a superhero, Tom's working-class self is transformed into his secret identity as a ghostbuster! Of course, we shouldn't take this as literal, but as one of the ways that fandom might provide "repertoires of identification" (Jenkins, 2004, p. 7) and demonstrative of "the affective power of primary identification" (p. 30) anchored to the totemic object. Indeed, Gerdhardt's "self-narrative" (Hills, 2012) is not simply enmeshed with the fan-object alone, but intrinsically connected to childhood memories of viewing the original film with his grandfather, who has since passed away from lymphoma cancer. In one particularly charged scene, Gerdhardt visibly struggles to contain a cascade of emotion and affect hinged on nostalgic memories, which is worth quoting at length:

> Not having my parents and that it was something I shared with my grandfather and I held him very dear…it was something that we shared together, it wasn't something that I watched with my mom, she was always so busy and I was getting weekend Dad… it was the first thing we did together and we bonded, shared a laugh… birthdays and holidays I always got something Ghostbusters… the cartoon [The Real Ghostbusters] was a huge hit… that was my thing and he was sitting there with me, eating his oatmeal cookies, dunking 'em in tea… it was something that I bonded with him and that, because I shared it with him and it was so big to me as a kid, it stuck with me […] it wasn't so much the film itself, but who I shared it with which made me love it even more because that person enjoyed it with me. (as cited in Mertens, 2016)

A recovering alcoholic, Abigail Gardner, explains that Ghostbusters helped maintain her sobriety: "In order to not drink, I started watching *Ghostbusters* and I found something in that movie that gave me hope and gave me purpose and meaning and a reason to live" (as cited in Mertens, 2016). For Abigail, the traditional route provided by Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) didn't work at all, but "the affective power of primary identification" cen-

tred on the Ghostbusters franchise became a therapeutically valuable tool for wellbeing and self-improvement even, to some extent, transcendence.

Performing fandom, at least in these (mediatized) cases, is not simply a routinized fun-filled extravaganza, but intrinsically bound to personal contexts, to everyday realities and "trajectories of the self." For these (admittedly few) fans, all of which are "flooded with affect" (Hills, 2015, p. 100), *Ghostbusters* is so much more than frivolous, disposable entertainment; it is, quite simply, one of the most important cultural text of their lives and a discursive foundation in the architecture of self-narrative. As Hills (2012) explains, "fans' sense of self-identity is so firmly enmeshed" with the fan-object of choice, that they may lionize the primary text to such an extent that "potential threats to textual authenticity" can become sites of intense negotiation and defensive bulwarking (p. 115). These threats, then, may constitute grounds for issues of ontological security, and, from this perspective, defensive manoeuvres seek to process existential anxieties "back into a sense of security" (Hills, 2012, p. 115). Drawing on Anthony Giddens' sociological work, Hills (2012) borrows the concept of ontological security to explain this element of fan identities as "the psychical attainment of basic trust in self-continuity and environmental continuity" (p. 113). Thus, threats to totemic objects "can thus be felt as threats to these fans' self-narratives" (Hills, 2012, p. 114).

Taking the importance of fan affection seriously, and the way in which the totemic object forms a crucial aspect of identity formation and self-narrative, it surely makes sense to move towards a nuanced understanding of fan complaints that a new text, such as *Ghostbusters 2016*, is perceived as a colonizing threat to trajectories of the self, not because this is somehow atypical, but precisely because these kinds of criticisms and complaints are par-for-the-course in various fandoms where "there is a high degree of protectiveness, with fans policing the boundaries diligently" (Lubernis & Larsen, 2012, p. 9). One such mode of protectionism, as we have seen, centres on the totemic object as a deified (and reified) icon of childhood, a nostalgic conduit with which to view the formation of social identity, formative memory and personal history. One of the ways that fans communicate this

is by painting a portrait of a childhood that has been soiled and ruined by an interloper text and that this produces grounds for "self-discontinuity," that is, "a sense of disjointedness between one's past and present self" (Sedikides et al., 2014, p. 52).

Of course, fans that communicate their vexation in such a manner are well aware that their childhood is safe and secure in real terms. Symbolically, however, the release of a new Ghostbusters film, and one which wipes the slate clean through the process of rebooting, threatens the sanctity of the totemic object and, by extension, the memories associated with such an important and fundamental aspect of growing up. Yet this kind of performative protectionism was singled out for opprobrium and mocking by news media and industry stakeholders, including director Paul Feig, who laid the foundations for growing *fan-tagonism* (Johnson, 2007) between first generation Ghostheads and producers. Rather than breaking down the boundaries between fan and producer, then, industry stakeholders set out to reinforce such boundaries, which can be viewed as a form of *outer fandom othering*—that is, a discursive admonishment that performs the same kind of work as inter- and intra-fandom othering, but, instead, emanating from industry. One commenter on Reddit addresses these issues in a post explaining—and defending—the totemic object through the lens of nostalgic ruminations on childhood when the infant self was first spellbound by affect.

To begin with, the commenter (tagged as crazylegsmurphy) accuses Paul Feig of deliberating provoking fans with bile and vinegar:

> One of the phrases you'll often hear when referring to some unwanted, or mistreated reboot, is "childhood ruined!" Recently, the cast and crew of this film have decided to insult people who utter these words. They argue that it is technically impossible to retroactively ruin a childhood and that anyone who says that are sad, basement dwelling assholes who need to get friends… [As Feig said] All those comments— "You're ruining my childhood!" I mean, really. Four women doing any movie on earth will destroy your childhood? I have a visual of those people not having a Ben [Falcone], not having friends, so they're just sitting there and spewing hate into this fake world of the internet. I just hope they find a friend. (crazylegsmurphy, 2016, para. 2–3)

Feig's comments are certainly caustic and rely on traditional stereotypes of the *fanboy*, famously captured in William Shatner's oft-cited "get a life" *Saturday Night Live* sketch (Jenkins, 1992).[2] Fans who claim that childhood have been "retroactively" ruined are "sad, basement dwelling assholes who need to get friends" and stop "spewing hate into this fake world of the internet." What this arguably demonstrates is that fans that summon visions of childhood purity and innocence as intrinsic components of self-hood are lampooned and taken literally rather than figurative. This, I argue, is indicative of a wider cultural perspective that fundamentally misinterprets and misunderstands the affective mechanics that fuel the engine of fandom.

Crazylegsmurphy then moves to share his own experiences by sharing his self-narrative and affective experience with the canonical Ghostbusters:

> As a kid, I remember seeing Ghostbusters in the theatre with my brother. I sat there on the edge of my seat, eyes wide as the hubcaps of Ecto 1, while my brother covered his eyes in fear. From that day on Ghostbusters was one of the coolest things I had ever experienced in my life…For months after, my brother and I would outfit our backpacks with everything from tent pegs, to various gadgets around the house. We would spend hours busting ghosts in the dark and scary places of our house, our neighbourhoods and our minds. The rigged together proton packs we had gave us the confidence to be able to explore and deal with the fears and reservations we had in our lives. (crazylegsmurphy, 2016, para. 5–6)

Here, crazylegsmurphy briefly illustrates how much the original Ghostbusters was, and remains, tethered to self-continuity and self-narrative; of hanging out with his brother, and constructing a story-world environment within which to imaginatively play with home-built proton packs and backpacks filled with tent pegs as props for identity formation and self-narrative anchored to the totemic object. This psychical, retroactive and nostalgic image is so beloved and so "flooded with affect" that any incursion from external forces becomes a veritable attack on such a memory despite its instrumental power being symbolic. Crazylegsmurphy is well aware that his childhood has not, of course, been ruined "retroactively"

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2   Other cast members joined in vilifying fans as basement dwellers and asexual "man-babies," including Melissa McCarthy and Dan Akroyd.

and that the new Ghostbusters has not "literally travelled back in time and messed with my family… so I am now slowly fading from existence in family photos" (crazylegsmurphy, 2016, para. 13). By playfully, whimsically— and definitely sarcastically— conjuring the image of another 1980s totemic object, *Back to the Future* ("slowly fading from existence in family photos"), crazylegsmurphy demonstrates the way in which his self-narrative is perhaps enmeshed with franchise films of the 1980s as emblematic of the primary locus of childhood. The point, however, is that nostalgic narratives, such as crazylegsmurphy's, function as defensive mechanisms built against a symbolic force that threatens the fan's structure of meaning and the "predominantly affective signature" of the fan totem: "a well-structured, orderly, and predictable world helps provide existential meaning, and that *a lack of structure erodes meaning*" (Routledge et al., 2012, p. 454, my italics). It is not difficult to view fans' recruitment of nostalgic narratives as a mode of meaning preservation and to offset self-discontinuity and ontological anxieties anchored to the totemic object.

Proclamations of this type, then, of childhood ruination, are metaphorically mapped onto affective and cognitive memories as vital and instrumental aspects of the totemic object. Following Richard Jenkins (2004), "self-identity is a distinctively modern project within which individuals can reflexively construct a personal narrative for themselves which allows them *to understand themselves as in control of their lives and futures*" (p. 35, my italics). Threats to the totemic object, then, can thus be felt as threats to self-identity, self-continuity, and self-narrative. This presents grounds for addressing and redressing ontological insecurities with totemic nostalgia, discursively marshaled as a bulwark to protect the endangered object, as an elemental site of memory and identity formation, from external incursion. As Vess et al. (2012) emphasize, nostalgia operates as "a potential mechanism through which individuals buttress the self against a variety of threats" (p. 275).

To return to the beginning of crazylegsmurphy's self-narrative, the fact that Ghostbusters 2016 is a reboot of the franchise, as opposed to a continuation, also opens up the potential for backlash induced by totemic

nostalgia. Although reboots have existed in comic books for decades, Christopher Nolan's *Batman Begins* "successfully resurrected the Batman brand from the cinematic graveyard" (Proctor, 2012, p. 1) by wiping the slate clean and beginning again. Other franchise properties successfully followed suit, such as the Bond reboot *Casino Royale* (2006) or the Abrams' helmed *Star Trek* (2009), but the frequency with which this "strategy of regeneration" (Proctor, 2017) has been evoked since is often criticized as evidence of Hollywood's creative inertia. And while Batman and Bond were primarily viewed as "necessary" incursions to update and refresh these ailing—and, indeed, *failed*—franchise properties, the economic triumph of Abrams' *Star Trek* was met by a subsection of outraged fans who decried that this parallel spin on a beloved (totemic) classic was "Trek in name only" (Proctor, 2018, forthcoming), thus leading nostalgic fans to resist and repeal the reboot as inauthentic, illegitimate and explicitly *non-totemic*.

Regarding *Ghostbusters 2016*, this is addressed by *The Guardian's* geek critic, Ben Child (2016), who asks if the film might well be "an unfortunate victim of Hollywood hitting peak reboot?"

> For while not all remakes and reworkings of classic fare attract brickbats from hardcore geek culture vultures, the very term "reboot" itself has come to denote Hollywood staleness, the inability of studios to see much-loved properties as anything more than "franchises" designed to be dusted off every 20 years and regurgitated for a new generation of filmgoers too young to remember the last time out. And it is this reading of the term that might just, very unfortunately and unfairly, have done for the new *Ghostbusters* movie. (Child, 2016, para. 3)

Considering this, then, I argue that, for the nostalgic fan, usually a first-generation ghosthead, rebooting is nothing less than a wen on the face of the totemic object, and wiping the slate clean in order to begin again threatens the integrity of the primary and primal textual experience, thus setting the stage for backlash and defensive posturing. Given that so-called "reboot culture" is often heavily castigated by different kinds of fans belonging to different fan cultures opens up a further point of analysis. For if fans lambasted Sony Pictures for rebooting Spider-Man so soon after Sam Raimi's trilogy—and, of course, being rebooted again by Marvel Studios in *Captain*

America: Civil War (2016) and *Spider-Man: Homebound* (2017)—then we can see that one of the ways that fans criticized the Ghostbusters reboot is not "simply" or "only" about gender. This is not to suggest that totemic nostalgia cannot mushroom into full-blown toxicity, as we shall see below, or that misogynist fans do not exist: for if "everyone is a fan of something," then it stands to reason that the ideological co-ordinates of fandom—which are messy and plural rather than a singular body politic—must indeed include reactionary actants. To conclude this section, I will now define *totemic nostalgia*.

Taking all this into account, *totemic nostalgia* refers to a type of fan protectionism, which is not toxic, centred on an affective relationship with a fan-object, usually forged in childhood. As a result, a totemic text becomes profoundly enmeshed as a resource of meaning-making, of self-identity, self-narrative and self-continuity. Symbolic threats may emerge that threaten the sanctity of the totemic relationship between self and object, and can induce nostalgic narratives as a method of meaning preservation as a regulatory and restorative balm (Sedikides et al., 2015). These threats may take multiple forms, as we have seen, including the strategy of rebooting, whereby a new text "writes over" an extant narrative totem to begin again in a distinct spatiotemporal location. Such "overwriting," which is metaphorical, runs the risk of contaminating the totemic object and pushing it into liminal space wherein the status of the text-identity becomes imperiled by a "structure of undecidability" (Lucy, 2004, pp. 147–151) between totemic object and non-totemic reboot, both of which bear the same title, which thus requires shifting the pronoun to differentiate between the two (GB '84 and GB '16). Totemic nostalgia is thus "a mourning of displacement and temporal irreversibility" (Boym, 2001, p. xvi).

Rebooting also threatens to cast the totemic text into "non-memory" (Harvey, 2015), especially if it forges a new continuity. Fans intimately understand that this is figurative, rather than literal, but this provides a valuable insight into the ways in which semiotic conflicts can be felt as real threats to self-hood that must be defended at all costs:

> Not because [fans] are somehow neurotic or pathological, but rather because these fans' sense of self-identity… is so firmly enmeshed with the narratives of their beloved [fan-object]. Threats to [totemic] narrative can thus be felt as threats to these fans' self-narratives. (Hills, 2012, p. 114)

A totemic object, which may shift in accordance with one's affective drive and fannish object of choice, can be understood as "a pattern of religious veneration—nominating and worshipping some sort of religious icon or set of religious tenets which is *then held up as beyond critique*" (Lubernis & Larsen, 2012, p. 121, my italics). Yet, while the undergirding of religion here is problematic, the sentiment is apposite.

The next section moves to consider the ramifications of totemic nostalgia when it mushrooms into harassment, bullying and other types of toxic fan practices.

The Anti-Social Network and Toxic Fan Practices

Over the past two decades or so, the rapid ascendancy and acceleration of domestic computer technologies, especially Internet capacities, has opened up a discursive space within which fans can immediately respond to the vagaries of popular culture. The proliferation of social media platforms provides a figurative bullhorn for fans to celebrate and commemorate, or criticise and commiserate, the creative decisions of the entertainment industrial complex. As Jenkins (2006) emphasizes, the affordances provided by new media proliferation means that "once silent and invisible" fan subcultures "are now noisy and public" (p. 19). And while many mainstream critics view this digital sea change as facilitating and producing a "new breed of fandom" (Proctor, 2016), it is more than likely that the rise of computer-mediated technologies (CMC) "has brought these consumers from the margins of the media industry into the spotlight" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 257).

> This visibility of fans online—populating news groups, online fora [and social media], video sharing portals, and fan created websites—has led to some inside and outside academia to misinterpret contemporary fan practices as a consequence of technological change […]

> [yet] these forms of fan productivity precede the proliferation of the Internet into a widely available house-hold communications technology. (Sandvoss, 2011, p. 51)

At the same time, however, fans *have* become "more visible, more mainstream and more normal" (Duffett, 2013, p. 15), and this has opened up a new series of debates hinged on the performances and behaviours of fans that have been viewed by mainstream commentators, especially journalists (whether professional, amateur or pro-am) as confrontational, unacceptable and, indeed, toxic.

Fan quarrels and conflicts are not a new phenomenon, either, but the migration from the (analogue) margins and into the (digital) mainstream has exposed the various operations of fan cultures to the larger online public encapsulated by blogs, vids, tweets, comments, and social media, for example. Marginal fan practices, then, have since entered the wider discursive array that has, in turn, produced grounds for "new" stereotypes, such as the wave of discourses centred on so-called "fan entitlement," a description that Hills (2016) claims is an "updated and retooled" (p. 271) version of William Shatner's oft-quoted "get a life" sketch (Jenkins, 1992).

Writing for *Forbes*, Scott Mendelson (2013) claimed that online fans often suffer from a severe case of delusional fan entitlement and that this is given life by the affordances provided by cyber-space. Fans "take to the internet to absolutely demand that they get their way as a matter of moral principle, damn the business logistics or any other logical obstacles in their way" (Mendelson, 2013, n.p.). For geek critic, Devin Faraci, such entitlement convincingly demonstrates that "fandom is broken." He writes that,

> Fandom has always been a powder keg just waiting for the right moment to explode, and that moment is the ubiquity of social media. Twitter is the match that has been touched to the powder keg and all of a sudden the uglier parts of fandom—the entitlement, the demands, the frankly poor understanding of how storytelling and drama work—have blown the fuck up. (Faraci, 2016, n.p.)

Yet, while it is certainly the case that the Internet has opened up spaces and opportunities for audiences to speak back to industrial power; this is not as new a phenomenon as such critics clearly believe.

Consider the fan outrage centred on the hiring of Michael Keaton for Tim Burton's Batman adaptation in the late 1980s. Fearing a return to the comedic Camp Crusader of the 1960s TV series—the ultimate "bad" bat object for many during the period—, instead of the "adult ethos" (Brooker, 2000) represented by the "grim and gritty" wave of comics and graphic novels, such as Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*, fans responded negatively and orchestrated a campaign of protest against Warner Bros. Keaton's previous roles in, respectively, *Mr. Mom* and *Beetlejuice* were read intertextually as clearly evincing that the path the studio were treading led towards horse-play and hilarity, not deadpan realism. Batman co-creator, Bob Kane, publicly denounced Keaton, which only poured fuel onto the flames of fan discontent, and reached a crescendo on September 11, 1988 when the *Los Angeles Times* ran an article about the controversy thus turning "under-the-Hollywood-radar fan grumbling into a corporate headache" (Weldon, 2016, p. 161). "The caped crusader may turn out to be a wimp," wrote Kathleen Hughes, adding that "Hundreds of passionate letters have poured into the offices of publications that cater to comic book fans and collectors" (Hughes, 1988, para. 7). Anxious about the fate of their multi-million-dollar production, Warner Bros. "kicked into crisis mode" and "[f]or the first time in Hollywood history, a studio launched a campaign targeted to the hard-core fan base of an existing property with the express purpose of mollifying their fears" (Weldon, 2016, p. 160).

What marks this (offline) episode differentially from the (online) cacophony of recent years is that the bullhorn was held, not by fans themselves, but by agents of journalism. Without the Kathleen Hughes article, such outrage would arguably be contained with the fan ghetto and may not have spilled over into the mainstream. What this example hopefully demonstrates is that fans have traditionally criticised the creative decisions of the culture industries using methods available to them during the period, but this has accelerated and proliferated in the digital age. The next

wave of bat-fan criticism centred on Joel Schumacher's *Batman and Robin* (1997), a film that "alerted Hollywood to the influence, baleful or otherwise, of the chatroom nerd" (Brooker, 2012, p. 56). By attaching one's fandom to a particular idealized vision of Batman—a "bat-platonic ideal of how Batman should really be" (Medhurst, 1991, p. 161)—often hinges on totemic nostalgia, but which can mushroom into full-blown toxicity exemplified here by homophobic rants against both Joel Schumacher's sexuality and the camp crusader Batman. Despite the multiple versions and variations of the character that populate the shifting spectrum of the Batman matrix, some fans' totemic nostalgia pivots on the character as a "one-note, rigid pillar of militarised heterosexuality" (Brooker, 2012, p. 176).

From this perspective, then, the opportunities provided by computer-mediated communication are neither specifically new nor old, but a spectrum of affordances that might well seem, especially to those from the outside looking in, as if they are entirely new ways of being a fan. Rather than view fan behaviours, performances and creative, transformative production (e.g., fan fiction, filk, vidding) as binaries between an "old" offline world and "new" online territories, it would be better to view the contemporary landscape as a complex marriage between past and present. In the age of convergence culture, fans are implicated in the collision between new and old media (Jenkins, 2006) and, by extension, new and old ways of "doing" fandom.

So, then, while cyberspace has certainly led to a mainstreaming of fan cultures, such heightened visibility publicises a wide variety of fannish behaviours for online publics and, perhaps more pointedly, news media to scrutinise, apperceive and cherry-pick readily available comments for wider dissemination, some of which forces fandom, warts-and-all, into the media spotlight. In recent years, news outlets have responded to "the dark side of geek culture," where fans are implicated within a noxious tsunami of "toxic technocultures" (Massanari, 2015). As with human existence in general terms, all fan cultures engage in what I term *toxic fan practices* (which is not the same as saying that all fans engage in such practices):

> [b]ullying, conflict and aggression occur in all corners of the world-
> wide web, and fandom is no exception […] The types of bullying,
> marginalizing, and jockeying for position that occur in fandom are
> mirrored in most other groups, online and face to face. (Lubernis &
> Larsen, 2012, pp. 117–118).

This, of course, is not to condone such hostilities, especially when aggression takes a nefarious turn and snowballs into a full-frontal assault on individuals and groups, but to recognise that fan cultures, like all communities, "are based *on the necessity of Othering and distinction*" (Sandvoss, 2011, p. 62, my italics). Aggression "serves instrumental functions within a group by helping to enforce norms, build cohesion, and defend against outsiders" (Lubernis & Larsen, 2012, p.121), as well as erecting defensive ramparts against (fan) insiders that hurl cannonballs at one's fan totem(s). This can be benign and innocuous, especially during the throes of debate, a prevalent characteristic across fan cultures generally. But this can also flare up into heated and hostile skirmishes, thus producing grounds for toxic fan practices to emerge.

According to Adrienne Massanari (2015), online spaces are heavily gendered "hotbeds of misogynistic activism" (p. 2). Focusing on #Gamer-Gate, perhaps the most notorious and widely publicised toxic flame war in recent years, which included rape and death threats, Massanari argues that social media, especially Reddit, actively encourages patterns of toxic technocultures "to take hold and have an outsized presence on the platform" through programming structures, such as "Reddit's design, algorithm, and platform politics", all of which "implicitly supports these kinds of cultures" (Massanari, 2015, p. 1) and "underscores the gendered nature of online discourse generally and the ways in which it can serve as a barrier to entry for women" (Massanari, 2015, p. 5). Leaving aside the problematic binary between "geek masculinity" and femininity for a moment, and which I shall return to in the conclusion, Massanari sees toxic technocultures as coalescing

> around a particular issue or event, but tactics used within these cul-
> tures often rely heavily on implicit or explicit harassment of others
> [and] demonstrate retrograde ideas of gender, sexual identity, sexua-

lity, and race and push against issues of diversity, multiculturalism, and progressivism. (Massanari, 2015, p. 5)

The problem, however, is that the term *toxic technocultures* would surely include these items whether stemming from fandom or from wider online discourse communities (so-called alt-right supporters of President Elect, Donald Trump, for example). In this light, the term *toxic fan practices* can be considered as a sub-category of Massanari's toxic technocultures, whereby a spirited debate centred on, for instance, a totemic-object or, as the case may be, the creative decisions of industrial stakeholders, that then spirals into cyber-violence committed by fans. Saying that, Massanari's definition works equally for a theory of toxic fan practices.

For so-called Gamer-Gaters, not all of who engaged in toxicity, the totemic object is not simply *a text*, as with GB '84, but *the medium* of video games. Following the flashpoint of #GamerGate—a malicious blog post written by Eron Gjoni, "the jilted ex-lover" (Massanari, 2015 p. 6) of feminist game designer Zoe Quinn—users turned to the affordances of social media to roundly criticise Quinn based on the contents of said blog post wherein she was accused of "cosying up" to games journalists in order to receive favourable reviews of her game, *Depression Quest* (DQ). This was later shown to be fallacious, but by that time, Quinn "became the centrepiece and token figure in a hateful campaign to delegitimize and harass women and their allies in the gaming community" (Massanari, 2015, p. 6) and orchestrated "a disturbing hub of discussion" (Massanari, 2015, p. 7) in online spaces. Discursively constructed by both mainstream media and academics as a binary gender war between, on the one hand, 'Gamer-Gaters', usually viewed as Men's Right's Activists (MRAs) or aficionados of "red pill" philosophy—the latter named after a scene in *The Matrix* (1999) when Morpheus offers Neo a choice between red "truth" and blue "illusion" pills—and, on the other, feminist activists, or so-called "social justice warriors" (SJWs), a derogatory term referring to politically correct, left-wing bullies, special agents of the Orwellian thought police. The former claimed that the debate was centred not on the harassment and bullying of women, but principally about ethics in journalism—given life by Gjoni's initial blog post—while the feminist contingent argued that it was about challenging a widespread

resistance to the diversification of (masculine) gaming culture (Todd, 2015, p. 66). Thus, Gamer-Gaters' totemic nostalgia fixated on an encroaching feminisation of gaming culture that, if successful, would colonise and damage the medium of video games itself. As Todd (2015) explains,

> [t]he GamerGate controversy represents a small group of gamers who do not want to see the culture of gaming change; however, their actions have brought attention to an important cultural shift that is occurring in the gaming community. Not only have these attacks on women heightened concerns related to how gaming is being portrayed via the media (which in turn affects public perceptions of gaming) but they have also effectively demonstrated the extent to which sexism and misogyny have become culturally embedded over time. (p. 66)

Following Massanari (2015), then, the controversy can be viewed as an ideological discourse community wherein conflict centred on Gamer-Gaters totemic nostalgia pitted against feminist criticisms of a masculinized gaming culture. By attempting to raise defences against feminist incursion to protect the medium from politically correct machinations, (some) users' online performances mushroomed into toxic fan practice.

Bearing this in mind, then—and with the caveat that this synopsis lacks comprehensiveness—I argue that Ghostbusters fans, male and female, who decried the reboot as "ruining their childhood" or criticised the manoeuvre as a way to defend the fan-totem from external assault, are forms of totemic nostalgia: benign and innocuous rather than explicitly toxic. However, a panoply of media reports indicate that totemic nostalgia is nothing but thinly veiled misogyny against the all-female Ghostbusters team, who represented, as with #GamerGate, franchise feminization and colonisation.

Consider James Rolfe's (2016) *Cinemassacre* video, where he summons forth his own totemic nostalgia to explain why he won't be viewing (or *re*viewing) GB '16. Over six minutes and thirty seconds, Rolfe painstakingly offers his opinion via what he calls a "non-review" and why he believes GB '16 is box office poison and an affront to fans who wanted nothing less than the return of the proton-pack wielding quartet to pass the torch to a new generation of Ghostbusters as a continuation, not a reboot:

> The original—which we now have to call the 1984 *Ghostbusters*—is a timeless classic. It's one of the greatest comedies ever made. This one, judging from the trailers—it looks awful… If this is the Ghostbusters movie that nobody wanted, then the box office should reflect that… I know I'm biased; *Ghostbusters* is something a lot of us grew up with. We wanted to see the original cast back together one last time while they were still alive and maybe introduce a new younger cast, win us over, and then pass it on for a new generation. (Rolfe, 2016)

Here, Rolfe specifically emphasizes that his criticism is not related to a new Ghostbusters team per se, but pivots on the fact that this would be designed as a reboot and thus erase the original team from textual memory. Indeed, Rolfe is fine with passing the torch to a new, younger generation, a point that aligns with Akroyd's original plans for a third movie, which I touched upon in the introduction. Paraphrasing Medhurst, then, Rolfe's complaint about a new, rebooted Ghostbusters hinge on *an ecto-platonic ideal of how—and who—the Ghostbusters should really be.*

Yet Rolfe's totemic nostalgia was interpreted by over eighteen online media accounts as clear evidence of fan misogyny. Writing for online site, *Medium*, intersectional feminist and pop culture critic, Rachel Banks, described Rolfe as a "bigot," and accused him for "spewing his sexist bile in a video on his Cinemassacre YouTube channel" (Banks, 2016, para. 2). Maggie Serota of *Death and Taxes* equated Rolfe with Nazi fascism, writing that his video is the "pop-culture critical equivalent of when our grandpas all stormed Normandy and kicked Hitler in the dick" (Serota, 2016, para. 1). Rolfe is "a whiny man-baby", states Alex Bruce-Smith (2016); a "limp dick loser," tweets Devin Faraci (as quoted in Banks, 2016)[3]; a "hideous buttbleach," and a "chodeface", according to Courtney Enlow (2016) of *Pajiba. The Atlantic's* David Sims (2016) described the anti-Ghostbusters brigade as a movement, "not unlike the GamerGate nightmare that continues to plague the world of video-games" (n.p.). I could go on.

The point here is that there is no evidence of misogyny in Rolfe's video, but the way in which he explained his refusal to watch GB '16 by evoking nostalgic narratives is interpreted axiomatically as misogynist. Other

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3   Devin Faraci has since stepped down as editor-in-chief of Birth, Death, Movies due to allegations of sexual assault.

outlets picked this up, sometimes in unhelpful ways by returning a volley of mud across the cyber-space peninsula, but what is interesting and worthy of further analysis is a YouTube video produced by Comic Book Girl, 19 (henceforth CBG 19), who expressed similar concerns about the reboot, but who did not receive online admonishment. In the video, "Why Being Honest about Ghostbusters is Important," CBG 19 (2016) proposes that the "cultural firestorm" was primarily orchestrated by Sony Pictures, including Paul Feig, as a marketing strategy to deal with the fallout from the debut of the trailer. "I'm going to try to be the voice of reason in an insane world," says CBG 19 (2016). The backlash was so pronounced that "Sony was freaking out, they were deleting, like, negative comments left and right, it was like super-nuts". As with Rolfe, CBG 19 explained that her disappointment stemmed from a dislike of reboots and remakes,

> Because I've just seen so many bad ones…what Hollywood is doing is they're being very, very lazy. They're taking a movie that worked, redo it now and take the same beats, paint-by-numbers movies, there's no real heart to it, nobody really cares…it just feels like a bunch of executives need to make money, and that's why they're making this. (CBG 19, 2016)

This chimes with Ben Child's thoughts (quoted above) regarding a widespread cultural dislike of properties undergoing reboot surgery. But one of the reasons why CBG 19 may not have been vilified as with Rolfe is because she is a woman, and if women disliked the GB '16 trailer, then the cultural firestorm is shown to be more akin to a small brush-fire, rather than a movement analogous with the #GamerGate controversy.

This is not to imply that some anti-fans of GB '16 do not engage in toxic fan practices. Many comments on YouTube and, by extension, other social media platforms, are certainly hateful, but the clearest example of toxicity emerged on Twitter following GB '16's theatrical release when Leslie Jones, who plays non-scientist character, Pattie Tolan, in the film, was victimised by a subsection of the Twitterati. Users insidiously (cyber) assaulted Jones in multiple ways, including racist and misogynistic tweets, and by creating a new Twitter account in the actor's name in order to push homophobic content as if written by Jones herself. This eventually led to

Jones publicly announcing that she was closing down her social media account to prevent further toxic assaults and rampant racism.

But even this is too neat and tidy; some Tweeters challenged Jones' character in GB '16 because they felt that the representation therein was nothing less than racial stereotyping, a form of toxicity in itself. So, then, in relation to fan practices more generally, this leaves researchers with an aporia to puzzle over, which I highlight in the conclusion that follows.

Conclusion

This article only pretends to scratch the surface of the perils and pitfalls of computer-mediated communication circulated around GB '16. Although a raft of online news articles focus on—and sensationalise—fan narratives contained in discursive assemblages, such as Twitter, YouTube comment sections, blogs and social media more generally, this should not be taken axiomatically by scholars either inside or outside fan studies, but should be viewed more as a rallying cry for a testing of methodological instruments and new ways of examining the online discursive elements of fan practices and behaviours. And while I wouldn't necessarily expect journalists, whether professional or not, to implement as rigorous a methodology as scholars, I would certainly expect researchers to excavate online data in ways that test the claims of journalistic discourse, which have either cherry-picked from the readily available array of online chatter to provide evidence or, worse still, without providing any evidence whatsoever. As I have shown elsewhere (Proctor, forthcoming), by scraping data from an entire hashtag on Twitter—in this case the hoopla surrounding #blackstormtrooper, which was cited as evidence of fan racism across multiple news sites—one may be presented with a rather different narrative than that represented by internet news outlets. In this case, I found little evidence of overt racism, but, rather, a litany of hostilities from so-called progressive and left-leaning commenters towards an imagined, and imaginary, corpus of racist fans. Again, I am not suggesting that fan cultures are utopian communities—far from it—nor am I asking that researchers build a firewall around fans to protect them from misinterpretation.

Fans themselves also challenge journalistic discourses either by rebuking claims of misogyny, racism and other toxic practices, thus aiming to shield fandom from enemy agents, or to conduct research themselves to challenge and criticise journalists—and other fans—for cherry-picking data and effectively manufacturing an online controversy for marketing ends.

For instance, Red Letter Media's (2016) satirical comedy series, *Scientist Man*, posted a video on YouTube and included analysis of scraped data from the comments' section beneath the debut trailer, the source of many online reports and recriminations, and used computer software to excavate the discursive assemblage. "An environment has been artificially created in order to make you look like a sexist for thinking that the film is a big piece of shit," says Scientist Man (Red Letter Media, 2016). But within this biting satire, Scientist Man moves to "look at some facts", which is worth quoting at length:

> The original upload by Sony of the first Ghostbusters trailer is currently [at the time of writing] at 38,045,852 views [not as many of the famous cat-playing-a-keyboard skit]. Out of all of those views, a total of 1256,434 have hit the like or dislike button […] That being said, 96.7 % watched the trailer but did not click like or dislike […] Because of all the down votes and sporadic nasty comments about women and feminism in general, a narrative began to form: about childish, racist man-babies were hating on the trailer, mainly because of women and one minority [Leslie Jones]. It seems to be all anyone was talking about; new story after news story began to pop up. People thought that these underpaid actors were being attacked by overweight, virginal, Ku Klux Klan, basement dwelling toy-unboxers members, they rushed to their defence to expose the justice that was being done. 0.73% of the people that watched the trailer commented. Ergo, 99.27% of the people who watched the trailer did not comment… If every one of those comments were sexist and misogynistic, it would still be less than 1%. Those comments were mixed in with many comments… 12% of comments were specifically anti-women […] .08 % felt the need to make a nasty anti-women comment […] 99.92% did not make a negative or anti-woman comment. (Red Letter Media, 2016)

Of course, I am not suggesting that this be accepted as gospel either, but it certainly throws a spanner in the wheel of discourse and challeng-

es researchers to drill down deeply into the discursive assemblage rather than wholeheartedly embrace online chatter both axiomatically and a priori. What this convincingly demonstrates is that the so-called Ghostbuster "controversy" needs to be addressed, redressed and examined rigorously in order to delve beneath the surface to excavate the discursive array across multiple sites.

Clearly, conflict and combat is a part and parcel of being a fan and this has proliferated and accelerated courtesy of the affordances of new media technologies. But how many fans are we talking about? What methodologies have we at our disposal to determine whether or not individual commenters are fans at all, or are they just general "trolls" that take great pleasure in sparking off a flame war while rubbing their hands with glee from behind the safety of their screens, protected by anonymous avatars, and pseudonymous personas and identities? For if the mainstreaming of fandom generally speaking has "transformed and facilitated the whole phenomenon of fandom" (Duffett, 2013, p. 236), then the issues of respondent selection "is compounded if the research is pursued online" (p. 257). Rather than the "embarrassment of riches" that Jenkins prophesized (1992), researchers need to ask themselves: "Am I gathering data from actual fans?" (Duffett, 2013. p. 256).

> Research conducted over the Internet is convenient, but respondents can easily disappear, it allows for various kinds of deception, and it can hide the variable contexts of everyday fandom… Forum membership and comment-posting does not necessarily signify fannish dedication although it can act as a sign of it. (Duffett, 2013, p. 256)

The internet has assuredly opened up a series of issues that need to be addressed by scholars, and "researchers are latterly grappling with a potentially indefinite range of communicative behaviours… influenced by any number of contextual variables" (Hardaker, 2010, p. 217). What we also are seeing quite frequently is a discursive demonization of fanboys and a continuing, and reductive, binary war between masculinity and femininity. In an interview, Dan Akroyd perpetuated negative stereotypes of fans and claimed that there are "millions" of "obese, white men between 50 and 60 who are active [Ku Klux Klan] members, or members of the Aryan nation"

(as quoted in Daly, 2016, para. 4). This is patently absurd, but the way in which the statement represents critics of GB '16 as right-wing men is not only problematic, but, I would argue, clearly fallacious.

In general terms, the binary between men—fanboys—and women—fangirls—is too neat and tidy, as demonstrated by Lubernis and Larsen (2012) who bravely illustrate that it is not only fanboys that are aggressive agents, but fangirls, too, thus deconstructing the reductive and simplistic binary between genders. To be sure, geek hierarchies exist (Busse, 2013)—and indeed persist—but this fails significantly in providing nuanced and complex understandings of "fandom's cultural dynamics" (Hills, 2002, p. xiii). Fanboys have engaged in Othering practices, such as the discourse around fans of, say, *Twilight* and One Direction (Jones, 2016; Proctor, 2016), for instance, whereby subsections of fangirls have been discursively constructed as "bad" fans, hysterical, unruly and "negatively feminized" (Busse, 2013). This, however, is the beginning of a larger conversation, rather than a final exclamation point. Given that sub-sections of fanboys have also been discursively constructed as "bad" fans, aggressive, inappropriate and negatively masculinized, needs to be addressed more rigorously by fan studies scholars and that fan conflicts may unfold across intersectional lines rather than (gendered) binaries.

A recent study by think tank, Deimos ("New Demos study," 2016), for instance, demonstrated empirically that hostile and aggressive online behaviours are almost egalitarian, by which I mean that both women and men engage in toxic online practices whether emerging from fandom or not. Whether the methodology employed in such case studies is suitably meticulous, especially from a scholarly standpoint, is another thing entirely, but extant academic literature from outside the fan studies discipline (for example Chisholm, 2006) has examined online "flame wars"—"vitriolic online exchanges" (Dery, 1994, p. 1)—which show that the neat separation of users into gendered compartments between angelic girls and demonic boys, both of which are infantilized, is simply parochial and simplistic. I understand that this might come across as provocative, and in some ways,

it is meant to be, but it will hopefully be viewed as it is intended—that is, as a rallying call for further critical evaluation, no matter how uncomfortable the terrain.

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