Fangirls in the Crosshairs
I’m angry that lazy stereotypes of a century ago continue to be cheap tabloid currency today.

By LORI MORIMOTO

In 1986, film scholar Miriam Hansen began her essay “Pleasure, Ambivalence, Identification: Valentino and Female Spectatorship” with a
short history lesson on the gendered characterization of Rudolph Valentino fans, observing that

*Never before was the discourse on fan behavior so strongly marked by the terms of sexual difference, and never again was spectatorship so explicitly linked to the discourse on female desire.*

This, Hansen illustrated through excerpts from biographies about Valentino, in which descriptions of the star were inextricably linked to his sexualized reception by women:

> "Lean, hot-eyed and Latin, Valentino was every woman’s dream…"

> "On screen and off, his smoldering glance ignited fierce sexual fires in millions of hearts…"

> "They breathed the words ‘The Sheik’ like a prayer on their lips. They tried to tear his clothes off when he left the theater…"

> "The studio telephones could not handle the thousands of calls from women. They begged for any job that would permit even a momentary glimpse of Valentino. Gladly they offered to work without pay." (p. 6)

If this was the last time spectatorship was “so explicitly linked to the discourse on female desire,” it’s only because this discourse has become the default language of female fan characterization.

Terms like *rabid* (recalling women apparently trying to tear the clothes from Valentino in a piranha-like feeding frenzy, and *hysterical* (begging for any job) are today so entwined with mass media characterizations of female fandom as to be indistinguishable from them, punctuated by a veritable banquet of frighteningly embodied behaviors—crying, screaming, throbbing, wailing.
Where celebrities struggle and fail in the high-stakes game of entertainment industry awards and recognition, the “selfie generation’s hysteria” over nothing more than than their superficial, cosmetic appeal is held responsible, as a recent article in the tellingly titled magazine *The Intelligent Life* reports. Female fans are rapacious and frenzied, a mindless throng kept in check only by the constant policing of the critically distanced journalist, blogger, or pop culture commentator.

So it was that, on the marriage engagement of *Sherlock* star Benedict Cumberbatch, whose own persona has suffered in some circles for its association with his female fans, to theater director Sophie Hunter, we were treated to an onslaught of condescending online commentary about fangirls’ presumed reactions to the news.

![Michael Hogan](https://twitter.com/michaelhogan/status/399686823187917569)

First George Clooney, now Benedict Cumberbatch. Who are middle-class women going to pretend to fancy now?

4:52 AM - 5 Nov 2014

34 RETWEETS 22 FAVORITES

![Tom + Lorenzo](https://twitter.com/tomandlorenzo/status/420267137747535362)

That shrieking wail you just heard was the internet responding to the news that Benedict Cumberbatch is getting married.

11/5/14, 9:29 AM
Fangirl tweets about Cumberbatch’s and Hunter’s engagement were quickly parlayed into “articles” on such outlets as *MTV, Time, International Business Times, Huffington Post (UK)*, and *Buzzfeed*. And, with the exception of *Buzzfeed*, which has posted on Cumberbatch-related news with a comparatively fannish voice, these pieces were patently unable to grasp the tongue-in-cheek tone of many of the tweets that comprised the bulk of “reporting” on the news. Which is not to say that all the tweets (or Tumblr posts) were tongue-in-cheek.
As might be expected when status-quo changing news occurs in the context of fandom—characterized by nothing so much as love of a thing—there were those fans who were truly dismayed, just as there were fans who were truly happy for the couple, and those who were indifferent, annoyed, or bittersweet. An entire range of responses to the news were there for the picking. Yet, what got picked, predictably, were those responses thought to reveal the extent to which, as Huffington Post so succinctly put it, “These People REALLY Aren’t Happy With The Sherlock Actor’s Wedding Plans.”

If I’m being honest, my first reaction to all of this, other than to roll my eyes so hard they threaten to pop right out of my head, is to wonder if these media outlets actually pay people to “write” this stuff—because, if they do, I have certainly missed my calling.

But when I put my fan-scholar hat on, I have one other response: anger. I’m angry that the lazy stereotypes of nearly a century ago continue to be cheap tabloid currency today. I’m angry this is a battle fangirls never can win, because pleasure, love, and closeness—taking things personally—are suspect from the start, eschewed by the more critically distant, ridiculed by anyone who doesn’t want to court association with them.
This leads me to what it is that truly angers me, and, yes, it’s anger—not dismay, not frustration, not any of those things that would distance me from what is a truly visceral reaction: that, in characterizing fangirls this way, fangirls ourselves have been robbed of any language through which to express feelings about anything.

Writing of cultural studies in 1986, Tania Modleski observed that female scholars, “denied access to pleasure, while simultaneously being scapegoated for seeming to represent it,” have no recourse within a critical framework but to accept an “adversarial position” towards popular culture. In the same way, when fangirls’ emotions are the thing that consistently brings negative attention to us from the outside, we are thrust into a position in which we are effectively prohibited from expressing all but the most measured reactions to such news, for fear of inadvertently acquiescing to a discursive framework constructed around disciplining us.

I’ve seen a range of reactions to Cumberbatch’s announcement within my small sliver of his fandom, many of which were congratulatory and happy for the couple. I’ve also seen and been told of people who have felt silenced and themselves disciplined by what might be seen—and perceived—as a kind of relentless positivity, intent on presenting a unified face to the world. Having done my time in online (Tumblr) fandom, this is something to which I’m sympathetic. But where our first inclination might be to go after fellow fans for enforcing a kind of “good” fandom, I think we might be better served by taking a step back and looking at where the desire for such a unified face originates.

We’re fangirls within a popular culture context that routinely and predictably scapegoats us for the crime of feeling. In that sense, it seems no wonder the first reaction of many is to try to present a positive, unified face to the people who would ridicule us. This is where the impetus to police fangirl reactions to this kind of celebrity news comes from, and this is what angers me.

 Fangirls are used as click-bait and turned on ourselves in a game of divide-and-conquer, all because what we love and what we do fail an arbitrary, masculinist litmus test for critical or ironic distance. And even after nearly a century, it’s a practice that shows few signs of abating.


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