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From the books to the screens, to the memes and beyond: Fans' notions of *Game of Thrones* as an adaptation

ABSTRACT

Parting from the awareness that not all consumers of US media are located within the geographical and linguistic context of the United States, this article contributes to media sociology with an approximation to the fandom of transnationally popular texts. Empirical findings presented here draw from a broader qualitative study on the reception of the series Game of Thrones *(GoT) by 21 viewers from Argentina, Spain and Germany. Here I build on participants' responses to both the original novels by George R.R. Martin and the series adaptation by HBO as distinctive media texts to explore notions of authorship, adaptation and cultural legitimacy. Given the polysemic, intertextual quality of contemporary's memetic culture, I also discuss a case of digital re-appropriation of GoT's characters within sociopolitical discourses in Argentina.*

THE RECEPTION OF *GAME OF THRONES* IN ARGENTINA, SPAIN AND GERMANY

When researching audiences, it is important to include those more difficult to find, the 'hidden' fans and members of the audience who do not necessarily produce or re-appropriate texts such as fan fiction; those who do not post on online forums or even those who do not consider themselves fans (Click et al. 2017). One reason for this is because they often represent a large group, which offers extensive, rich insights into biographies, motives and the uses of the content they engage with, including how they experience it and how that influences them (Redmond 2006; García-Rapp 2017).

The second reason for paying attention to less visible fans (or non-fans) is to counterbalance the tendency within fan studies, historically white and anglophone, to privilege certain practices, groups and objects of fandom over others due to their inherent visibility, productivity or implied legitimacy (Bennett 2014; Bury 2018). This is evident when scholars judge how 'subversive' or 'active' examined engagements are to measure its relevance as an object of study or even as objects of fandom (see also Hills 2002; Morimoto and Chin 2013). Quickly applying value judgements to justify dismissing experiences and practices as trivial, banal, normative or mainstream is neither inclusive nor conducive to our aim of understanding cultures. Rather, I acknowledge audiences' subjectivities within a dynamic, diversified media landscape and seek to theorize the popular from a diverse perspective. I highlight the relevance of user-centred perspectives where entertainment and coping with stress, pain or boredom are legitimate reasons to engage with a variety of media texts (Grossberg 1992; Jenson 1992; García-Rapp 2019). More or less active fans and viewers remind us that there is a continuum of participation and engagement (Bury 2018).

Therefore, and to address the perceived disconnectedness of studies focusing on non-English-speaking audiences and discussions of Anglo-American media, as noted by Morimoto and Chin (2013), I went to seek out voices of both female and male viewers of the series *Game of Thrones* (GoT; HBO, 2011–19) in Argentina, Spain and Germany. The study contributes to scholarship on audiences of the series in non-English-speaking contexts, as comparative studies on French and Spanish fans from 2013 (Bourdaa and Lozano Delmar 2015), as well as Italian (Spano 2016) and Brazilian audiences (Castellano et al. 2017), and the GoT's Arabic-speaking fan community on Facebook (Alhayek 2017).

GoT, HBO's most successful production ever, is an adaptation of George R.R. Martin's series of epic fantasy novels 'A Song of Ice and Fire'. It has amassed acclaim from critics and fans alike, has a strong international fan base and has turned into a cult media text, referenced in other media contexts and popular culture more widely. Taking place in a fantasy historical world where seven kingdoms fight to take the iron throne, the series is named after Martin's first of seven books: *A Game of Thrones* (1996), *A Clash of Kings* (1998), *A Storm of Swords* (2000), *A Feast for Crows* (2005), *A Dance with Dragons* (2011), *The Winds of Winter* and *A Dream of Spring* (to be released).

Here I draw from empirical data collected during semi-structured interviews with 21 German and Spanish-speaking viewers of the series (García-Rapp 2021) to focus on their understandings of authorship and fidelity as well as legitimacy and cultural value. I analyse and interpret participants' readings on the series as an adaptation, the ascribed value of the original novels, and include a typology of emerged findings, expanding on the one presented elsewhere (García-Rapp 2021). Given the polysemic, intertextual quality of contemporary's memetic culture, which the article's title also seeks to reflect, I offer a cultural approximation to a case of digital re-appropriation of GoT's characters within sociopolitical discourses in Argentina.

To finalize, I include a reflection regarding the openness, inclusivity and diversity of perspectives that we sustain within our scholarships. I connect claims to revalorize adaptations and de-privilege prose over film to my own call to challenge dominant notions around the productivity, participation, triviality or relevance of certain fans and objects of fandom.

EPISTEMOLOGICAL STANCE AND METHODS

My scholarship follows an interpretivist, constructionist approach to social reality and knowledge (Charmaz 2006; Saldaña 2009; Merriam 2009) that acknowledges the performative and processual character of social identities and roles (Goffman 1959; Garfinkel 1967). Working from a symbolic interactionist perspective of social interaction (Blumer 1962), I highlight the semiotic productivity of audiences through media texts (Fiske 1992; Thompson 1995). More broadly, my epistemology and axiology are influenced by sociology and anthropology: by the former particularly in its themes of identity and the two-way relationship between society and technology, by the latter in its cultural relativism, its fieldwork aims and the relevance of the emic perspective (Wolcott 2010; Agar 2006).

I perform data-grounded research to achieve a theoretical approximation to audiences' uses and practices (Baym and Markham 2009) based on interpretive techniques of data analysis and coding (Bazeley 2013; Charmaz 2006). In this case, the study (García-Rapp 2021) followed the qualitative research aim to understand German, Spanish and Argentinian fans' views on the series, how they made sense of their engagement and reception experiences. I performed 21 semi-structured interviews of between ten and 45 minutes long in person and over Skype. Collected data consisted of ten hours of audio material in Spanish and German. During research, broader patterns around adaptation and authorship emerged that created the need for this article. In this case, focusing on contrasting GoT's storyworld reception as book and as audio-visual production as well as on fans' notions of literature and television as distinct media forms.

Participants, nine females and twelve males, were between 24 and 34 years, middle-class, urbanite and technologically savvy. Eight viewers were from Argentina, seven from Spain and six from Germany. I started from a convenience sample by contacting acquaintances and friends to then expand the sample through snowball sampling with interviewed participants suggesting new members from their networks. Interviews were performed in German and Spanish, then transcribed in the original languages and manually coded in English first assigning descriptive and verbatim codes to tag data. Later, during second cycle coding, more comprehensive codes were applied such as code landscaping and code mapping in order to visually grasp and interpret interrelationships (Saldaña 2009).

GoT AS A DOUBLE ADAPTATION

It is known that novels' variety of incidents are favourable for televisual adaptation (e.g. Ellis 1982). Particularly in the case of GoT, the original story had a special quality useful for serialization. Key elements of this 'cine-literary television' (Hassler-Forest 2014: 162) were already inscribed in Martin's novels: its large number of characters provide a basis for several season-long story arcs, and the character-driven chapters contribute to larger plots and feed into the extensive master-narrative with few isolated sub-plots (Steiner 2015). In addition, the aesthetic sophistication and narrative complexity of the audio-visual adaptation, together with its internal realism, are distinctive elements of cinematic 'Quality TV' (Steiner 2015; Bourdaa 2014; Mittell 2006, 2015). Moreover, the experimentation in storytelling and daring violent and sex scenes are epitomes of HBO's most popular serialized productions such as *The Sopranos, The Wire* and *Sex and the City*.

According to Hassler-Forest, 'Quality TV' as a sophisticated 'meta-genre' (2014: 163) can be deemed an adaptation in itself, conjuring the aesthetics and inherent cultural value of cinema with the complex narrative structure of the nineteenth-century realist novel. At the same time, GoT bridges a historically geek, medieval fantasy cult genre with the more mainstream, realist context of HBO's most acclaimed series. The 'childish' (Bourdaa 2014: 2), playful fantasy genre is adapted for an audience in search of an authentic, adult experience. The series shines as innovative and edgy while remaining tasteful to appeal to wide mainstream audiences. In other words, GoT achieved a double adaptation; on the one hand, it presents a fantasy narrative – albeit internally realist – successfully made mainstream, and, on the other hand, it feels like a cinematic experience brought to TV (Hassler-Forest 2014).

HBO has made a name for themselves as a creative haven that provides support to writers with minimum interference. The leniency on artistic decisions awarded to 'Quality-TV' productions is built on a notion of authorship related to traditional forms of art ascribed high cultural legitimacy as theatre, international art cinema (paradigmatically, French and Italian auteur film) and literature. Marketing authorship as a marker of quality – one of the networks most successful strategies – turns the auteur to an object of cult fan engagement, together with the original oeuvre (Steiner 2015; Sarikakis et al. 2017).

Let us now turn our attention to the cultural legitimacy of media forms independent of their content. Television series are already the dominant narrative for the twenty-first century, as film was for the twentieth century, and novel had been for the nineteenth century (Hassler-Forest 2014; Mittell 2006, 2015). However, for some academic communities, this historical development necessarily implies a decreased level of legitimacy and, subsequently, decreased cultural value. In the case of adaptation studies, Voigt and Nicklas often detect the 'parochial reworking of the old literature into film paradigm' (2013: 141). This hierarchy of cultural legitimacy is clearly not only active in adaptation and literary studies, or in film studies, but we also see the dismissal of certain popular culture texts and their interpretations within audience research and fandom studies. Unfortunately, it is apparent that how (supposedly) 'active' and 'subversive' fans are in the eyes of scholars determines their relevance for paying attention to them at all (García-Rapp 2017, 2019; Click et al. 2017).

A key element of our work as social scientists is identifying and interpreting cultural tendencies and local hierarchies within the audience

communities we research. Often it is the die-hard, cult fandoms that celebrate traditionally high-culture categories of authorship as well as discourses of fidelity, and the 'good' versus the 'bad' fan (e.g. Van de Goor 2015). But, as informed academics, we ought to keep an open mind and nuance our own perspectives. Our truths are contingent and temporary (Blumler et al. 1992; Strangelove 2010; Baym and Markham 2009). The bottom line is that fan studies research still focuses on the same reduced group of hallmark practices associated with participatory culture (Jenkins 1992) privileging certain trends, formats or communities while marginalizing others (Bury 2018; Bennett 2014).

Often, fans are not 'just' fans of one thing but of many different things. It is just one aspect of their identities (Baym 2000; Jenson 1992). In other words, we are all fans of something (Sandvoss 2005; García-Rapp 2017), but no one is 'just' a fan. We all play several roles and embody different cultural identities and subjectivities in different fields of our social lives. Livingstone wrote about this back in 2005 '[i]n a thoroughly mediated world, audiences and publics, along with communities, nations, markets and crowds, are composed of the same people' (2005: 17). 'The audience' as well as 'the fan' or 'the user' are not monolithic entities; they are in flux and as polysemic as texts. All members of the audience participate dialogically and discursively (Harriss 2017) through 'semiotic productivity' (Fiske 1992: 37; Hartley 1999; Thompson 1995) by interpreting media texts and discussing them with others, even without actively posting or producing online content.

ADAPTATION AND GENRE AS SITES OF DIALOGIC INTERTEXTUALITY

Literary theorist Hutcheon (2006) – like Stam (2000), Bruhn (2013) and Leitch (2008) – draw from the work of theorists Kristeva, Bakhtin and Barthes, when arguing that adaptations are fluid texts; never unique, always reverberating through echoes of past works and voices. Adaptations are about remediation, recreation, pleasure, hybridity, porousness and collaboration. The 'true original' and 'lone genius' do not really exist.

In the same line, scholars such as Slethaug (2014), Elliot (2013) and Naremore (2000) join in the previously named to de-hierarchize adaptations by deconstructing binary oppositions of film versus prose and the inherent value attached to them. Adaptations are much more than novel-into-film celebrations and expand their reach to video games, songs, comic books, parodies and television series. They are temporally second, but not secondary. As valuable artistic forms that speak about culture, they should not be measured by their fidelity to adapted texts. As 'source texts will always be better at being themselves' (Leitch cited in Bruhn 2013: 70), adapted texts and adaptations are to be situated laterally, along a continuum of closer to looser interplay, from reconstruction to allusion (Leitch 2007). This fits beautifully with the argument I introduced before about the continuum of fan engagement and activity that challenges binary oppositions and local academic hierarchies.

Adaptations also influence adapted texts as these are often reinterpreted and their position in the field changes when important new works enter (Bruhn 2013). They are process rather than a mere product: they arise from the dynamic interplay among texts, paratexts and the discursive, intertextual practices of production, reproduction interpretation and reception, including audiences adapting, reusing and sharing content themselves (Hutcheon 2006).

Mittell (2001) argues the same for the case of genre. Instead of understanding genres as stable, textual categories, they are to be seen as dynamic,

discursive practices. These are constituted and ongoingly reproduced by the interplay of 'external', contextual elements as reviews and criticism, academic work, audience discussions as well as paratexts brought forward by media, industries and marketing discourses. This means that, instead of looking at individual texts to grasp the meaning of a genre, we should collect 'micro instances of generic discourse' (2001: 15) happening at the level of broader spheres of society that transcend the textual level.

Adaptations are, as well as genres, instances of dialogic intertextuality (Slethaug 2014; Bruhn 2013; Mittell 2001, 2017). 'There are precious few stories around that have not been "lovingly ripped off" from others. In the workings of the human imagination, adaptation is the norm, not the exception' (Hutcheon 2006: 177). Between familiarity and contempt, ubiquity and denigration, popularity, and scorning, adaptations should be valued by persistence, extent of dissemination and the skill that makes it possible for them to stand alone.

READINGS ON AUTHORSHIP, TWO MEDIA AND THE OMNIVOROUS FAN

As I identified in the connected study on GoT's reception (García-Rapp 2021), findings showed interpretive patterns 'across' cultures, rather than marked cultural contrasts. There were varying degrees of analytic and emotional fannish engagement (Zubernis and Larsen 2012; Morimoto and Chin 2013) leading to diverse fan subjectivities within their 'locality'.

Here I draw from the same empirical data to achieve a theoretical approximation to another aspect of audiences' understandings of GoT, namely their views on the series as an adaptation and the novels as original oeuvre. Given the prevalence of these topics during interviews, I sought to 'zoom in' to discern their specificity with a dedicated article. In this case, there were relevant differences based on the participants' respective countries.

I organize participants' notions about the inherent cultural value of types of media, issues around fidelity to an original work around three types of readings: fans of the books (*book-purists*), fans of the series (*just-the-series fans*) and viewers who enjoyed both (*omnivorous fans*). Spanish fans were mainly 'book-purists', Argentinian fans were 'omnivorous' enjoying both books and series whereas German fans were mostly fans of 'just-the-series' (Figure 1). As neither the sample nor the study has the aim of generalizing findings, this observation remains anecdotical. It may nevertheless be an insightful remark worth being picked up in the future to further research it.

As mentioned before, a key question in adaptation theory is if the adapted text should remain faithful to the original or rather be considered a second, independent work (Brown 2009; Ellis 1982). According to the doctrine of fidelity, an adaptation's success depends on its faithfulness to the original but for Lev (2009), Voigts and Nicklas (2013) and others, this would set overly high expectations. In this line, adaptations are to be understood as interpretations (Boyum cited in Dearman 2016). These two seemingly antagonistic alternatives, loyalty and respect or openness to change, were also present in participants' answers. There were fans of both the series and the books (*omnivorous fans*), who enjoyed them being different, there was a small group of books' fans (*book-purists*) which included viewers who even disliked the series, and the largest group, *just-the-series fans*, was made up by fans of the series who had not read the books but were nevertheless respectful of its
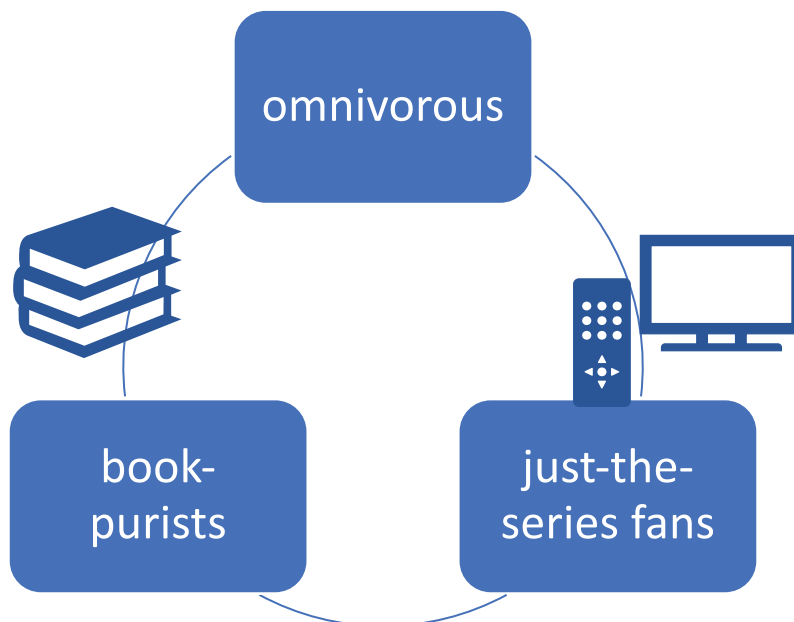
Figure 1: Three emerged subjectivities.

intrinsic cultural value (external value as novel and internal value as the original start to GoT's storyworld).

Overall, participants showed a certain respect for the original novels. For instance, viewers who had not read them expressed that doing so was not out of the question. What is more, most were planning to read them at a later point. While some book-purists were even anti-fans of the series and markedly disliked them, the opposite was not true. There were no anti-fans of the books themselves, except for German fans who were mostly not interested in fictional books in general and preferred audiobooks.

Most die-hard fans had read the book along with the series. They had become aware of the series by word-of-mouth, which then took them to the books. This decision to engage with both media forms can be related to Ellis' (1982) point that consuming an adaptation is motivated by the desire to recall a certain positive experience. Most of those I had defined as 'casual viewers', viewers who enjoy the series but do not consider themselves fans nor engage deeply with the series' universe, had not read the books.

Book-purists

What Voigts and Nicklas denominate as the 'traditional film scholar's canon' and the 'classic film studies mode' (2013: 140) of fidelity to the original was represented by participants who upheld the importance of paying respect to Martin's *oeuvre*. Similar to the findings by Sarikakis et al. (2017), interviewed *books fans* followed a romantic notion of authorship in which changes must be limited so as not to spoil the author's creation, object of worship and fascination (see also Steiner 2015). This group of viewers, mostly Spanish viewers and one Argentinian, legitimize the notion of author as creative genius with inherent artistic and aesthetic authority. The

compelling oeuvre turns into something to pay homage to, rather than to intervene or mess with.

> but the truth is that I think the adaptation is quite faithful, so in that sense it's fine.

> the ceremony around when they revive Jon […] ehhh […] that shocked me also because it was a question of, as I said before, of adaptations, about things that make the book something that could have been done well in the series. I am one of those who prefers more fidelity to the book and, as I haven't seen this yet, it hasn't happened, it goes the opposite way […] I didn't like it.

Book-purists enjoyed reading in general and had been extensively engaged in literary genres such as historical novels, romantic medievalism and, audio-visually, with the fantasy genre. They often showed some anger, disappointment and disinterest for the adaptation during interviews. They were not as engaged as with the books because the series was inherently just 'a copy', 'a second version', 'not the real thing'. These viewers had stopped watching the series to immerse themselves in the books and follow that story line, and just two continued watching the series afterwards, while waiting for the next book.

Some had even become anti-fans of the series, because of their preference and respect for the original. They disliked changes the series had incorporated and two of them had stopped watching and did not care about the development of the series. Only if there was an original text, and it was a novel, were they willing to put the time and emotional investment in it, instead of in a year-long audio-visual adaptation.

> because […] they separated themselves from the books, I want to think, arghhhh [annoyed] and it's like I watch it but I'm not as hooked as before, I still watch it but […] with a little distaste because I'd like the books to come out and to be able to read them, and to advance because I'm the kind of people who think that books can develop a story so much more than an hour of a series, right? […] I was super hooked at that time. I think I watched two seasons in a row and now it's like I watch it but as […] you know […] more relaxed.

The conditions of production of works created within different media forms are also a relevant aspect in creating the myth of the original, untainted oeuvre. The novelist is deemed to produce 'high' art as it emerges from their solitary efforts to express a certain vision. The author is generally not involved in aspects of commercial value of the product, considered secondary to its aesthetic value. A film is, conversely, produced under a company logo, and its high production costs make commercial success a requirement (Whelehan 2009).

Omnivorous fans

The group that enjoyed engaging with both the series and the novels can be related to Ellis' argument that an adaptation is a 'means of prolonging the pleasure of the original representation and repeating the production of a memory'

(1982: 4). Watching the series after having read the books is fuelled by the motivation to repeat particular positive acts of consumption. Reading the novels is not enough and they seek the series to deepen their engagement with the storyworld. For some, it was the other way around. The series was immersive and entertaining, which created a motivation to expand their experience with the story and they went to look for the books. This may extend to a third step by further expanding their enthusiasm within social media and online forums.

Omnivorous fans were in fact aware of certain changes in timings, characters and plot. They missed details that were present in the novels and had made it possible for them to get to know characters better. Nevertheless, they understood this as necessary because they are two different forms. Two fans were actually expecting them to be different and one Argentinean fan even said that 'if they were both (series and books) the same, they had no reason to exist'. They did not only recognize and supported artistic and narrative contrasts in general but also see the novelist's own style weaved into the tempo of the series:

> But George Martin does the same in the books too: I don't know, you have five hundred pages of description and suddenly in thirty a lot of things happened. You must read a thousand-times-an-hour because you can't believe everything that's happening and [...] well, that's also reflected in the series. Perhaps it's the author's own style that they have managed to reflect. There can't be, you can't have six hundred pages, I don't know how many they are, putting action after action (laughs). It's based on books, so, obviously, there will never be time or space to be able to maybe further develop characters.

They acknowledged that literature offers a depth and immersion that often the audio-visual medium cannot compete with, often because of time reasons.

> if you like the series, enjoy watching it, the book is much more attractive, besides it's much more descriptive, I don't know, you have the whole thing with the houses, how it describes it all, its beginnings. It delineates the whole family tree.

> In my case, I really like reading, and I usually prefer books to movies. Why? Well, because they go deeper, because the characters can develop more, they can advance the story more [...] A 1000-page book is very difficult to present in ten hours, when reading it actually takes you, I do not know, forty, fifty or one hundred, then it's clear that the series themselves run faster.

Even though fans acknowledged certain inherent benefits of the book as a medium over television such as the detailed description they felt the debate was not needed. They situated themselves and their experience as audience members beyond a criticism or evaluation of GoT's condition as an adaptation (a non-original work) and were not motivated to focus into similarities or oppositions between both texts.

> for me, there's no original, because I started with the series and I like that they are different. [literature and television] are two different formats

and there must be differences. If I am going to read the books and they are going to provide me with the same as the series, it's demotivating for me to read the books. […] There are many fans who go crazy if you change a character's shoe colour but for me, they must have differences and that's a very positive thing.

What is more, most fans from Argentina who had also read the books were not planning on stopping precisely because they provided two different but satisfying experiences. As mentioned before, for some, this was even an expectation. As an Argentinian fan of the series explained:

For example, now things happened that haven't been seen in the book yet, but anyway I plan to continue watching the series even so and wait just as eagerly for the book to see if […] if the story is going to be different, if they are going to change something, if it's going to have the same ending. No, I wouldn't stop doing either.

To summarize, omnivorous fans as avid readers of the books who also enjoyed the series had a laid-back attitude about expectations for an adaptation in general and were content with the quality of GoT as a series in particular. They understood the need for changes due to the inherent affordances and constraints of the medium in itself: the audio-visual offers a time-saving experience at the price of less space for deeper narrative development and, subsequently, immersion. GoT was highly immersive anyhow.

Just-the-series fans

This group was mostly made up of German and some Argentinian viewers. Most of them had not read the books. Of those who had, some had started with the series and continued with the books but also the other way around. Two fans from each country were planning to read the novels at some point as they offer more details and depth, but since that typically takes much longer than watching the series that was a problem. They mentioned that GoT's books were particularly long, and they preferred shorter books due to time constraints. Two fans pointed out that since they were already watching the series, they would prefer to read something different, just for variety.

Two German viewers had started the books but stopped because they felt the book was offering too much detail and it was too long. They preferred to go back to the series. Conversely, and as mentioned before, the depth that a book provides is precisely what most of the other interviewees enjoyed. Two viewers were planning to read them whenever they felt like reading fiction again; in general, they preferred audiobooks to books. One mentioned that especially because the two storylines are not identical, it would be interesting to watch the series and also read the books to compare. These resonate with the reasons why fans of both the series and the books mentioned to engage with both media.

As most had not read the books, they were not involved in the adaptation debate. The understanding was that if you just watch the series or even got to know the book through the series, then that's your 'original' and the books have no narrative relevance for you. This goes in line with Hutcheon's (2006) conscious choice to foreground the concept of 'adapted text' rather than the terms 'original' or 'source' as there is seldom only one and they usually imply

a morally loaded vertical hierarchy. Similarly, when discussing audiences and readers, she privileges the term 'knowing audiences' to refer to those who had experienced the adapted text before, instead of 'learned' or 'competent'. If unknowing viewers watch the audio-visual adaptation, the novel does not affect their experience. This challenges the notion of priority and bears the question of which text is the original in that case? Is the novel then secondary to the series? Bruhn would answer 'let us make both texts secondary to each other, a result of each other' (2013: 83).

Most interviewed viewers in this group were highly engaged with the series while some were laid-back, casual viewers who did not consider themselves fans. In this case, it is understandable that as their enthusiasm for the series was not as strong, they did not feel the need to further explore the narrative world through the books. The high number of characters and dense plot lines require commitment and deeper involvement (Dearman 2016) particularly when engaging with both the books and the series.

Here I outline the main elements of configuration of the subjectivities I identified across the sample (Figure 2).

Following a point made earlier, user-generated intertextuality through memes, mashups, viding, spoilers or live-tweeting as 'the creative jazz of collective intelligence' (Voigts and Nicklas 2013: 141) have often been disregarded by scholars and the so-called 'expert culture', historically against 'mainstream tastes' (2013: 141). This would be, following Voigts and Nicklas, Adaptation Studies genre at its narrowest, too preoccupied with form and medium to pay attention to wider sociocultural dimensions.

Appropriation of texts and their re-signification in view of audiences' own lives and identities are performed daily. Viewers, fans and users, 'like all of us, move between communities, importing and exporting practices along the way' (Baym 2000: 217). Media texts are remixable, spreadable, drillable (Jenkins et al. 2013; Mittell 2012) and incorporated to cultural repertoires and vernacular discourses, including politics. A series of memes uploaded to Facebook connecting GoT's characters with Argentinian politics arisen from the buzz first started on Twitter when the president at the time, Cristina Kirchner,

books' purists	omnivorous	just-the-series fans
•includes anti-fans of the series •follow a strict symbolic value chain •mainly Spanish fans •very engaged with the storyworld (not series), consider themselves fans	•do not see worth in fidelity/copy/adaptation debates •enjoy both media forms •mainly Argentinian fans •very engaged, consider themselves fans	•no time/interest to engage with books •respect the novels as original •mainly German fans, some Argentinian •mostly very engaged, consider themselves fans, some casual viewers

Figure 2: Outline of characteristics of emerged categories.

tweeted that queen Khaleesi was her favourite character – all picked up later by local press and TV news – sounds like a prime example of a postmodern, eclectic, digital pastiche.

From Fiske's polysemic intertextuality (1989) and Eco's *Lector in Fabula* (1979) to the current ever-expanding database of dynamic semiotic, semantic webs of production, interpretation and consumption, we advance from medium to medium and text to text, from the books to the series, to the memes and beyond. Following the messy flows and volatile spread of cultural artefacts – from TV series to memes – that are continuously being remixed, repurposed and re-signified within today's complex digital pop culture, the path takes us to Argentinian fans' impressions of a political social media debate connecting former president Cristina Kirchner with GoT's rightful and (once) fair queen Khaleesi.

POLITICAL POP-CULTURE AND INTERTEXTUALITY IN ARGENTINA'S SOCIAL MEDIA

GoT's narrative of battles, aims of conquering and claims to the throne tie it back to historical and contemporary issues of politics and war. When asked about the connections of the series with real life, viewers related the manoeuvring, strategic alliances and treason to contemporary politics. Alhayek's study (2017) of GoT's Arabic-speaking fan Facebook page with over 240,000 followers also shows how humorous, playful memetic content and references to the series are reinterpreted in view of local political contexts (such as Egypt's President El-Sisi) and wider international ones (such as US Former President Trump). This group foregrounds pop entertainment through digital ideological interventions and satirical political commentary within current's mediatized politics.

According to interviewed fans, the character of Daenerys (Targaryen, interpreted by British actress Emilia Clarke) is related to feminist ideals. She was deemed a fair, brave leader. Her past of enduring abuse and her long journey of battling against injustice, liberating slaves and forming her own army to take power strengthened her quality of uncompromising tenacity and toughness. GoT's character Daenerys, rightful heir to the Iron Throne, has been rearticulated by political parties too, as Cascajosa-Virino and Rodríguez-Ortega (2019) explain. The Spanish left-wing political party Podemos (now 'Unidas Podemos', meaning 'united we can') currently part of the coalition governing the country, explicitly connected the series with their political agenda and ideals to popularize the party's political platform.

While talking to fans about the character, I was made aware of a relevant social media debate that had taken place in Argentina, when the then president, Cristina Kirchner, tweeted in April 2013 that she liked the series and her favourite character was 'Khaleesi, Mother of Dragons' (Khaleesi means Queen in one of the series' fictional languages), referring to Daenerys. Surprisingly, in that tweet, she also predicted a situation that did not happen for several seasons later, 60 episodes more exactly, which is Daenerys's and Jon Snow's romantic connection.

A pop-culture parody of a fictional political campaign – humorously orientated against Cristina Kirchner's opponents – drew from the debate started by her tweet. The campaign was started in 2013 by two Argentinian film script coaches promoting their workshops, who created and posted a series of memes to their Facebook page 'Series y punto' ('Series and nothing else'). The posters and memes yielded more than 6000 shares, 1000 likes and 330

comments, mainly during 2013–15 – the last years of Kirchner's populist, anti-press government (Waisbord and Amado 2017; Stein and Kellam 2014; Richardson 2009). This popularity and visibility fostered the later creation of the Twitter hashtag #CFKhaleesi, a word play of the acronym of Kirchner's name (Cristina Fernández de Kirchner) and the character's role of Queen (Khaleesi). The hashtag was used by Kirchner's supporters and detractors alike, the former passionately and the latter ironically.

One of the uploaded photomontages emulating Argentina's political campaign posters had the face of Joffrey Baratheon, one of GoT's Kings and particularly evil character, with the logo and aesthetics of Kirchner's main opponent party – 'PRO' led by Mauricio Macri – Argentina's president during 2015–19. Baratheon was supposedly campaigning as parliament representative.

One of the most liked and commented montages was a picture of Daenerys surrounded by stretched out, claiming arms with the text 'The Strength of Dragons' in light blue and white, the colours of the Argentinian flag and also of Kirchner's party. The meme includes the phrase '[c]hoosing to continue liberating' to the left connecting Daenerys actions with Kirchner's purported political values oriented towards common good. To make the connection more evident, the poster included the logo of 'Frente para la Victoria' ('Front for Victory'), Kirchner's party at the time. The posters' symbolism fits with Kirchner's life-long affiliation to Argentina's strong Peronist Party, historically known for its authoritarian, demagogical discourse (e.g. Craig 1976; Finchelstein 2014, 2017), conflagrated especially around supposedly helping those in need and fighting for the 'victory' of the masses (Figure 3).

At that time, Kirchner's supporters commented online, which was quickly picked up by the press (Perfil 2015), comparing Daenerys' battle for fairness and justice – albeit later derailed and deranged – through helping others and saving slaves to Kirchner's personalistic political style and alleged Left-wing ideals of fighting for and protecting those in need (Houle and Kenny 2018).
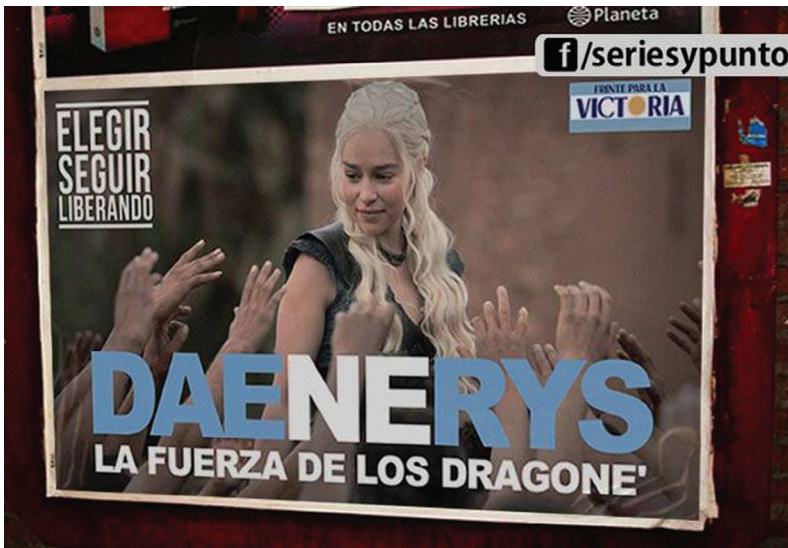

Figure 3: Satirical political campaign poster, 'Daenerys: The Strength of Dragons', from Facebook page 'Series y punto', 2013.

Interviewed Argentinian fans did not support this connection and found it 'ridiculous'. They explained that while both may be followed by multitudes and are charismatic, their motives and actions were not comparable.[1]

> Cristina has that too, she's like a magnet, she magnetizes people with her speeches, she's a very good speaker. I don't like Cristina and I like Daenerys, and I don't really make that connection but there are fans who made it, like everything, you know.

> You see, if they come and tell me in the series things about Daenerys that I don't like, or things that she does wrong, or things that I think are not morally, that are not morally right, I'm going to start dismissing her as, my heroine, let's say [*contrasting implicitly Kirchner's supporters and their reactions to her ongoing judicial issues due to corruption and embezzlement*] Some say 'no, no […] I like her because she's fair and all that, she does good things. But, Daenerys, that's a character. The other [Cristina] did a lot of things that are wrong and you can't keep saying 'Oh but she's an excellent leader', you know?

> Cristina's fans here, if they watched the series, became heavy Daenerys fans. Fans connected things a lot, like 'the woman who frees the people', it was closely related to that. […]. But the series is fiction, so I analyse it as fiction.

The narrative development towards the end of the last episode brings us to an ironic paradox. It is decidedly a politically incorrect moment and an uncomfortable realization for Kirchner, her supporters, and Khaleesi's fans alike. Khaleesi's regime drastically and suddenly turned into an autocratic, hegemonic reign, removed from her once fairer leadership. Someone who used to epitomize 'the idea of the just and fair rules who shakes up the existing hegemonic structures' (Cascajosa-Virino and Rodríguez-Ortega 2019: 425) and, thanks to this referenced by politicians, ended up symbolizing a 'the end justifies the means' political attitude. The once fair queen, the dashed hopes and the debacle of her (in Daenerys' case) short reign are not just useful examples to discuss intertextuality and pop culture, but rather, as we often find, it all can have deeper, broader meanings. And truth is indeed stranger than fiction.

In the case of Kirchner's democratic government,[2] there was, as history shows us in other Latin American examples including Peronism, reduction of consensus, lessened transparency of institutions and perennial myths of the 'messianic saviour' (McGuire 1997; Moses et al. 2017). Kirchner would possibly not be happy to being connected to Khaleesi any longer now. Perhaps she would not mind.

CONCLUSIONS: ADAPTING FAN STUDIES TO FIT US ALL

These concluding remarks part from the recognition of 'western culture's long and happy history of borrowing and stealing, or more accurately, sharing stories' (Hutcheon 2006: 4) and the belief that poetic drama and entertainment are not mutually exclusive (Bruhn 2013). A key theme of this article was adaptation in the literary sense. But how about adapting fan studies to fit us all?

Connecting the empirical results presented here with fan studies' development as a research field, the same parallels could be drawn between binary labels as 'high cultural taste', 'mass appeal' and our own field's hierarchies of 'productive fan' versus 'lurkers' or a 'trivial' versus a 'meaningful' object of fandom. In this line, 'mass appeal' versus 'high literary value', the hostile response against adaptations that 'betray' the original, or the inherent value of prose over other media forms, can be brought in as well.

Book-purists, omnivorous and just-the-series fans are all reflections of ourselves as inhabiting a myriad of roles and engaging with a diversity of texts and practices in our daily lives. Cultural identities and media pleasures are contingent and dynamic. 'Fandom is escapist and immersive, playful and serious' (Harriss 2017: 376). Identifying and interpreting hierarchies of value and legitimation within the communities that we study is a large aspect of what we do as scholars. It is also necessary that we apply the same when looking at our research field and our own discourses.

With the aim and hope of rearticulating conceptual frameworks and systems of value within academia itself, it is worth pointing out how we are not examining (or respecting) all fans. As noted before, research within fan studies still focuses mainly on the hallmark productive practices first outlined by Jenkins (1992) (Bury 2018; Bennett 2014).

What is more, we are not only focusing on what a reduced number of fans are doing but often even dismiss others as not subversive, active or productive enough. Audience members, users and objects of fandom are thus deemed trivial, banal, normative, in other words, not worth our time as researchers. As Baym puts it, 'we all are members of audience communities of one sort or another, although some of the materials around which we organize might be granted higher social status' (2000: 4). As I argued elsewhere, the discursive construction of certain analytical categories or the implicit cultural prestige of communities and practices can and should not prevent us from listening closely to understand and acknowledge agency (García-Rapp 2019, see also Hills 2002).

Externally, the claim of fan studies has historically been that fandom is much more than just entertainment. It is about identity, transformation, appropriation, creativity, activism and communal efforts. Which is true. But what about fans who do not engage in what we deem as production? What about our own internal hierarchies of objects of fandom, of varying degrees of legitimacy within our field? It *can* be just about entertainment, it can be about the so-called 'guilty pleasures', and this should imply the same relevance, dedication and respect in our research efforts.

We have already established how complex and rich the world of fandom is. Now let us take another look to see who we are brushing aside by still implicitly claiming there are (just) two sides to this. This still makes it about binary oppositions, which in reality do not exist; 'active' versus 'passive', 'activist' versus 'normative', 'political' versus 'trivial'. Reception is consumption, and fandom is inherently performative, no matter what fans actually produce and can show for (García-Rapp 2017, 2019; Hartley 1999; Thompson 1995).

Parting from the anthropological stance that human experiences intrinsically matter and seeing fandom as inherently performative (Jenkins 1992; Hills 2002), I propose to approach fandom from an inclusive perspective that tolerates ambivalence (Tolson 2010), contradictions and embraces the complexity of social worlds. Audiences generally show a moderate degree

3. For a discussion on participation and issues around the political dimension of social processes, see Jenkins and Carpentier (2013). It is evident that they understand the same concepts differently due to their underlying different theoretical frameworks.

of critical interpretation and 'critical theory cannot claim superiority over fans' own understanding of the industries and cultural roles in which they are implicated' (Hills 2002: 16). Different fans are more or less willing to be acknowledged by the industry or to engage with it (Click et al. 2017) and varying degrees of 'permeability to commercialism' take place within a diverse array of activities and interpretations (Linden and Linden 2017).

Let us make our own hierarchies visible to at least establish the merit and existence of different readings. As Van de Goor (2015) argues, assigning moral values to communities and audiences is not productive for our research aims. Instead of holding on to an 'emptied rhetoric of participation' (Jenkins and Carpentier 2013: 267) – for both celebratory and derogatory analysis[3] – it is time to reconsider the way in which we evaluate and judge engagement. In the best case, 'critically but with respect and hope' (2013: 268).

We need to grant the same space for subjectivity, indeterminacy and instability present in adaptations-as-process to those viewers who do not conform to activity, activism or participatory standards. As other scholars do within adaptation studies, stemming from hermeneutics and phenomenological understandings, and influenced by the egalitarian stance of cultural studies, and post-structuralism's call to deconstruct binarisms, let us embrace open and fluid texts, and practice open and fluid scholarships (Elliott 2013). Appreciating the ambiguity of polysemic, messy practices that give rise to texts that touch us, we should allow the same for our research fields.

Let us update our theories for the sake of theoretical plurality and openness to dissent, but more importantly, to include us all. If we need more flexibility 'to insert the reading of literary texts into the same critical spheres as the consumption of commercial products' (Whelehan 2009: 8) when the novel remains the norm and the film deviates 'at its peril' (Bluestone cited in Whelehan 2009), we could apply the same to fan studies.

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