

A Defense of Theory Fandom and Anti-Fandom: *New York Times* Readers respond to  
Stanley Fish  
Alex Weintraub, FMST 085, Spring 2008

Fan Artifact: "French Theory in America" (Parts 1 and 2)

<http://fish.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/04/06/french-theory-in-america/>

<http://fish.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/04/20/french-theory-in-america-part-two/index.html?8ty&emc=ty>

On April 6, 2008, literary critic, Stanley Fish, wrote an article for the *New York Times* discussing an upcoming book about the history of French Theory in the United States in which he presents his opinion on deconstruction. In the article, he posits that the polarizing reception of French Theory is based on a false notion that deconstruction can move beyond the rhetorical sphere and into the political realm. The article received over 600 posts, some from fans of Theory and some from anti-fans. In a follow up article published on April 20, Fish defends his point against selected posters' arguments, both in favor of and against Theory. Again, the article received hundreds of posts in response. This article and the responses it garnered offer many important insights on the nature of contemporary fandom.

The article's responses provide an important study of anti-fans and how they participate in fandom. In Derek Johnson's essay, "Fan-tagonism," he characterizes the anti-fan as a fan of a text who, through aesthetic judgment, seeks to exclude parts of a text she dislikes. Johnson describes that competing opinions usually end up with the dominant tastes becoming the preferred reading.<sup>1</sup> The responses to Fish's article show just this tendency, with the majority of the responses attempting to exclude French

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<sup>1</sup> Derek, Johnson. "Fan-tagonism: Factions, Institutions, and Consitutive Hegemonies of Fandom," Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World. London: NYU Press, 2007. Pg. 289

Theory from certain disciplines or academia as a whole. One poster writes that theory “is a decent back into the cave, the end of philosophy” and that “a good dose” of Plato is in order. Another describes that “a regular dose of French theory” ruined his English major at McGill. These types of posts reflect much consistency with Johnson’s conception of the anti-fan. Instead of excluding Season 6 of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* because it was the “worst season,”<sup>2</sup> these posters exclude Theory on the grounds that it degrades their academic area of interest. This anti-fan, as the article demonstrates, is just as active and passionate as the fan of a text.

Moreover, the article’s responses and use of an online forum seem to further bridge the connections between high and pop fan activities. Like the Bachies of Roberta Pearson’ “Bachies, Bardies, Treckies, and Sherlockians,” the fans and anti-fans of theory show no substantive differences from those of mass media texts. They participate in active (and sometimes hostile) debates online and they remain very close to the texts they are fans of.<sup>3</sup> This latter point proved to be very true in the context of the Fish articles. Name dropping and quoting of authors appears to be the favorite strategy for fans and anti-fans alike. However, as was discussed throughout the course, while the activity of high fans and pop fans is very similar, their status is not. The readers of Fish’s articles reflect a very small, well-educated segment of the population. In fact, some of these well read individuals appear to be not only acafans, but also could be described as “Fishies.”

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<sup>2</sup> Johnson, Derek. “Fan-tagonism: Factions, Institutions, and Consitutive Hegemonies of Fandom,” Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World. London: NYU Press, 2007. Pg. 288

<sup>3</sup> Pearson, Roberta. “Bachies, Bardies, Treckies, and Sherlockians,” Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World. London: NYU Press, 2007. Pg. 108

On multiple occasions, the posters cited other articles or books from the author himself to help present their argument.

Finally, the article itself represents an attack on a particular fandom. Fish describes that the culture war French theory helped to entrench in the United States was based on the idea that deconstruction was political. He states this is untrue because if everything is a social construction (as Theory proposes), then it does not make sense to criticize something for being socially constructed. The impacts of this view are twofold. First, it limits the ways in which one may read and utilize theory since it can no longer move past the text to discuss broader issues. Second, it dismisses the debate going on in the responses as being predicated on simply conflating terms. As a fan of theory, I read this view as having a very real threat to theory fans and anti-fans alike. It implies that both groups are foolish for even having the debate. It logically follows that Fish, like Shatner with the Trekkies, would like fans of theory to “Get a life.”

However, Fish reduces a much larger issue surrounding literary theory and academia with the result of almost missing the point entirely. In the essay, “Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies and Community,” written for the book, *The Anti-Aesthetic*, Edward Said provides an alternate reasoning for why literary theory has been depoliticized.<sup>4</sup> First, Fish’s thesis that Theory was never political, Said would argue, is simply not true, since it began with a commitment “to pry literature and writing loose from confining institutions.”<sup>5</sup>(160) Its depoliticization, Said argues is due to the constructing of rigid boundaries between different disciplines in academia. He even cites

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<sup>4</sup> Said, Edward. “Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies and Community,” The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture. New York: New Press, 1998.

<sup>5</sup>Said, Edward. “Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies and Community,” The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture. New York: New Press, 1998. Pg. 160

Fish's own term of interpretive communities to explain that certain institutions control how one may interpret knowledge.<sup>6</sup> (164) This precedent of rigid disciplines separate from one another has created small, insular, niche audiences for very specific subjects, like French Theory. Therefore, Fish may be right in saying that Theory is not political, but not because of anything intrinsic to the texts, themselves, but because of the current imperative in academia that prevent theorists from finding connections. Fish's article is self-defeating because in saying that theory can't move beyond the text, he is perpetuating the mindset that certain fields are locked in place.

Interestingly enough, both fans and anti-fans of theory seemed to reject Fish's thesis. Dissent came from varying perspectives, depending on the reader's particular view of Theory. Some thought it granted immunity to a dangerous practice, while others were offended that Fish failed to take into account the true meaning of deconstructionism. Regardless of one's opinion, it appears that in the age of contemporary fandom, attacks on a particular fan object will not be left unanswered. At the end of the debate, one question fan studies may not be able to answer is how to classify those readers of theory who agreed with Professor Fish. Are they the true anti-fan?

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<sup>6</sup> Said, Edward. "Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies and Community," The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture. New York: New Press, 1998. Pg. 164