

# To Like, Or Not To Like?

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Jonathan Gray, *Dislike-Minded: Media, Audiences, and the Dynamics of Taste*. New York University Press, 272 pp. \$89 cloth, \$29 paper.

**F**OR OVER TEN YEARS, MEDIA theorist Jonathan Gray has pushed beyond studies of fandom, the gathering of likers around their favorite programming, to explore the realm of what he terms dislike. As he explains in *Dislike-Minded*, we live through our favorite television shows much as we live through our pets. Just as dear Fido will always be sweet and harmless, so the programs we fall in love with can do no wrong, at least for the space of our infatuation. In *Dislike-Minded*, Gray turns media studies on its head, using qualitative interviews of more than 200 people to help explain why dislike matters more than simple liking.

Gray begins with our earliest attachment to our parents. To help explain our strong allegiance to our favorites, Gray draws on child psychologist D.W. Winnicott. Babies, says Winnicott, begin to wean themselves from their mothers by connecting with temporary substitutes like blankets and toys.<sup>1</sup> And this phenomenon extends well beyond infancy. As a boy, Gray tells us, he could experiment with independence by hefting a toy light saber and imagining he was Luke Skywalker.

Such behavior, putting ourselves in the shoes of movie or TV characters, can engage us in creating fan fiction—our amateur extensions of official programming.

Certain viewers have always enjoyed taking on others' characters. Starting in the 1970s, they could act as Oakland Athletics exec Billy "Moneyball" Beane or a medieval cleric through role-playing games such as *Fantasy Baseball* and *Dungeons and Dragons*. Today, the Internet has united media fans as never before. Via websites such as [archiveofourown.org](http://archiveofourown.org), enthusiasts have shared responses, often in the form of original stories, to broadcast works. Traditionally underserved populations like immigrant communities, Black women, and queer viewers have been especially active in transforming shows into something that speaks their language. For example, fan fictions have expanded on the televised kiss, back in 1968, between *Star Trek's* Captain Kirk and Officer Uhura, and have written up a romance between Kirk and Officer Spock.

Such experiments complicate our sense of exactly what each work is and what it is not. Following the lead of film critics, television critics have often described each show as a unique work, something produced by a single author. Since the 1960s, however, scholars—media fans *par excellence*—have increasingly discussed media objects as living, changing organisms. Writing in 1977, literary theorist Roland Barthes explained the difference. Like a bound book, a work (a story, book, game, movie, TV show...) "can be held in the hand." In contrast, treating a show as a *text* begins to soften its boundaries. A text, says Barthes, "is held in language, only exists in the movement of a discourse" and "is experienced only in an act of production" that "decants" the work "and gathers it up

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<sup>1</sup> D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Press, 1997), 77-78.

as play, activity, production, practice.”<sup>2</sup> Just as our edits of a Wikipedia entry can provide readers with new insight, so our engagement with works-as-media texts contributes to their meaning.

*Star Wars* is a case in point. Thanks in part to fan fiction, our sense of George Lucas’s 1977 *Star Wars*—itself the subject of many official pre- and sequels—has expanded beyond George Lucas’s parameters. Within a year of its release date, Ernie Fosselius paid the film the ultimate homage, parodying it with the low-budget fan fiction *Hardware Wars* (1978). Fosselius sent up the original by casting kitchen appliances as starships, with Ham Salad serving as right-hand man to Fluke Starbucker. On Internet discussion boards, fans tirelessly debate the merits of media texts such as these.

Would that we lived in a world featuring only the programs that pleased us! Gray insists that we most often choose between texts we find bad, and those we find less bad. Here we behave like gamers whose second selves endure injury and death. Such games, to the uninitiated, seem like a waste of time. Who wants to die a *League of Legends* (LoL) death over and over again? By expressing our *LoL* frustration to peers and developing solutions, however, we gain a sense of accomplishment, building on each gaming failure. Since our families and friends choose much of our viewing, we must endure a certain amount of less-than-thrilling material. Like gamers turning disappointment to joy, we may rest secure in our chat-room putdowns of a difficult show, even while putting up a happy front to friends and family.

Gray’s chapter “Performing Identity Through Dislike” focuses on people willing to explain their negative responses to programming. Many of his viewers act as

hatewatchers, who practice “competitive antifandom” by defining themselves in part by what they can’t stand. Many of Roger Ebert’s movie reviews paint him as a typical hater. Ebert’s book *I Hated, Hated, Hated This Movie*,” uses its title to entertain his fellow haters. In his volume *Your Movie Sucks*, Ebert finds *The Hot Chick* (PG-13) “too vulgar for anyone under thirteen, and too dumb for anyone over thirteen.”

Hatewatchers, aka antifans, will often compete online to drown out the positive responses of a show’s fans. Hatewatchers map out boundaries of taste reminiscent of those described in Pierre Bourdieu’s 1979 book *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Writing on France, Bourdieu suggests that dislike is mere snobbery—turning up one’s nose at people one deems beneath one. The Fox sitcom *Married with Children* (1987-1997), certainly offered food for snobs, sending up the midwestern nuclear family by presenting the ultimate cynical household and their annoying neighbors. While some viewers will enjoy such snarkiness; others will avoid it out of principle.

A second set of Gray’s viewers behaved differently than did Ebert and the hatewatchers. This group reported most disliking not the most unwatchable texts—for Ebert, *The Hot Chick*, and for a feminist viewer, *Two and a Half Men*—but those that most disappointed them. For example, viewers drawn to a *Jerry Springer* episode by its implicit promise of thoughtfully depicting gay marriage, were thoroughly disappointed by the show’s dissolving into a typical shout-fest. These viewers put their keystrokes where their dislike is, writing to analyze their reactions to *Married with Children*. Admittedly, without the presence of an interviewer, most do no more than summarize episodes, or at most spin off their own fan fiction.

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<sup>2</sup> Roland Barthes, “From Work to Text.” In *Image Music Text*, translated by Stephen Heath (Glasgow: Fontana Collins, 1977), 155–64.

We may sometimes be conflicted in our liking and disliking. Sports dislike is familiar: Americans dislike the most rich and successful sports franchises (in baseball, the New York Yankees), as there is no fun in a game that is no contest. On the other hand, viewers may simultaneously be ardent fans and griping anti-fans of a sports team such as the Dallas Cowboys. While faithful, these viewers may be quick to fault personnel decisions and harbor negative expectations for the season ahead. As when we call in to a sports talk show, posting to a disliker discussion board allows us to rehearse our response and reaction to the text.

Ultimately, says Gray, dislike helps shape each of our textual relationships. Indeed, he thinks we can use the disliking option for constructive ends. Noting that Americans' engagement with politics happens mainly through programs like Trevor Noah's *The Daily Show*, Gray posits that expressing ourselves through our responses to such

programming engages us in both world politics and issues closer to home. In this regard, several theorists have valorized emotional response as a vital political tool.

As communications scholar Zizi Papacharizzi suggests, the act of policing emotions in politics may censor content and keep many groups from participating.<sup>3</sup> Speaking on activism by women of color, Audre Lorde once said, "We cannot allow our fear of anger to deflect us nor to seduce us" into silence, "for It is not the anger of other women that will destroy us, but our refusal to stand still to listen to its rhythms, to learn within it to move beyond the manner of presentation to the substance, to tap that anger as an important source of empowerment."<sup>4</sup>

During this trying COVID-19 period, Gray's book offers two gifts to public discourse, urging scholars to fill in the gaps left by *Dislike-Minded* while prompting readers to listen more closely to others' hates and dislikes. A

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3 Zizi Papacharizzi, *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

4 Audre Lorde, "The Uses of Anger." *Women's Studies Quarterly* 25, nos. 1-2 (1997): 278-85.