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Stories of Significance

The Process and Practices of Sense-Making in the Sherlock Fan Community

Abstract

Building on professor of psychology Kenneth Pargament’s claim that people actively seek to establish a sense of significance and strive to minimize its loss, this study argues that fans of fictional works continually create a (subjectively seemingly) coherent interpretation of the source text that both builds upon and supports meaningful themes and phenomena found in the text. This, in turn, generates a subjective (though often communally negotiated) sense of significance. However, such meaningful/meaning-creating interpretations – and thus the sense of significance generated by them – are constantly running the risk of being disturbed by new information or perspectives that contradict them. This risk is particularly high when the source text is still evolving, as in the case of a current book series or TV-show, which necessitates an on-going process of interpretation and coping. In this thesis I examine how a sense of significance is formed and maintained by fans of an evolving text by studying the various interpretative strategies employed by fans of the BBC TV series Sherlock. Combining in-depth interviews with data from a three-month participant observation of fan interactions primarily but not exclusively on the social network platform site Tumblr, this study aims both to deepen the understanding of some of the psychological mechanisms behind the creation, negotiation and transformation of meaning, and to examine its expressions in a specific case.

Keywords: coping theory, production of meaning, virtual anthropology, sherlock, tumblr, fan studies, fan psychology.

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List of Sherlock Episodes

Unaired pilot, available as bonus material on the season one DVD and BluRay boxes.

Season 1 (2010)
S01E01 “A Study in Pink” (ASiP)
S01E02 “The Blind Banker” (TBB)
S01E03 “The Great Game” (TGG)

Season 2 (2012)
S02E01 “A Scandal in Belgravia” (ASiB)
S02E02 “The Hound of Baskerville” (THoB)
S02E03 “The Reichenbach Fall” (TRF)

Seven minute special mini episode “Many Happy Returns” (MHR) (2013)

Season 3 (2014)
S03E01 “The Empty Hearse” (TEH)
S03E02 “The Sign of Three” (TSoT)
S03E03 “His Last Vow” (HLV)
**Introduction**

In Germany, DoYourResearch\(^1\) realizes that her new friend hasn’t seen *Sherlock* yet and immediately arranges for them to watch the first episode together. She hopes that her friend will be as moved by the deep, undeniable love between Sherlock and John as she is. Across the Atlantic, Hobbes sits down in front of her computer to plot out a new story about Mycroft Holmes and Greg Lestrade, and timetumbingconsultant nods in approval as she reads a rather heated exchange between several fans discussing the misogyny of *Sherlock*. In Sweden Lorna exclaims in glee as she discovers another clever wink to Arthur Conan Doyle’s original stories in the updated TV version. And I, I put my thesis aside for a moment, to read finalproblem’s latest theory about how Sherlock faked his death. It is comforting to know that I’m not alone in finding the explanation offered to us in the first episode of the third season rather suspect.

We are all *Sherlock* fans. We all spend many hours a week on various activities related to the show we watch and, arguably, love. Yet we have very different ideas of what it is all about and what makes it meaningful.

We are big on meaning, us humans. Our pursuit of it is constant and relentless, at least for as long as we remain in good mental health; psychological trauma is sometimes defined as the inability to integrate lived events into a meaningful whole (Laanes, 2013). Not only do we want to know *what* is happening; we want to know *why* it is happening and what it *means* that it does (Martin & Barresi 2006). While it might be argued that the notion of meaning, and thus of coping (a concept we shall return to later on), is a specifically modern and Western construct, one must ask oneself if the heightened interest in both meaning and coping ought not to be understood as a reflection of the experience of living in a world where neither significance nor the ways of preserving it are given (Pargament 1997). From such a line of reasoning one might speculate that it was not a matter of meaning lacking meaning in the past, or in the vast parts of the today’s world not Western, but rather that the plausibility structures – overreaching frameworks for interpreting the world, as suggested by Peter Berger (1967) – of that time and those cultures were far more stable and easily maintained than are those of our global, fast-moving, culturally diverse days. When the church, the king, or the state are no longer conceived of as the sole broker of truth (if indeed they ever were), and when personal and cultural perceptions of reality are constantly challenged by rivaling interpretations of the

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\(^1\) All informants have been given false names. Rather than giving my online informants names I have selected nicks such as those they use on Tumblr. In the case of those who participated in the group chats or watch-alongs, I have used the random nicks they gave themselves for those.
world, the burden of finding a meaning behind the things that happen are to a greater degree the individual’s to carry (Pargament 1997:74). That is to say, meaning was not discussed (much) in the past, because it was not questioned (very often). What is taken for granted is rarely reflected upon, after all. Today, however, much of what we would take for granted is constantly running the risk of being called into question. Hence our focus on the quest for significance.

Significance, small or large, can seemingly be found in the most random of things – in the alignment of distant stars when we leave our mothers’ wombs, in the wearing of the colours sported by an eleven man gang of grown men kicking a ball, in the stories we tell ourselves before we drift off to sleep.

In the modern day TV adaptation of detective stories written a century ago. What follows in the next hundred pages or so is the story of significance and our very human quest for it. It is also the story of fans, and a story of how they – we - make sense of the tale of a genius detective and his loyal sidekick. Because Sherlock is experienced as deeply meaningful by its fans, an understanding of how such meaning is created, negotiated and transformed is crucial for understanding fans’ emotional involvement and relationship to the text - although it is certainly not the only crucial aspect. It is, however, the aspect this study concerns itself with, as it aims to explore the process of sense-making by examining the interpretative strategies formulated by fans of an evolving text, in this case Sherlock. In order to do so I have utilized narrative analysis and my own development of Kenneth Pargament’s coping theory to answer questions such as:

- In what – if any – sense can the interpretations/stories told and shared by fans be said to be meaningful?
- What are the contents of the potentially meaningful interpretations/stories told and shared by the fans?
- How is this content created, shared and negotiated (on- and offline)?
- How does an individual’s meaningful interpretations relate to various discourses in and outside of the community?
- What ‘crises of meaning’ can be identified in the fan’s interactions/discourse?
- How are these crisis points dealt with?

The first chapter introduces the field by providing a snap shot of media fans; who they are and what they do, with special focus on Sherlock fans on Tumblr. It also offers a brief overview of earlier fandom research and fan studies. In chapter 2 I outline the method employed in the
making of the study, paying particular attention to my own bias and rather prominent presence in the text, and to the various opportunities, difficulties and peculiarities of online ethnography. Chapter 3 introduces *Sherlock* and the notion of fans’ experience of fictional texts as significant, and details the theoretical framework of the study, i.e. a theory of coping and significance. Chapter 4 deals with text reception and how preferences and assumptions affect how various aspects of the text is perceived and evaluated. In chapter 5 I consider the social aspects of sense-making; how fan’s interpretations are shaped by interaction and discussions with other fans, and what sources outside of the text itself are drawn on to interpret the narrative or support/disprove such interpretations. Chapter 6 focuses on the various interpretations of Mary Morstan and her presence on the show, and examines how different interpretations make use of different strategies to maintain a sense of significance. Finally I summarize and reflect on what may or may not be concluded from the analysis, and what issues further inquiry might fruitfully tackle.
A Brief Note on Ontology and Truth Claims in the Humanities

Before one embarks on a journey to produce knowledge, it may be worthwhile to consider what sort of knowledge one hopes to produce, and how the success of the inquiry may be determined. Lacking the possibility of yielding statistically reliable data of experiments successful or failed, the veracity of anthropological theory is not always – or ever – very easy to determine. While we, like the early American anthropologist Alfred Kroeber, might declare anthropology to be “the most humanistic of the sciences and the most scientific of the humanities,” we cannot always meet the natural sciences’ demand for quantifiable data. Of course some of the data produced by anthropologists can be quantified and scientifically verified; we have spawned as many positivists as interpretativists (Bernard 2006). But most of what we write and discuss in our ethnographies cannot be quantified, as it concerns specific people, times, and places. Our study is of humans and human behavior in its context; the variables are too many for us to easily reduce our theories to neat equations, a fact that has led Ulf Danielsson, professor of theoretical physics at Uppsala University, to proclaim that “humanities are actually a lot more complicated than the natural sciences” (2008:30, my translation). Some anthropologists sidestep this difficulty by disavowing any claims to objective truth; for the postmodernist there is only text and subjective interpretation (Kuper 1999). But such a solution is hardly satisfactory for the scholar who aspires to produce something beyond meta-narratives, which is somewhat ironic considering the postmodern ambition to deconstruct just such narratives (as Jean-Francois Lyotard does in his influential The Postmodern Condition, 1984). While postmodernism offers a useful and sometimes necessary way of questioning dominant theories and paradigms, critics such as Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont (1998) have pointed out that it is ultimately unable to create empirical knowledge – something that most of us arguably wish to do. What we can do, then – what we actually do most of the time, even if it’s not always articulated – is to offer coherent stories: do the theoretical perspectives we utilize allow us to analyze and describe what is going on in a way that makes sense? Of course, a story can be perfectly coherent and perfect bullshit at the same time. Or rather; a bullshit story can appear to be perfectly coherent. Throughout the history of anthropology we have by and large refuted, or revised, theories by introducing facts that cannot be coherently incorporated in the suggested story. For instance, social evolutionist

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2 This section of the chapter is lifted from an unpublished paper titled The Significance of Meaning, which I wrote for the Uppsala University Master course Conflict Anthropology in the summer of 2014.

3 Though this is a quote widely circulated and cited, no one has actually been able to find the original source. The earliest references can be found in Eric Wolf’s Anthropology (1964), where Wolf attributes it to Kroeber without offering any specific details.
claims could not really account for cultural diversity, and was rejected. I do not mean to propose that anthropologists are, or should be, merely purveyors of pleasing tales, but rather that the only way we have of determining the veracity of a theory is to examine whether it can, as mentioned above, incorporate all – or at least most – known and relevant facts in a coherent narrative. Actually, when you come right down to it, this is not so very different from what the natural scientists are doing.

Quite naturally we may, in our quest for a coherent narrative, feel tempted to edit out what does not neatly line up with our proposed theory. This tendency is one best countered by actively and consciously seeking out the data that contradicts our ideas, as Boellerstorff et al. (2012) advise us in their guide to ethnographic fieldwork online; rather than shying away from incoherence and the bits that do not fit we should embrace them and let them help us adjust our theories to better reflect reality. As already noted, we are unlikely to ever be able to successfully account for everything, as the world, humans and human behavior are much too complex to be neatly explained by one single theory, no matter how well thought out. As such, this account neither is nor was intended as the final word on fans and their interpretative strategies; it is one perspective, attempting to shed light on certain aspects – while by necessity excluding others – of a phenomenon that is a complex as and multifaceted as any other human activity.
1. Fans: Who They Are And What They Do

We meet at a small coffee shop at the Central station in Stockholm. I’ve taken the train from Uppsala and Petra has travelled for several hours to meet me here. “This is the first time I’m wearing a t-shirt with a print since I was a teenager,” she explains, indicating her black tee with JOHNLOCKED emblazoned in white on it. Just over forty and a mother of three, she sometimes pauses and looks away as she struggles to find the right words. “It’s hard… I’ve never gotten to talk about this before. My family doesn’t understand, they don’t want to hear about it. But I get that; I don’t want to listen to my husband talk about his skiing, either.”

Fandom came late to Petra. Although she has a history of developing intense interests – naming archaeology as one of those – she was not quite prepared for the obsession that would grow out of watching a few Sherlock YouTube videos. As she began delving into online fandom, she stepped into a new world of fan fiction, mpreg, hurt/comfort, GIF sets and feels. It is a world not easily explained to her family and friends, most of them middle-aged and with highly qualified jobs, just like Petra. “No one I know can say what a fan fic is,” she protests as I — more than a decade younger and a dedicated fangirl since I was ten — note how fandom has become much more mainstream over the past few years. To Petra, being a fan is still a strange, almost embarrassing thing; not something to be bragged about or carelessly shared with just anyone.

She has paid her own way to Stockholm to see me, for a chance to talk about her love for Sherlock, for Johnlock (the hypothesized romantic and/or sexual pairing of John and Sherlock), and for the fandom. “My husband looks forward to this just as much as I do,” she explains. “He is incredibly tired of Sherlock.” She makes it very clear that I must take care to anonymize her in the finished thesis. Her friends know what she “likes Sherlock” but have little idea of what her fannishness entails.

Female fans, fan fiction and shipping have received quite a bit of media attention in the last decade. I myself have featured in several such articles as a Star Wars fan, at one point posing with a stack of books, my laptop and Darth Vader figures under the headline: “Now the nerd is cool – and female” (Wahlman 2008). That particular piece offered a rather positive view of female fanship, suggesting that special interests were the road to success. Such is not always the case, however. Female fans in general, and slash (homoerotica) fans in particular, are often stereotyped as hormonal teenage girls. In the fall of 2014 the ‘benedict cumberbatch’ and ‘johnlock’ tag on Tumblr filled with unhappy fans expressing their disappointment in the actor – who plays Sherlock – after his comments on slash fiction and its fans in an interview:
Perhaps, I [the interviewer] suggest, making Holmes and Watson gay is a way to remove other women from the picture. “Yes, yes,” he [Cumberbatch] replies enthusiastically. “I think it’s about burgeoning sexuality in adolescence, because you don’t necessarily know how to operate that. And I think it’s a way of neutralizing the threat, so this person is sort of removed from them as somebody who could break their heart.” (Hicklin 2014)

The term slash was coined in the seventies and derives from the / that was used to denote a romantic/sexual relationship between Star Trek characters Kirk and Spock in the fan fic label ‘Kirk/Spock’. Written and appreciated primarily by female fans, slash has been theorized as a way for women to create the perfect, equal relationship (Russ 2006), as a way for women to at the same time identify and not-identify with the desired character’s lover (Penley 1992), and as a way to discuss real life issues that are too sensitive to be approached directly (Bacon-Smith 1992). However, these theories were formulated by American women in the seventies and eighties, in a time and place when women’s sexualities and career opportunities were restricted, and homosexuality far less visible and accepted than it is today. It is reasonable to question whether the (potentially valid) explanations of a phenomenon in one context might properly account for it in another. While some of my older informants, such as Petra, describe reading up on the existent literature to better understand their own and to themselves inexplicable fascination for slash, the majority of the fans I interviewed (of which only two were teenagers and none appeared particularly confused about their own sexuality or that of others) or have encountered online appear to regard it as a non-issue. It’s exciting and fulfilling – emotionally as well as sexually – to imagine these two male characters in a relationship; what of it? When the topic is occasionally broached, the discussion primarily concerns the ethical aspects of slash, e.g. whether or not it ought to be construed as fetishization of homosexual relationships comparable to porn featuring two women produced by men for men, or if it is a result of patriarchal structures that teaches women that the relationships of men are inherently more real and interesting than those between women or between men and women. No general consensus regarding these issues exists and, as mentioned, most shippers are perfectly happy engaging in slash and regard it as normal and non-problematic, if not necessarily something you will brag about outside of fandom.

As much as fans, fandom and fan activities have become part of the mainstream during the past decade, there is still a stigma attached to it. Images of hysterical girls screaming their heads off and trampling each other in desperate attempts to get closer to the beloved celebrity are coupled with those of lonely and unkempt nobodies hiding away in their rooms, finding in their fantasies the joy, love and community they can’t find in ‘real life’. The idea of a fan’s
devotion serving to fulfill a basic need not otherwise met is a recurring idea in several theories that has been formulated to explain the psychopathology of fans. While allowing that most fans are neither dangerous nor delusional, there exists a sometimes unspoken notion of a ‘slippery slope’ – fans are always running the risk of taking their devotion too far and falling into madness (Duffet 2013). The word ‘fan’ itself, derived from ‘fanatic’ and first used to describe religious zealots in seventeenth century England (Cavicchi 1998), hints at unreasonably obsession and blind devotion, even if it has lost most of its original connotations in modern usage.

Are fans dangerously obsessed? Or are they passive consumers, as suggested by Theodore Adorno (1978)? When Henry Jenkins wrote his highly influential study of fans, *Textual Poachers*, in 1992 it was partly in response to both of these then-dominant discourses. Jenkins, on the other hand, painted a perhaps too rosy picture of fans as self-aware, independent and creative (Gray & Sandvoss & Harrington 2007). In his account, and that of many other early fan studies scholars, the fan is exceptional, special, better than. Neither his, nor Adorno’s, is a fair assessment, I believe. While there is little denying that my own experience with and view on fandom in general is a primarily positive one, I can’t find anything inherently good or worthy about being a fan; neither is there anything inherently bad or dangerous about it. Underpinning this study is the assumption that being a fan is not an exceptional thing; it is just another human thing, no less and no more extraordinary than any other. Fans are, simply put, ordinary human beings – even if some of things fan do may seem strange to the outsider, just as many things we do seems strange to those who are not part of the group that engages in them.

**What’s in a Name?**

But if fans and their activities are ‘ordinary’, how can we differentiate them from any other sort of group or activity? What *is* a fan? *Who* is a fan?

‘Fan’ – much like ‘religion’ – is a word most of us feel perfectly able and comfortable using in casual conversation. Yet ‘fan’ – much like ‘religion’ – is a word and concept that has proved surprisingly hard to define. Not until a hundred years after it was coined in England to describe religious zealots did it come to connote the devotion displayed by first American baseball spectators and later on film and music audiences of all nationalities (Duffet 2013). As the field of fan studies has grown larger, so have the attempts at finding a definition that encapsulates all aspects of fandom grown more numerous (albeit not necessarily more
successful). Henry Jenkins and John Tulloch (1995) differentiate between casual ‘followers’ and devoted ‘fans’ and emphasizes the social aspect of fandom; Matt Hills (2002) writes of ‘cult fans’ and argues that it is the duration of the devotion that determines whether or not one is a fan; Lawrence Grossberg (1992) describes the fan’s unique sensitivity to the favored object as a positive and emotionally charged process of identification. However, and as academic definitions are often wont to do, all these definitions fail to include every person who would identify as a fan and every practice we would define as fannish: if we are intensely invested in a book but never speak of it to another, are we not fans? If we fall in love with the TV series *Heroes* and spend a year writing five hundred pages of fan fiction before shifting our interest to another show, were we not fans? If we are deeply involved in the *Sherlock* fandom but have only a fleeting interest in the actual series, are we not fans?

Perhaps we need not be overly concerned about the lack of a fully encompassing and always applicable definition of our main object of study, especially not when considering that fandom practices, as all practices, are situated not only in space but in time; what is true of fandom today might not be true of it tomorrow, or yesterday. The sciences of religion seem to have managed quite well without one single definition, after all. Given the complexity of human beings and their behavior we are unlikely to do them justice if we strive to reduce them to one or two sentences, no matter how eloquent. However, engaging in scientific inquiry without making explicit the boundaries of our investigation is sloppy at best and hopelessly confusing at worst. The problem created by the need for clear definitions that are impossible to make is one best solved, I feel, by the adoption of momentary definitions, tailored to suit the study at hand. Thus: for the purposes of this study I will focus on fans as **persons to whom a cultural object has become an object of significance**. In terms of media fandoms in general and *Sherlock* in particular, this means persons who have an emotional stake in the development of the characters and plot; persons to whom it **matters** what happens in the story or to the characters.

**From Shakespeare to Star Trek**

In his comprehensive treatise on fans and fandom Mark Duffet (2013) notes that the word ‘fan’ as we commonly understand it today may be fairly new but the behavior and attitude it connotes are not; English Victorians scratched their names on the window panes of the cottage said to be the birthplace of William Shakespeare, singers Jenny Lind and Sarah Bernhardt sold merchandise during their international tours, and in 1887 admirers sent flowers
to American showman Buffalo Bill before ever seeing his show. But while fandom to some degree pre-existed modern media, there is little denying that the birth of sound recordings and moving pictures have served as the foundation of “the vast audiences and fan phenomena that dominated much of the twentieth century” (Duffet 2013:30). The first fan clubs were dedicated to actors and actresses rather than to specific movies or characters, and in 1926 over 75,000 people marched to the funeral home of Rudolph Valentino, rioting as they went. According to Duffet, this helped shape the media and mainstream perception of fans as dangerously obsessed for many years to come. Gradually, fandom – particularly that associated with music and film – came to be identified as primarily a youth phenomenon. The devotion of fans was not exclusively reserved for individual movie stars or singers, however; the still-running science fiction fan convention Worldcon was created in 1939 and the first James Bond movie was released in 1962. In the sixties and seventies TV shows like Star Trek and Doctor Who gained dedicated cult followings that survived the shows’ cancellations – and that were not content to simply watch the episodes but who started to write their own stories set in the fictional world. These stories – fan fiction – were sometimes gathered in fan-produced non-profit magazines – fan zines – and circulated via mail or sold at conventions. Before video players became common to most households, fans would listen to the sound recordings of old episodes or read summaries of them. Technical development has affected not only fan behavior but storytelling – the advent of Betamax and VHS offered fans the opportunity to re-watch their favorite episodes, which in turn allowed the writers to produce more complicated plots that rewarded repeat viewings. Fans with the right equipment and required know-how could produce fan videos, editing together various scenes to create their own stories or highlight certain aspects of the show. Since the tapes, like the fan zines and newsletters, were unofficial merchandise created by fans their existence was primarily communicated by word-of-mouth. Hard copies were made in the home of the creator and either mailed to buyers – who might in turn copy it for other fans free of charge – or sold at conventions. In his article on Doctor Who fans, Alan McKee (2001) notes that since fan zines typically had editors, the content was ‘policed’ and the discourses shared limited, which sometimes led to frustration amongst those whose views were not being represented.

Internet changed much of this; now everyone can express their opinion or share a piece of transformative work online and – at least in theory – have it seen by hundreds, thousands or potentially millions of people. For better and for worse, there is little to no censorship or

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4 This is not to suggest that Doctor Who and Star Trek fans invented fan fiction or fan zines; the first science fiction fan zine was published as early as 1930. (Stephen Perkins, quoted in Coppa 2006:42).
quality control. When fandom first moved online, it found its home in mailing lists, web rings and on dedicated online forums. Later, the blog platforms such as LiveJournal took over and reigned supreme for a few years. These days, one of the foremost hotspots for media fandom is Tumblr, where every day thousands upon thousands of text post, pictures, GIF-sets and other *Sherlock*-related content is created and shared between fans from all over the world (although predominately North America and Europe). It is where a majority of my informants participate in fandom and for this reason it has served as the main site of my fieldwork.

**Tumblr**

Tumblr was founded by software consultant David Karp and launched in 2007. Intrigued by the idea of microblogs, Karp grew tired of waiting for someone else to launch a platform for them and did so himself (Davis 2008). Microblogs are optimized for the spread and sharing of content (Kaplan & Haenlein 2011), via such functions as ‘reblogging’. It requires less time and effort than a traditional blog, as you do not typically create all of the content yourself; on Tumblr you can very well build up a faithful ‘audience’ of followers by reblogging only.

As you log onto Tumblr, you arrive directly to your dashboard where the latest posts made by the blogs you follow appear first. You can then scroll through them, or go into a specific blog (see the next picture) or a specific tag. If you hit the search field, your tracked tags will appear in a list and you can either choose one of them or search for a new tag/subject.
A reblogged post as it appears on the reblogger’s own blog. When you reblog a post you have the option of adding a comment or any other sort of content to it. As there are no message boards or forum, this is how public/open discussions are conducted on Tumblr. One post may get reblogged by various users adding different content, so in the end there might be dozens, hundreds or thousands variants of the same original post. These splintered discussions are hard to track both for individuals and researchers.

Tumblr operates in a fashion similar to Twitter, although on Tumblr you can post however long posts you wish, as well as any other type of media, including pictures, movies and sound. On your dashboard or ‘dash’ – the Tumblr equivalent of Facebook’s feed – the posts made on the blogs you follow will appear. As on Twitter and Facebook, you can both ‘like’ and ‘reblog’ (retweet/share) posts made by others. If the posts have been tagged, i.e. marked by the poster to signal type of content using hashtags, it will appear if you search for that sort of content and it is possible to track (follow) tags. “I found this gorgeous picture it in the Sherlock tag,” a Tumblr user might tell you, or “God, there’s so much hate in this tag right now.” Since Tumblr doesn’t allow for specific message boards or forums, engagement with likeminded fans primarily occurs in the tags, at least initially – as you begin to follow more blogs you may well find yourself spending less time in the tags.

“Everybody on Tumblr hates Benedict Cumberbatch,” a good friend remarked during a casual conversation. I gave her a disbelieving look: “What are you talking about? Everybody on Tumblr loves Benedict Cumberbatch!” We were both of us absolutely wrong, of course. As of December 1, 2014, there are over 213 million blogs hosted on Tumblr, according to the sites ‘About’ page (www.tumblr.com/about). They are dedicated to sports, fashion,
celebrities, media fandom, personal musings, cooking, social justice, and so on and so forth; there is no ‘everybody’ on Tumblr, and while it is very easy to assume otherwise when you spend all your time there surrounded by people who share your interests, there is not one single culture either. Even within the same fandom, smaller groups form around certain characters, ships or speculative discussions, and they need not necessarily be very aware of what is going on in other parts of the fandom:

I mean, everyone only sees fractions of the fandom, depending on who one follows. Like, sometimes there are discussions / scandals / "wars” in the fandom that I never get in contact with and only ever find the odd post saying "This current ship war is ridiculous, please stop it." or the like. (DoYourResearch, e-mail interview.)

Yet there are something common to all the users of Tumblr, i.e. the experience of interacting via and using this specific interface. The features and layout of the virtual space do affect how fandom is enacted, expressed and experienced, as noted by Rebecca Lucy Busker in her 2008 article on the traditional blog platform LiveJournal (Busker 2008). Both Tumblr and LiveJournal, which was the primary site of online media fan activity before Tumblr became the new hotspot, are multi-fandom; unlike the mailing lists and forums of old, the sites are not dedicated to one single fandom or interest. While some blogs are determinedly single-topic, most personal blogs are not. In combination with the user’s dash being made up of all the post the people they follow make, this makes for a space where you are ‘subjected’ to a lot of topics you might not (initially) be interested in. This does not only explain the spread of fandoms, as people discover new media object through the people they follow, but it also accounts – at least to some degree – for the many crossovers that is constantly occurring, not only in fic and art, but in ‘general’ text posts as well. Furthermore, it creates a particular type of meta fandom where everyone (‘everyone’ as in everyone involved with the media fandom side of Tumblr) are familiar with the basics (and sometimes specifics) of a great many media products they might never have consumed. The spread between various topics is not contained to various media products, either; in chapter 6 we will return to how common discourses on social justice and feminism intersect with fandom discourses to create new discussions and interpretations.

The reblogging option on Tumblr makes for a rapid spread of content, but it also serves to make invisible those posts that earn no reblogs; they appear once in the flowing feed and quickly disappear. Discussions suffer, as the lack of a single site collecting all comments and additions made to a post makes them difficult to track; one post might generate hundreds or
even thousands of conversation, but they rarely speak to each other. Perhaps this one-way style of communication can explain the sometimes very harsh debate climate on Tumblr. Then again; the rest of the net is hardly a haven of reasonable discussion either. Although the specifics of mediation do affect how and what are expressed and done, there are also practices and behavior that transcend medium. Some of the modern day fan activities listed below, such as the creation of GIF-sets, have gained popularity on Tumblr. Others, such as writing fan fiction, have been a favourite pastime of fans for a long time.

**Fan Activities of Today: A Glossary of the Words Fans Use to Describe Their Activities**

I reblog Sherlock fanart and some Sherlock gifsets/picsets. Sometimes I reblog other people’s fanfic or rec fanfic, but I don’t read much. Most primarily, I write fanfic – a lot of it. I just got finished with a 70,000 word Mysstrade story that’s taken me a solid five months of writing/editing. I enjoy reading some meta, but not the Johnlock/endgame meta (which just irritates me). I love the cinematography aspect of the show and could read about that for ages. I love behind-the-scenes content. I don’t fangirl Benedict Cumberbatch or Martin Freeman, but I am a big fan of Rupert Graves (his work and, er, visually) and Mark Gatiss (his work and his hands) – so I repost quite a bit of those. (Hobbes, e-mail interview)

**Canon/head-canon/fanon**

Appropriated from the word used to denote Biblical authoritative scripture, canon refers to textual truth; it is canon that Sherlock wears a Belstaff coat and that John and he live together at Baker Street 221B. It is not canon that John and he go ice skating every Christmas Day. However, it is never explicitly stated that they don’t go ice skating either, and a fan might imagine that they do; it might be the fan’s head-canon. Head-canons do not usually contradict canon, but rather complement or complete it; filling in the blanks, so to speak. If such a head-canon is shared by many fans it might be referred to as fanon. Among Mormor shippers – fans who think main villain Jim Moriarty ought to get together with his (non-existent) henchman, Sebastian Moran – it is commonly assumed that Jim has nicknamed Sebastian ‘Tiger’; it is fanon. As we will see when we turn to various interpretative strategies employed by fans, there is some disagreements over which statements should be considered canonical. Some argue that only what is shown or said in the text itself is canon, others refer to statements made by the cast and crew in interviews.
Ship/shipper

Ship is short for relationship, and refers to the romantic and/or sexual relationship between two (or more) characters; ships can be both fanon and canon. It can be used as both a noun and as a verb: Johnlock (John/Sherlock) is my favourite ship, I ship it/them so hard. Someone who ships something is a shipper; Lorna is a die-hard Mystrade (Mycroft/Lestrade) shipper. It is common for ships to be given a portmanteau, usually a contraction and mingling of the involved character’s names. A ship may also be referred to as a pairing. The acronym OTP stands for ‘one true pairing’, but contrary to the sound of it a person may have several OTP:s; rather than denoting the only pairing imaginable to the fan, it refers to a pairing they are particularly fond of. Sometimes groups of shippers engage in ship/shipping wars by arguing over which ship is better or more plausible. This is particularly common between two ships with one character in common. For instance, Johnlock and Sherlolly (Sherlock/Molly) might fight over whether Sherlock should or is more likely to end up John or Molly, usually backing up their claims and discrediting the others’ by pointing to various scenes and interactions between the characters.

Fan fiction/fan art/fan edit/fan videos/gif set/meta

As mentioned earlier, the fan practice of writing stories set in the fictional world and/or about the characters is at least half a century old; the product of such writings is called fan fiction, or fic for short. While some fans who write never share their stories with anyone else, many chose to publish their works online, either on their blogs or via various archive sites. Some archives are dedicated to one single fandom, and some are multi-fandom. The largest and most well-known of the latter is Fanfiction.net; the best regarded among Sherlock fans is the relatively new Archive of Our Own (destinationtoast 2014), which allows not only fiction but fan art – the drawn equivalent of fan fiction – and videos too. While fan art (generally) refers to drawn pictures, new images created by manipulating photos are referred to as edits or manips. Fans play with moving pictures as well, either using snippets from the series or other shows and movies featuring the relevant actors to create fan videos, or arranging GIFs in sequences that either recapture a scene or creates a new one in a gif set. The writing and recording of fan songs are not very common among fans on Tumblr, but do occur from time to time. Meta is shot for meta-analysis and refers to any discussion or fan authored essay dealing with the text or things linked to it, including fan works and behavior. It may be described as the exegesis of fandom.
Manip. Differing from an edit (see below) a manip often involves pasting a character or actors head to an already existing picture to suggest that the characters/actors have been involved in the situation depicted. Here we see Benedict Cumberbatch (Sherlock) and Martin Freeman’s (John) faces inserted in a romance novel cover to create a Johnlock scene.

Edit. Using a picture of Sherlock, the creator tweaked and added content to create a poster for the ‘I believe in Sherlock’ movement that was sparked by the last episode of the second season, “The Reichenbach Fall”.

GIF set. In the original virtual setting the pictures would be moving, each representing a small film clip in the form of a gif. They are taken from two different scenes in two different episodes (TRF and HLV) to illustrate – as the title suggests – how Sherlock and John make each other laugh before saying goodbye.

Fan art. An original picture by Shrlck depicting Jim Moriarty’s corpse being carried away by his employee Sebastian Moran. At the time of painting, Sebastian Moran had not appeared in the series, but fans extrapolated from his character in the original stories to create a henchman and lover for Moriarty.
Potentially because the source text is fairly short, spanning only nine episodes and 13 and a half hours, *Sherlock* fans are quite adept at dreaming up alternative versions of the stories, characters and world. This is not unique to the *Sherlock* fandom, but perhaps more prevalent than in other fandoms. The abbreviation **AU** stands for alternative universe, which is in other fandoms – such as *Star Wars* – means that the plot has developed differently than in canon; for instance, a fan might write an AU fic in which Luke doesn’t blow up the Death Star. On Tumblr and in the *Sherlock* fandom, however, such plot differences are referred to as **canon divergence** and AU denotes the characters appearing in a completely different universe, usually with completely different social roles and identities (see the picture below). Sometimes these take the form of **crossovers**; for instance by putting the *Sherlock* characters in Hogwarts, the magical school created by J. K. Rowling in her *Harry Potter* book series. This relatively common crossover/AU is called Potterlock, and the practice of naming particular genre of AU by adding –lock is one unique to the *Sherlock* fandom on Tumblr: balletlock, Bondlock, tunalock (in which all or some of the characters are, yes, tunas). The most well-known of these ‘-locks’ is Superwholock, the amalgam of three of the biggest media fandoms on Tumblr: *Supernatural*, *Doctor Who* and *Sherlock*. Sometimes an exclamation mark is added; ballet!lock, Bond!Lock, etc. The exclamation mark is used to mark a differentiation between the canon verse (‘universe’ is often shortened to ‘verse’) and the alternative interpretation and might be used to describe characters as well: dark!Sherlock, novelist!John, asexual!Mycroft. While it is a gross exaggeration to claim that all fan fiction and fan art are porn or smut, quite a bit of it is. The abbreviation **PWP** stands for either ‘plot, what plot?’ or ‘porn without plot’. **Kink** is something a person finds arousing (‘I have a military kink’), while **squick** is something off-putting (‘feces play is a major squick for me’/’I was really squicked by the last part of the fic’). In a sometimes problematic blending of terms, the word **trigger** is occasionally used instead of squick, which creates confusion and sometimes sparks debate as a trigger is clinically defined as stimuli that set off PTSD-related flashback or anxiety and panic attacks. Whether specific content creates a sense of mild aversion or a clinical state of acute distress, it is considered rude not to clearly mark it (this also serves to advertise the content to those who would find it kinky rather than squicky).
A summary of an AU Sherlock fic as it appears on Archive of Our Own. Apart from writing a summary description, the author uses tags to both describe the fic and to make it searchable. Tags usually include common warnings such as ‘major depictions of violence’ and ‘major character death’ (if applicable), as well as things that might be a kink, squick or trigger to some people. At the bottom of the picture you see the statistics associated with the fic; word count, chapters, comments left by other users or the author, kudos (the equivalent of a ‘like’ on Facebook), bookmarks to indicate how many users have saved the fic in their private collection, and number of hits, i.e. how many times someone has opened the link to the actual story.

Fandom Research and Fan Studies

What has been offered above is but a very cursory and somewhat narrow look at the fandom of the past and of today. Not only have I chosen to focus on the aspects most relevant to the practices of the fans of my study; the account of fandoms past that I summarize is the history of fandom as told by (primarily Western) fan scholars. While not incorrect in its details, the account is decidedly US- and Euro-centric and emphasizes celebrity, music and media fandom over others. This is not surprising, perhaps, considering that I have actively sought out the literature and activities relevant to my own interests. Nor is it necessarily a flaw, since the object of this study is not to scrutinize the history of fandom but to examine the practices of the fans of a Western media product. However, when we reproduce specific accounts of fandom in text such as this we would do well to remember that the abundance of academic texts on a certain subject doesn’t always correspond with the subject’s status ‘in the real world’. Fan scholars have written scores of texts on Doctor Who and Star Trek, giving the

5 Something which Mark Duffet, whose account of the history of fandom I am largely drawing upon, himself notes. (Duffet 2013:48.)
impression that these fandoms have been of particular importance in the formation of modern fandom, but perhaps we should see the primacy of such texts as reflections of the scholar’s own preferences. Studying what you love has been a perfectly acceptable, if not always uncontested, practice in fan studies for over 20 years (Hills 2002, 2013; Jenkins 2006; Hellekson & Busse 2006).

The already mentioned fan scholar Mark Duffet differentiates between fandom research and fan studies. The former represents the many studies – primarily but not exclusively sociological, psychological or anthropological – that focus on fandom. This multidisciplinary body of work is less cohesive and much broader than fans studies, which have developed out of cultural studies and into a distinct field over the past twenty years (Duffet 2013:24). 1992 saw the publication of Henry Jenkin’s seminal work Textual Poaches which, alongside Constance Penley’s Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Study of Popular Culture and Camille Bacon-Smith’s ethnographic account of female Star Trek fans, Enterprising Women, marked the birth of fan studies. Although Jenkins never uses the term in Textual Poachers, he is often named the first aca fan; an academic who is also a fan, and who consciously writes from a position of immersion – a stance I have obviously adopted in this piece of writing. This was a markedly different approach from the one previously employed by the scholars who chose to study and theorize fandom:

Theodor Adorno was one of the first researchers to theorize fans, and he certainly did not identify as one. He and his contemporaries drew on the idea of textual determinism⁶ to paint the pictures of fans as victims of clever manipulation; popular music served to distract the masses from real issues (Adorno 1978, Duffet 2013). While this notion of a modern day, mass mediated panem et circenses still survives to some degree, most later fan scholars⁷ have dismissed Adorno by pointing to the fact that fans – and audiences in general – are not passive receptacles of fixed meanings. Texts always need to be interpreted, and meaning does not exist independent of interpretation⁸. Reader-response criticism was formulated in response to both formalism and, most specifically, New Criticism and focuses on the reader’s role as an

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⁶ The idea of textual determinism derives from the work of Claude Elwood Shannon and Warren Weaver (1948, cited in Duffet 2013:105), who suggested a model wherein the text delivered fixed meaning as determined by the sender to the receiver. Textual determinism posits that since specific meaning is inherent in the text it will influence the readers in a certain and predictable manner.

⁷ Although Matt Hills (2002) makes an effort to partly redeem Adorno, and Mark Duffet (2013:110) notes that “all too often Adorno’s work has been selectively read in ways that have missed its useful points [...] in various ways media producers do wield considerable power and constantly encourage us to collude with their agenda.”

⁸ Admittedly, this statement is a stance on the ontology of texts that not everyone will agree on; however, the study at hand focuses on what the text means to individual fans and is not an attempt to assess the true, objective meaning of Sherlock (if such can be said to exist).
interpreter and argues that rather than decoding a text’s inherent message the reader actively creates it; only through their interpretation does the text become a meaningful whole. By drawing on experiences, expectations, cultural repertoires and narrative conventions among other things, the reader make sense of the text (Tompkins 1980). However, reader-response criticism has not been a dominant theoretical framework within either fandom research or fan studies, where the study of a fan’s relationship to the producer and the producer’s supposed intent has been privileged; in the eighties fans were often seen as either resistant or compliant in their readings, and when Michel De Certeau (1984) introduced the idea of fans as travellers and poachers – who take from the text only that which is appealing to them – he wrote in opposition to this sharp dichotomy. In Textual Poachers Henry Jenkins draws on De Certeau to describe the fan as someone who actively creates meaning by selective readings. Jenkins spends a chapter on how fans of the ill-fated American TV series Beauty and the Beast interpreted the favoured text and, eventually, ‘fell out of love’ with it when the death of the heroine put an end to the romantic saga they had seen as integral to the show. Some twenty years later, this remains one of very few developed account of evolving fan response in academia. While there exists many studies of the interpretative work done by readers, they often focus on media literacy and how fans draw upon other sources to makes sense of the text at hand (see, for instance, Hills & Williams 2005, Lamerichs 2012) or how interpretative communities negotiate meaning (McKee 2001, Jenkins 2012). While I do spend some time elaborating on how fan makes use of both extra-textual sources and each other in their sense-making process, I am primarily interested in the fluctuations and variations in fan response as it unfolds; interpretation is an on-going process, and meaning continually made anew. While this is a fact acknowledged by most fan scholars, not much attention has been paid to the actual study of it. In the 2013 addendum to Textual Poachers Henry Jenkins notes that the lack of close studies of evolving fan reception in academic writing is both curious and unfortunate, and it is in part this lack this study attempts to address.

Although still a young field, there have been several scholarly works which critically examine the dominant discourses and methodologies of fan studies; below I will consider how an anthropological approach might serve to address some of these perceived lacks.

**Fan Studies and Anthropology**

In several ways, anthropology has been present as a part of fan studies ever since the field’s inception. The commonly-employed ethnographic approach and the study of cultures – in this
case fan cultures — where and when they happen carries with them the anthropological sensibilities of presence and participation. Yet many fan studies scholars are not anthropologists, and while that in and of itself certainly isn’t a problem — I am personally a vehement advocate of interdisciplinary approaches — a more wholesale9 adoption of anthropological ideas might help us deal with some of the difficulties encountered in earlier fan studies:.

In *Fan Cultures* Matt Hills (2002) posits that the tendency of aca fans to focus almost exclusively on fandoms that they are a part of leads to a fragmentation of knowledge; rather than contributing general theories of fandom and, by extension, mankind, fan studies merely provide snap shots of cultural expressions. At the same time, and as noted by Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (2006), many of the accounts of fandom that claim to provide general theories—such as Bacon-Smith’s monograph on the female *Star Trek* fans—base them on one single case study. Admittedly, anthropology often aims to find the general in the particular (Boellerstorff et al. 2012:176ff), using specific instances of human behavior to address universal issues such as kinship, identity and religion. Whether or not this is a useable approach depends on the data you consider and the generalizations you feel justified drawing from them; in this study I propose a theory of a (supposedly) universal cognitive process, and then test its validity by applying it to the meaning-making practices of *Sherlock* fans. The problem with Bacon-Smith’s study, for instance, is that she identified one aspect—namely the hurt/comfort genre that centers on one character being hurt and another providing comfort — as central to the female *Star Trek* fans she studied and came to the conclusion that this focus was “the emotional heart and secret” of all fandom (Hellekson & Busse 2006:19). Fandom is not homogenous, and the practices of fans are situated in both time and space, as are the academic discourses used to explain them; I believe that the anthropological notion of considering human behavior in context allows us to better remember this, and the long tradition of extrapolating the general from the particular gives us a rather good grasp of what might reliably extrapolated from each specific case. Additionally, due to more than a hundred years of doing participant observation, anthropology knows a thing or two about the importance of taking into account the lived experiences of people, without giving up the ambition of critical academic analysis.

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9 The fact that many of the social sciences and humanities have adopted ethnography as a valid method is on the one hand a testament to its usefulness, but on the other hand it leaves anthropology somewhat at a loss — how to frame ourselves as a unique and separate discipline when our defining method has been appropriated by scholars from all fields? And how to deal with the fact that what others might term ethnography does not live up to the standards of anthropological research?
2. Method: Who I Am And What I Did

The key is to remember that humans are still human, and that technology only connects and sometimes even amplifies that humanness ("Digital Ethnography," 2011).

Ever since Malinowski, we anthropologists have prided ourselves of our immersion in the field; we do not merely observe cultures, we live them, we participate (Geertz 1973). For a great long time that meant leaving home and travelling to the far corners of the Earth, preferably to a society as untouched by ‘civilization’ as possible. Today we have – thankfully – moved beyond the notion of ‘primitive’ cultures, as Adam Kuper so beautifully demonstrates in The Reinvention of Primitive Societies (Kuper 2005), but most (although certainly not all) anthropologists still elect to study societies other than their own. Furthermore, the visited site has often (although certainly not always) been one of clear boundaries; a village or a city for instance (Boellstorff et al. 2012). Not so with this study – the culture I examine is multi-sited and the interactions I study occur primarily online.

Additionally, it is a culture I was (too some degree) already familiar with and involved in. Neither of these facts are inherently problematic or of value; but they must, by necessity, affect how the fieldwork was carried out and what results it yielded.

The empirical data considered in this study were gathered over a period of four months, during which I spent a rather large chunk following the various discussions, interactions and posts taking place and being made on the micro-blogging platform site Tumblr. In addition, I conducted 22 individual in-depth interviews via e-mail and four individual in-depth interviews face to face. I arranged three offline watch-alongs, one for each season and with three to five fans, and these were followed by group-discussions/semi-structured group interviews. I also arranged one online watch-along of season three with three to six participants. Finally, I hosted seven group chats, three of which were fairly unstructured and three dedicated to specific topics that I had identified as being of special interest during my fieldwork. The seventh chat was held after the first draft of the thesis had been submitted to

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10 ‘We’ as in most anthropologists; Kuper spends a chapter of his book critiquing the reemerging ‘romantic savage’ narrative utilized by certain indigenous people movements.

11 While I have conducted several watch-alongs, group chats and individual interviews in the physical world (and I choose this term because the commonly used abbreviation ‘IRL’ – in real life – suggests that interactions facilitated by internet are not real, an assertion I and most other online ethnographers take a strong stance against) and while fans do get together to watch the show or talk about, the fact remains that most of media fandom happens online.
all informants, giving them a chance to comment on and discuss it; these comments were subsequently considered during the editing of the draft.

**Why Sherlock? Why Tumblr?**

The choice to focus on *Sherlock* fans made for several reasons; firstly, it is one of the most active online fan communities which offer ample opportunities to study the on-going meaning-making process that I am interested in. Secondly, I deemed that my familiarity with the community would afford me a deeper understanding of the data provided by informants and field-work. From my own personal engagement with the *Sherlock* fandom I had a general idea of what specific themes and characters were particularly favoured by large parts of the fanbase, and I began my investigation in the tags related to those themes and characters; as the inquiry progressed, I allowed the nature of the content I found set the path, moving on from tag to tag, blog to blog. One might question whether or not this can be considered participant observation; I did, after all, not exactly participate. It is not entirely clear how one is supposed to do that on Tumblr; while a lot of people create original content, most do not. Going through the tags, scrolling through your dash, liking a couple of posts, reblogging a few others; these are the most common actions on Tumblr, and these are the ones I engaged in. I chose not to take part by reblogging certain posts and adding my thoughts to them in the hopes of provoking a discussion since A, the chance of this strategy succeeding seemed slim, B, adding critical or questioning content to a fan post is often considered rude\(^\text{12}\), and C, adding something positive and celebratory that I did not truly mean would be dishonest.

Finally (and perhaps obviously), I chose this field of study because am fascinated by the *Sherlock* fandom, and if you are going to spend months upon months delving into a specific subject you had better make it one you are truly interested in. As noted above, making your own fascination the object of study has a long-standing tradition in fan studies.

Another challenge concerns how to define a community when it cannot be easily demarcated with reference to a specific place (but then again, this is true of non-site-specific offline communities as well). If you take as the object of study the interactions and activities of a specific mailing list or forum, the problem of defining boundaries might not prove very problematic, but if you study a phenomenon stretching over several platforms or taking place both off- and online things quickly turns rather complicated (Boellstorff et al. 2012). It might,

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\(^{12}\)’Don’t tag your hate’ is a common caution on Tumblr, based on the assumption that people track and go into the tags they like and thus they don’t want to see them filled up with others posting negative things about their favourite thing. Sometimes this caution is followed, and sometimes it is not.
for instance, be difficult to establish that the group or culture that you are studying is a cohesive group or culture at all. This is a topic often debated by fan scholars, who sometimes points to Benedict Anderson’s (1991) ‘imagined communities’, sometimes discusses communities of play or interest instead (Pearce 2011), or sometimes reject the notion of online communities being anything other than ‘real’ (Wilson & Peterson 2002). What unites media fans is usually not shared face-to-face encounters, but rather a shared interest – but are all those who share the interested part of a fandom community? Not necessarily, as evident by some of my respondents telling me that they don’t actually engage in any fandom related activities, but simply enjoy and ponder the series in solitude. While ‘the Sherlock fandom’ can be used to sweepingly denote all Sherlock fans, it doesn’t make sense to speak of it as one unified fandom, or one community, since different parts of the fandom and different clusters of Sherlock fans might exist quite independently of each other. On Tumblr the fans share both an interest and a space, which leads to the emergence of shared discourses and a common language/codes; I think it fair to speak of the Sherlock fandom on Tumblr as a community in that sense. However, one needs to be aware of the fact that the Sherlock community is large and divided into a great many subgroups; as a fan of Jim Moriarty (the main antagonist of the series) I was, for instance, not very familiar with the narrative interpretations and ideas that fans of Greg Lestrade (a recurring minor character) take for granted. While there are knowledge and ideas shared by (almost) all Sherlock fans on Tumblr, what might be common truth to one part of the fandom might be completely unknown – or completely unrealistic – to another.

As noted earlier, Sherlock has been sold to over 221 territories and it seems reasonable to assume that we can find fans of the series almost all over the globe. Not all of these fans participate in the online fandom, and of those who do, not everyone is active on Tumblr. Yet I have chosen this specific site as my main field, because while not nearly all of the Sherlock fandom activities take place on Tumblr, there are a lot of Sherlock fans present there. Other sites I might have considered are the fan fiction forum Archive of Our Own, YouTube, LiveJournal or dedicated Facebook groups. While studying several sites, their connections and differences, would have been interesting, this is not the topic of this study and for the purposes of doing a qualitative inquiry of meaning-making it seemed more prudent to focus on one site.
Online Ethnography

Once our mark of distinction, ethnography remains anthropology’s trademark even as other numerous other disciplines have adopted the method. Ethnography is both a methodological process and the product of that process; by the systematic study of cultures we aim to provide as true and full an account of them as we are able. This is partly achieved by personal engagement – what Malinowski (1922:25) described as “grasp[ing] the native’s point of view”. To understand a culture\(^{13}\), subculture or cultural phenomenon we need to understand what it means to its members. In order to reach such an understanding we engage in participant observation, but usually also combines it with interviews, life histories, discourse and conversational analysis, and documentation in the form of photographs and videos (Hobbs 2006). Online ethnography\(^{14}\), then, is simply the process and product of studying an internet-based culture or culture as it occurs online.

Actually, there is very little that is simple about it, but we’ll get back to the shortly. First let us consider the development of online anthropological fieldwork:

Gabriella Coleman (2010), who has studied hacker culture and internet activism, claims that anthropologists were slow to start studying digital media\(^{15}\). What research there was in the nineties focused primarily on the potentially revolutionary aspects of new media; this idea has later met with criticism for ascribing to technology the inherent and autonomous power to bring about change, when in actuality social systems and relationships might just as well be reproduced and reinforced as be transformed on new media platforms. With the rapture of the dot-com bubble, the talk of a brave new digital world subsided to a murmur – only to rise in volume again when 2004 saw the birth of Web 2.0\(^{16}\). While the notion of digital media as underpinning an unparalleled emancipatory project remained (rightly) criticized, with scholars

\(^{13}\) Culture remains a contested term, both in and outside of anthropology (Kuper 1999). I don’t presume or aim to provide an exhaustive definition here, but ascribe to the idea of culture as a shared production/reproduction and understanding of symbols, artifacts and actions. This is admittedly vague and hard to delineate, but so is the phenomenon the term denote; culture is fluid, changeable and to be found in the doing rather than in the being. Lacking a clear way demarcate ‘one culture’, the differentiation between culture and subculture becomes somewhat difficult to make, but we may consider a subculture a set of symbols, artifacts and actions as understood by only a minority of a group of culture members (this is not an unproblematic definition, as the issue of delimitation remains, but perhaps it is as close as we can get without a long discussion and several addendums that unfortunately have no place in this study).

\(^{14}\) Online ethnography is sometimes referred to as digital ethnography or virtual ethnography (and sometimes those terms take on a slightly different meaning, i.e. virtual ethnography might refer to ethnographies of explicitly virtual worlds such as Second Life or World of Warcraft).

\(^{15}\) Digital media can refer to variety of non-analogous media; cell phones, apps and – most commonly – the internet.

\(^{16}\) Web 2.0 is a term to describe the cumulative change of the internet from static webpages (created by one person or organization, passively viewed by everyone else) to interactive spaces, including social networking platforms, blogs, video sharing, etc.
pointing to issues of access and capacity, an emerging interest in the “groups, practices, and communicative genres that are underwritten and sustained via engagement with digital technology” led to many anthropologists to recognize that “groups substantially can and do culturally dwell in digital technology” (Coleman 2010:490). The sharp distinction between on- and offline is increasingly blurred as digital media is increasingly incorporated in our everyday lives; with our smartphone in our pocket, when are we truly offline? Yet the distinction remains in much of anthropological literature, notes Coleman. At the heart of the discourse is the notion that what happens online isn’t really real – or only real insofar as it facilitates an offline relationship or interest. However, and as both Coleman and Garcia et al. (2009) points out in their overviews of ethnographic approaches to new media, not only does digital media play a large part in our supposedly ‘offline’ lives, but there are communities, relationships and phenomena that take place primarily or exclusively online, with the participants never meeting in the physical world. Thus there are plenty of reasons to both include online interactions in our study of offline cultures and communities, and to study the cultures and communities that exist solely online. But to do so, we need to consider how our methods must be adjusted to suit the different nature of our field (Garcia et al., 2009). Although the underlying notion of participation and contextualized understanding remain whether we spend our time on the Trobiand islands or in our office with our eyes glued to a computer screen, the specific ways in which we participate, observe, collect data and conduct interviews are by necessity quite different. This offers opportunities as well as difficulties, of both practical and ethical nature, and these need to be carefully considered both before, during and after the fieldwork.

Difficulties, Opportunities and Practical Solutions

As is sometimes the case, one of the greatest strengths of online ethnography is also its greatest weakness. On the one hand the nature of communication means that you, in many cases, can follow the entirety of the social exchange as it occurs online; join a forum or a mailing list, and the discussions you read and participate in will be the culture (barring private messages and the like). The text you wish to dissect is there for you to see as the other users see it – and in many cases you don’t even need to transcribe it (McKee 2001)! However, the fact that the interaction is text also means that text (or pictures, or gifs, or videos) is all you have to go on: no body-language, no intonation, none of the myriad of subtle hints that make up a lot of human communication. Ideally, the writer has accounted for this, making an effort
to express themselves clearly or with the help of the culturally defined codes of communication, but the researcher still needs to be aware of the limitations of the medium.

This ‘reading of texts’ calls for a different set of skills, compared to the interpersonal ones employed in face to face encounters (Garcia et al. 2009). One of the reasons that I choose to combine my online investigations with a few offline interviews and watch-alongs was to have the offline data serve as a sort of corrective to my analysis of the online data; in the case of offline informants who were also active on Tumblr, I could study how they related to the discourses prevalent there, and record a more spontaneous exchange as they shared a space as well as time. It was also motivated by a desire to compare and contrast narratives and discourses between Tumblr-users and non-Tumblr-users, since I am interested to how meaning is created and negotiated communally and (supposedly) shaped by our social context.

To say that I entered the field in early July 2014 is both true and untrue; I had been an active part of the Sherlock fandom on Tumblr for about two years when my fieldwork commenced. However, at this time I went from ‘mere’ participant to observing participant and I began to explore parts of the fandom other than those I myself was actively involved in. I created a separate blog account for my thesis work and spent the first month of fieldwork lurking ‘in the tags’. This strategy both raises and was the result of questions about presence, presentation and participation:

While gaining access to a field in the physical world can be difficult, once you are there, you are there – physically present and with your existence obvious to everyone in your immediate vicinity. Online fields can be both easier and harder to enter; on the one hand, the fact that everything that is going on is laid out for you to see (unless it’s a closed forum) makes lurking – the practice of following a discussion or the like without contributing and without your presence being obvious – both possible and easy. However, while lurking can to some degree be construed as participant observation (since a lot of people do lurk, and thus you are sharing their experience), the practice offers limited opportunities for full understanding since you do not engage with the other participants. It also raises a number of ethical concerns:

Since a lot of the data we need are ‘out there’ it might be tempting for the ethnographer to simply take what they need, gathering texts, comments and pictures without their creator ever learning about it. Citing fair use, copy right infringement need not be a worry (as long as we cite our sources properly). Yet anthropologists reject the notion of going undercover and pretending to be something we are not in order to gain access to otherwise closed fields. Is
hiding in safe invisibility granted by the particulars of the media so different? While it doesn’t involve active deception, it still robs the ‘informants’ of their right to decline to participate. Yet one might argue that texts and photos posted in a public forum should be construed as public speech – the ones who posted them are aware that they have made it available for anyone with access to the internet. And if it is public speech, it – like an actual public speech, a newspaper article or a televised discussion – may be freely analyzed and dissected (Boellestorff et al. 2012). But should these internet posts be construed as public speech? While the posters know that the content they have posted theoretically might be viewed and used by anyone, they might not have thought it likely that it actually would be seen by anyone outside of the intended community. Naïve, perhaps – but an assumption arguably based on the experience of this being the case. The dilemma is not easily solved; as ethical anthropologists and human beings we need to be sensitive to the feelings and well-beings of those we would make our objects of study – yet we cannot let the opinions of our informants to completely rule us, as that would make chroniclers rather than analysts (which is not to say that chroniclers don’t fill an important function, just that I do not aim to be one). It seems to me that the judgment of whether something posted online is public or private speech needs to be made on a case to case basis and founded on an honest appraisal of whether the creator of content could reasonably expect their speech to be appropriated beyond the intended use. In this case, I determined that since Tumblr posts are visible even to people without Tumblr accounts themselves (and that users are typically very aware of this), they can reasonably be considered public speech – asking permission to cite posts was not necessary. However, I have restricted myself to tagged posts and reblogs of tagged posts; while tagging can be and is used for archival purposes, it is primarily a communicative tool; you tag your content so that people will see it when they go through the relevant tag; you consciously make your content available and visible to people other than those who follow you or happen to stumble over your blog. While people are theoretically aware that even a non-tagged post on a personal blog might be read by anyone, it is my estimation that people do not expect it to be; they do not intend it to be, and thus I have abstained from citing such posts without express permission.

Another ethical issue, and one I have already briefly touched upon, concerns the matter of identity and presentation of self. As we have previously established, entering an online field unseen is in many cases very easy; entering one with the full knowledge of the community members can be very challenging indeed. Since we are not physically present it is sometimes difficult to announce our presence in a way that we can be reasonably sure makes it obvious
to everyone concerned. This is even more problematic on a site such as Tumbler: while it is perfectly possible to post such an announcement, the post will soon disappear in the quick flow of new content and there is no guarantee that even those scrolling the tags you have marked the post with will see it. Again, based on my conclusion that tagged Tumblr post may be considered public speech, I determined that it was not necessary to make myself known to everyone who considered themselves a member of the *Sherlock* community on Tumblr (which is just as well, since it would have been impossible; as it was, I was spared having to weight the importance of the study against ethical considerations).

It may be also be difficult to convince others of our legitimate interest and honest intentions, since we cannot back up our professed identity (García et al. 2009). Additionally, it is not uncommon for participants of various online sub-cultures to be particularly sensitive to matters regarding the protection of their own identity – this is particularly true of closed groups or communities, but goes for members in open communities as well. For instance, a few of my informants expressed worry that their offline friends and acquaintances would learn of their fondness for reading homoerotic stories. This makes for a situation where we need to consider very carefully how to present ourselves in a way that is honest, transparent and confidence-inspiring. While not able to make a fandom wide introduction of myself, the description blurb on my research blog stated the purpose of it, and when I posted to ask for people to participate in the study by being interviewed I added a detailed research description (see Appendix A). All subsequent posts linked to it for clarity and transparency. My request for interviewees and participants in online group chats and watch-alongs resulted in 27 people expressing an interest of being interviewed, and about half of them also wanted to participate in group chats and watch-alongs. Out of the 27, five never responded to the first batch of questions I sent out (see Appendix B). Apart from collecting general data such as age, nationality and the like, the standardized first batch of questions were meant to gauge the informant’s specific areas of interest and once they had responded I sent them individual follow-up questions. While participant observation on Tumblr proved hard, the interviews offered an unusual opportunity for it. Since it is a common practice for media fans to engage in discussions about their favoured text, and since these discussions are an on-going process of making sense of the text (creating/maintaining/negotiating significance in the terms of this thesis), the interviews provided an excellent way for me both to engage in said practice and to observe it. Rather than simply asking questions, I often offered my own opinions, creating a dialogue between to fans rather than ‘merely’ doing an interview. I employed the same tactic in the offline interviews and all of the group chats and watch-alongs.
The interviews typically consisted of three sets of questions and answers/discussion – filling everything from six pages to thirty Word pages of text – and could feasibly have gone on for much longer. However, as the fieldwork neared its end I was (to my regret, as I had been enjoying myself tremendously) forced to inform my interviewees that communications would have to cease for the time being as I needed to move on the next stage of thesis work. Before this I had first arranged three group-chats (taking place in a private chat room), inviting those who had expressed an interest in participating in such to join me for a conversation about *Sherlock*. They were also invited to submit questions or topics they were personally interested in exploring beforehand, as I wanted to see what they liked to talk about, rather than directing the conversation. For both group-chats and watch-alongs I asked everyone to choose a completely random nickname so that they might not be identified by the other participants. Everyone I interviewed individually, off- and online, and all the participants in the online activities were promised anonymity and have been given false names in the following text. Potentially identifying personal details have been altered if mentioned in the text. Obviously it was impossible to keep the identities of the participants in the offline watch-along and group chats a secret from the others, but they have still been given pseudonyms in the text.

Near the end of my field work I arranged another three online group chats, this time focusing on three topics that I had identified as the specific areas I wanted to address in my analysis. Those were Johnlock, Sally Donovan and The Fall (the big mystery of the last episode of the second season, wherein Sherlock fakes his death by jumping off a roof). These group chats were semi-structured, and while I posed questions I also encouraged the participants to discuss with each other rather than just answering me. Apart from inviting my interviewees, I also posted an open invitation for anyone interested to participate on Tumblr; I did the same for the online watch-along of season 3. All informants were sent a copy and invited to offer comments and participate in a group chat about the contents.

The choice to arrange watch-alongs in the first place was partly inspired by Will Brooker’s monograph on *Star Wars* fans, *Using the Force* (2002), in which is joins four *Star Wars* fans and friend for a marathon. Not only is this a fairly common way for fans to engage in their fandom together, but the spontaneous exchanges and discussions between fans as they watch also provide ample opportunity to study the real-time process of making sense of a text. During an online watch-along, each participant watches the episode/s in question in their home, turning them on at an agreed upon time so that everyone’s timing is synced. While watching, the participants chat about what occurs on screen (and sometimes about other things as well). This was the least structured of all the activities, with me joining in as my
‘usual fan self’; exclaiming in delight whenever Moriarty appeared, pointing to the plot holes in the explanation Sherlock offers of how he survived jumping off a building, and speculating over whether Mary Morstan meant to kill Sherlock or not when she shoots him in “His Last Vow”. I did the same during the offline watch-alongs, but the necessity to take notes of what the others said limited my participation somewhat. The offline watch-alongs were followed by audio recorded group chats with the participants, during which I asked both general questions and questions relating to what had been said during the watch-alongs. To find participants for these, I posted announcements in relevant forums\textsuperscript{17} on Facebook and invited actual friends who happened to be \textit{Sherlock} fans (some of which are active on Tumblr, some are not). The watch-alongs took place in my home with three to five participants, excluding me, and each of the three watch-alongs were dedicated to one season. Some of the participants joined in for more than one watch-along. None of them were interviewed individually. The four offline individual interviews took place either in my home or in Stockholm, and participants for those were once again found on Facebook. The interviews were audio recorded and lasted between one and three and a half hours.

\textbf{“A Particularly Curious Fan”: Positionality and Bias}

During the course of the fieldwork I consistently emphasized my identity as a \textit{Sherlock} fan, leading DoYourResearch to declare that she would treat me as the header’s ‘particularly curious fan’. Studying a community you are yourself a part of raises a number of questions regarding positionality and bias (although since there are no ‘innocent’ viewpoints any position the researcher might take or hold raises similar concerns). While being part of a group can blind one to certain peculiarities of it or make one predisposed to focus on the positive rather than the negative, it – I believe – also reduces the tendency to generalize ‘the Other’, since the subjects of study does not constitutes such Other\textsuperscript{18}. As Mark Duffet (2013:75) writes: “I’m not saying anything about fans that I wouldn’t say about myself.” On the other hand, there is always a risk of expecting other members of the same group to share one’s own feelings and ideas, which can lead to presumptuous interpretations of the data; I have tried to abstain from such assumptions and instead ask my informants to detail their own understanding and experience.

\textsuperscript{17} Such as the group for Swedish Sherlockians and the group of the Uppsala faction of Geek Women Unite!
\textsuperscript{18} This is, admittedly, a claim that needs to be qualified; as Matt Hills and others (Hills 2002, Yodovitch 2014) have pointed out we constantly positions ourselves not only against non-fans but against ‘bad’ or ‘different’ fans of the same text as well.
Of course, one might question to which degree I have actually been a member of the specific groups I have studied; while a *Sherlock* fan, I have never been a Johnlock fan, and never particularly interested in Sally Donovan. *I am* emotionally invested in the truth about The Fall but have not participated or even followed the various online discussions about it. In fact, a several points did I experience dismay and distress when confronted by fans who interpreted the texts so very, very differently from the way I did. Not only did they emphasize the importance of their favoured aspects over mine; sometimes they denied the existence of my favourite aspects altogether. While upsetting at the time, it did allow me to feel and better understand the process I was studying and rather than shying away from my own experiences I have incorporated them into the analysis; this is a study of *Sherlock* fans, and I am one of those. At times, it makes for a somewhat self-centered text where I spend more time detailing my own feelings and actions than is, perhaps, usual. Such detailing is not entirely unheard of however, neither in fan studies with its aca fans, nor in anthropology, where the last few decades has seen autoethnography become a recognized genre (Chang 2008). Although this text makes common cause with autoethnography in that my own experience is very much presented and analyzed as part of the narrative, it does not embrace the (occasional) postmodernism connotations of the term; I do not seek to reduce any knowledge yielded by social research to mere constructions (Ellingson & Ellis 2008), but instead the elaboration on my own involvement is partly done for the sake of transparency, as it shows how my own experiences and emotions have shaped my understanding of other fans, but also serves as a test of the analytical frame used to consider the data provided by my informants: if a conclusion seemed to simplistic and reductive when used to account for my experience, it is likely equally simplistic and reductive when used to account for the experience of others.

Traditionally, anthropologists have entered foreign fields. So did I, a little over two years ago when I first created a Tumblr account, learned to navigate the site and became familiar with the language of my new people. Is the experience so very different from the one I would have had if I had entered the field not as a fan but as a researcher? Very few of us are born into fandom; at one point or another, we have all been outsiders, newcomers, stepping into a new world of unknown codes and rules. Perhaps my experience would have been vastly different; I am inclined to think not. And in either case, and since we cannot know, I believe that the same sensibilities remain whether we enter a field as in- or outsiders; be aware of your bias, consider how your collection and interpretation of data might be skewed by it and – most importantly – present the data and your analysis of it in as detailed and clear a way as
possible in order to enable the reader to determine the validity and potential pitfalls of your conclusions.

Narrative Theory and Analysis

As I later move on to consider how Sherlock fans have reacted to and interpreted specific aspects of the show, I aim to demonstrate how various narrative responses to the evolving text serve as coping strategies employed to maintain a sense of significance without rejecting the text as a source of the same. This I have achieved by studying the interpretative narratives formed by my informants; how do they tell the story of Sherlock, and why? Since my object of study is the fan’s search for significance – how they make sense of a text, how it is given and understood as containing meaning – I have focused on how fans interpret the text, and how such interpretations are formed, justified, shared and negotiated. I have, in short, focused on the narratives and discourses spun around and in relation to the text.

The difference between narratives and discourses are not clear-cut; the concepts overlap, as do the analytical tools employed to identify and examine them. In somewhat simplified terms we might say that narrative analysis focus on specific stories and accounts, which in turn relate and invoke one or several discourses (Reissman 2008). Discourses are defined by Mark Duffet as “widely shared and socially legitimated ways of talking about things”, adding that “fans often form communities – whether online or offline – which share interpretations via discursive means” (Duffet 2013:146). Narratives, on the other hand, typically center on an event (i.e. contain an element of change), on actions and/or characters, which are brought together by some sort of plotline (Ochs & Capp 1996). In this study I focus primarily on narratives – in the way the text is interpreted as a subjectively meaningful story – although I also touch upon the discourses pervading them, as when identifying common themes to Johnlock-shippers accounts of Mary Morstan’s role in the show and considering how these accounts serve to maintain and/or transform significance (by asking if and how the narrative and its meaning change as a result of her inclusion).

Narratives might be considered from a structuralist point of view with a focus on story grammar (Labov 1972), from a sociological angle where the political, social and cultural context of the story is studied (Plummer 1996), or from a functional perspective in which particular attention is paid to what the story does for the teller; how it serves to make the world understandable and meaningful (Bruner 1990). I mainly make use of the latter approach when analyzing the narratives, as what I seek to examine is how the fans make sense of the
text. Yet I also – and to a much larger degree than I had initially anticipated – consider how a narrative’s content and form is shaped and negotiated socially; the process of sense-making. However, such questions were not primarily answered by the application of narrative analysis but rather by studying how fans interact, and how they relate to extra-textual sources of text-related information, such as utterances by actors or the original works of Arthur Conan Doyle.

Narrative theory is built on the assumption that people are inherently pattern-seeking, sense-making storytellers and posits that we do not only re-tell the event as it happened; we do – to some degree – create the event, as noted by anthropologists Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capp back in 1996. Our accounts will never perfectly capture all the details of what has occurred, and by the conscious or unconscious choice to leave out some details and highlight others, we formulate its meaning. While narratives spring from our lived experiences, our lived experience is in turn shaped by the narratives; in and through them we make sense of the world. Seldom do we spin a narrative around the very ordinary, unremarkable aspects of our existence; we tell our stories instead about the events that break with the expected, that contradicts our idea about the world and ourselves (Bruner 1990). By incorporating these events into a narrative, they become not only understandable but meaningful; although some events are too jarring to be easily incorporated (Ochs & Capp 1996). This is true of the events of our lives, and it is true of the fictional texts that appeal to us; as we interpret and make sense of the world, so we interpret and make sense of our favoured texts. By studying the content of interpretive narratives (as expressed in discussions, blog posts, pictures and interviews) as well as how they are communicated and transformed, we may study the process of meaning-making.

Practically and in this case, this was achieved by posing a number of questions to the various narratives presented by my informants: how is the story told? Why was it told in that way – what influenced the telling and what meaning does it create? What is included/excluded? What is highlighted? How are various actions and characters framed? How is the particular narrative justified and defended? How is new information incorporated – in a way that changes the meaning of the story, or the plot, or something else, or nothing?

Only but rarely have I studied full accounts of the series; my informants did not typically sit down and describe to me what happens in a certain scene. While this surely would have offered interesting insights, I wished to study meaning-making as it actually occurs, on Tumblr and elsewhere. This means that I have primarily considered – i.e. interpreted the narratives expressed in – the blog posts and discussions of fans; but as these are often fragmented and dependent upon already established understandings I have also
interviewed/had long discussions with individual fans about their love for and interpretation of *Sherlock*. Put together, the data offers a fuller and more nuanced – albeit not complete - account of both the content and process of fans’ sense-making than has been previously offered by scholars of fans and fandom.
3. Not a Detective Show; A Show About a Detective

There are many ways to tell a story. When introducing a series such as *Sherlock*, one might elect to describe its inception and development; or to share one person’s story of how she became a fan and what her fannishness entails; or to detail the plot and characters of the show. Or one might – as I do below – elect to do all three, in order to offer as full as possible a picture of a phenomenon that is not only a professional media product, not only individual involvement with the fandom, and not only the story told in the show. Though scarcely exhaustive, it should provide a brief overview of *Sherlock* and its fans.

*A Sherlock Story: I*

Once upon a time there was a train heading to Cardiff. On the train were two screenwriters and friends, happily discussing their favourite book series. ‘How fantastic it would be,’ they said, ‘to see a modern day adaptation of it! Mobile phones! Blogs! The stories, not the trappings! Damn, but won’t it be maddening when someone actually does it, and we’ll know we thought of it first…’

The friends were two middle-aged men by the names of Stephen Moffat and Mark Gatiss; the books they discussed Arthur Conan Doyle’s *Sherlock Holmes*. In an interview with Den Of Geek, Moffat recalls telling his wife about the idea: “And I said that to Sue [Vertue, also the producer of *Sherlock*], I said ‘Someone should do that, and it's really annoying because it should be us,’ and she said, ‘Why don't you?’” (Leader 2010). On July 25 in 2010 the first episode of *Sherlock* aired on BBC1.

The show was an immediate hit, garnering both glowing reviews and a massive fan base. Chronicling the adventures of genius detective Sherlock Holmes and retired army doctor John Watson in a modern-day London, each ninety minute episode presents a self-contained case story, although there are plot threads that run over several episodes or even seasons. As is often the case with British television shows, seasons are short and span only three episodes. The wait between seasons, however, is unusually long and ranges between one and a half years to two. Following the airing of the third season in early 2014, a fourth season and a ‘special’ in-between seasons episode were commissioned by the BBC. The latter began shooting in January 2015 and will air sometime during that year; no date for the production and airing of the fourth season has been set as of writing this.
A Sherlock Story: II

DoYourResearch introduces herself as a “huge Sherlock fan” when she first writes an e-mail in response to my request for participants on Tumblr. She is a 23-year old student from Germany and explains that she would “like to help with your thesis, cause the topic sounds interesting and also I study Communication and Media Science myself, so it'd be interesting for me to be a part of a thesis-writing process since such a thing is awaiting me in about a year's time as well”. She proves an incredible source of information, generously sharing her thoughts and feelings both in e-mails and chats. She tells me how she became a fan of the show, and how she became involved in the online fandom. Her account illustrates that being is, perhaps, primarily about an emotional response to a text; but it is also about actions and practices, and about community.

It was in early 2012 when season 2 had just aired. I was with a friend of mine who already knew the show and loved it and he kept gushing on about how I needed to see it, how I'd love it, so I said, fine, let's check it out. And he had season 1 on DVD, so we watched "A Study In Pink" and I was immediately hooked, I think from the moment on when Sherlock makes his first deduction about John being an army doctor. I was utterly amazed at how Sherlock did this and loved the entire look of the show. The visualisation of Sherlock's thinking process was something I'd never seen before in a TV show and also Benedict's [Cumberbatch, who plays Sherlock] performance was truly mesmerizing. Anyway, I had my friend copy season 1 for me and shortly after started binge-watching it as well as the season 2 episodes that I found online.

At first I copied / streamed season 1 and 2, but soon found I loved the show so much that I absolutely needed to own them on DVD, so I bought them. Living in Germany, where everything gets dubbed instead of using subtitles like any other country (which obviously takes much more time than adding a subtitle track), I always have to wait like half a year after the English broadcast for episodes to air on our television. I could never ever stand waiting that long and also I couldn't be on any social network anymore at all if I wanted to avoid spoilers, hence I watched all 3 season 3 episodes via live-stream directly when they were airing. I later downloaded them, as the German DVDs are obviously only published around the time of the German TV premiere and I didn't want to wait that long to see them again (and buying English DVDs was not an option since I also watch the show with my non-English-speaking parents and don't want to buy the exact same DVD in 2 versions). Like, I don't usually download shows or films and I'd never want to harm anyone involved with Sherlock, I only did so because I knew I was going to buy the DVD as soon as I could (which by now I have).

I was not particularly aware of the fandom until early 2013 when preparations for season 3 started and there was information on when they would film and people "setlocked"\textsuperscript{19}. Like, I stumbled across the little tidbits and photos fans posted from their set visits somewhere else on the Internet.

\textsuperscript{19} 'Setlock' is the tag used to mark photos and other content from the shooting of Sherlock. During the production of both the second season, the third season and the special fans have gathered to watch the outside scenes being shot, and it is often pictures taken during these gatherings that are shared online.
(possibly facebook or twitter, but I'm not entirely sure) and this first showed me what kind of big information network that fandom is and I loved being able to feel somewhat present in the making of the next series that I awaited so eagerly. And thus began all the following and reblogging and discussing aka my time on tumblr.

I'm not talented enough to create any of these things myself, but I love reading fanfiction, I reblog fanart and edits and gifsets and pretty much everything there is to find about Sherlock on tumblr. I also enjoy reading meta very much, especially when it's about subtext, Johnlock or what is labeled as "TILC - The Johnlock Conspiracy". I also talk about Sherlock very much. I've got to know some very nice people from around the world via tumblr and I regularly talk to them, mostly about Sherlock or its actors. In real life, I'm basically a living Sherlock commercial, there are times when it's hard to shut up about it (like when series 3 aired). Everyone who even remotely knows me also knows that I'm a big fan of the show - so much that when Sherlock won 7 Emmys lately there were people who actually congratulated me for "my Sherlock winning". I have lots of friends that I have introduced to the show and who really like it, but none of them are as active on social media as I am, so whenever I find new information on twitter or tumblr, I'll usually copy and paste it to send it to all my closer friends who I know watch the show. Whenever I am with people and realize they haven't seen Sherlock yet, I make them watch the first episode with me. And when I'm talking to my best friends that I share the Sherlock passion with, it's not a particularly unusual thing to happen that we dwell on theories for the next series until late at night/early in the morning.

While every story of finding fandom is unique, there are often similarities between them. Like DoYourResearch, many of us have started watching a show because it was recommend to us by someone whose taste we trust; breaking the law to see the episodes as soon as they have aired is a common practice even amongst those who otherwise abstain from illegal downloading, as waiting for weeks or months for a regional broadcast makes spending time in the fandom without being spoiled (unwillingly learning about the content of the text prior to watching it) is impossible; and when we first find our way into online fandom it is often the result of a (happy) accident rather than a conscious choice. Many fans like to 'proselyte' and are eager to share and spread their love for the text, although there are those who for various reasons would hide their fandom away from friends and family; we have already met one such fan, Petra. Not all fans are as committed as DoYourResearch, who provided me with 30 pages of very thoughtful interview answers and spent 6 hours hanging out with me in a chat room while we watched season three. Yet her story of getting involved with the fandom is one shared by many of my informants, in parts or in almost its entirety.
Once upon a time an army doctor returned to London after getting shot in the shoulder during military service in Afghanistan. Struggling to make it in the big city on an army pension, he allows an old school pal to introduce him to a peculiar young man on the lookout for a flatmate to share the burden of exorbitant London rent.

The army doctor is called John Watson and the peculiar man Sherlock Holmes; the address they soon move into Baker Street 221B. John immediately gets pulled into Sherlock’s work as a ‘consulting detective’, and after having shot a man to save Sherlock’s life and turned down an offer to spy on him for money (made by Sherlock’s older brother Mycroft) he becomes the chronicler of their adventures, writing them up on his blog and thus earning them both an increasingly large number of clients. When Sherlock is not contacted by private individuals, his help is requested by the Scotland Yard –most often through one Detective Inspector Greg Lestrade, who unlike his subordinates Sally Donovan and Philip Anderson has great faith in the consulting detective.

As they solve cases involving a serial killer, the Chinese mafia, stolen missile plans and many others, Sherlock and John gradually become aware that behind many of the mysteries they encounter lurks the mysterious individual known only as ‘Moriarty’. In the season one finale, they finally come face to face with the man after he has orchestrated a number of cases solely for the benefit of Sherlock because he “loves to watch [him] dance” (Jim, S01E03 “The Great Game”).

Season two opens with the ever unpredictable Moriarty receiving a call that distracts him from killing John and Sherlock. He walks away and our heroes return to Baker Street and their life of crime-solving. Soon enough, however, they are contacted by Mycroft, who wants them to retrieve a number of compromising photographs of a member of the royal family from dominatrix Irene Adler. Following Irene’s apparent death and subsequent return, it turns out that the entire scheme was a plot of Moriarty’s to get hold of certain sensitive information. In spite of showing clear signs of attraction to Irene, Sherlock appears to send her to her death – although in the last scene it is revealed that she is still alive, having been saved by Sherlock from beheading by a terrorist cell.

After a string of successfully solved cases, including a brief sojourn to Dartmoor to tackle the elusive ‘hound’ of Baskerville, Sherlock becomes a net phenomenon and the target of massive media attention. This concerns John, and he cautions his flatmate that “the press will turn, Sherlock, they always turn, and they will turn on you” (S02E03 “The Reichenbach Fall”). John is proved right as Jim Moriarty creates a complicated web of lies (unwittingly
In his early thirties, Sherlock Holmes is the world’s only and self-appointed consulting detective. He uses his amazing skills of deduction and cold logic to solve various mysteries, but shows little interest/skill in developing relationships and is regularly rude to and dismissive of others. It appears – at least initially – that he is motivated more by the intellectual challenge of a hard case than by any burning desire to bring deviants to justice.

Retiring from his career as an army doctor after being shot in the shoulder, John Watson struggles to make ends meet on an army pension. Being something of an adrenaline junkie, he is immediately pulled into his new flat-mate’s crime solving activities. Unlike others, he isn’t intimidated by Sherlock’s prowess and often expresses his admiration - although he often is exasperated with the other’s lack of tact or consideration for others. Encouraged by his therapist, he chronicles the adventures he and Sherlock share on his blog.

Season three introduces the character of Mary Morstan, the woman John marries and who now (as of the end of season three) carries his child. She is first presented as working as a nurse in the same hospital as John, but we later learn that her original profession was that of a CIA assassin who ‘went freelance’. Fleeing from her past, she has assumed a new identity and seems willing to go to great lengths to protect her new life.

Gregory Lestrade is a Detective Inspector at the Scotland Yard. How he and Sherlock met has not been explained, but he evidently trusts and respects the consulting detective enough to enlist his help whenever the police fall short. Sherlock has referred to him as ‘my handler’, and does – in spite of never remembering his first name correctly – appear to think of him as a friend.

Sherlock’s older brother Mycroft claims to work as minor government official, but is shown to wield quite a bit more power than that, to the point of Sherlock claiming that he IS the British government. Supposed to be the smarter of the two but disliking ‘legwork’, Mycroft often recruits his baby brother’s help with various matters sensitive to the state. He is nicknamed The Iceman by Jim Moriarty and often appears cold and detached, but has admitted that Sherlock’s loss ‘would break his heart’.

Pictures © BBC
Initially meant to appear in only one scene, her character and actress Louise Brealey’s portrayal of Molly Hooper proved intriguing enough that she was turned into one of the most important recurring characters, playing a vital part in Sherlock’s plan to fake his own death in season two. She works as a specialist registrar in the morgue at St Bart’s hospital and has a crush on Sherlock. Although shy and timid, she is shown to be intelligent and capable. As the series progresses, she grows more outspoken.

Grateful to Sherlock, who ensured her husband’s execution a few years back, Mrs. Hudson offers him and John a special deal on the flat at 221B Baker Street. While the landlady expresses dismay over Sherlock’s habit of keeping body parts in the fridge, she appears very fond of him and the affection is obviously returned, to the point of Sherlock brutally beating the CIA agent who dares assault her.

Working as a dominatrix, Irene Adler collects the secrets of the rich and powerful. Although identifying as lesbian, she falls in love or lust with Sherlock (which doesn’t stop her from trying to use him in one of her schemes). Sherlock, in spite of his claiming to be married to his work, seems to be quite taken by The Woman (which doesn’t stop him from ruthlessly foiling her scheme).

In the BBC’s adaption, arch-enemy James Moriarty has turned from old professor to young, well-dressed ‘consulting criminal’ controlling a vast criminal network. Serving as a dark mirror of Sherlock, he is similarly eager for ‘distractions’ to ward off boredom. He is obsessed with Sherlock and creates several crimes for the sole purpose of getting Sherlock to ‘come out and play’; in the first two seasons, he is behind every case Sherlock solves but one. Supposedly dead.

Sergeant Sally Donovan works under Lestrade at Scotland Yard. She is openly suspicious of Sherlock and warns both her superior and John Watson against getting involved with him. Smart and capable, she appears to genuinely care for Lestrade and is concerned that Sherlock is only going to let him down. She is the only person of colour amongst the recurring cast.

Pictures © BBC
aided by Sally Donovan and Anderson) to prove that Sherlock is a fraud who has invented all the crimes he has ‘solved’. Fleeing from the police, Sherlock confronts Moriarty on St. Bart’s rooftop; the consulting criminal demands Sherlock jump off the building and kill himself, or Moriarty’s men will kill John, Mrs. Hudson and Lestrade. To prevent Sherlock from forcing Moriarty to order his men to stand down, the criminal shoots himself in the head. After a painful farewell to John, Sherlock jumps off the roof and his broken body is shown lying on the pavement. However, we later see him watching in the distance as John visits his grave.

Sherlock spends the following two years covertly dismantling Moriarty’s vast criminal network. While most of his friends – including John, Mrs. Hudson and Lestrade – have fallen for his ruse, a guilt-ridden Anderson remains convinced that the detective is still alive. He even creates a mystery for Sherlock to solve in order to lure him back to London. The scheme doesn’t actually work, and instead it is on Mycroft’s insistence that Sherlock finally returns to battle the threat of an imminent terrorist attack in the first episode of the third season (“The Empty Hearse”). Sherlock wants to enlist John’s help in doing so, but finds that in his absence the doctor has moved on: he has left Baker Street, dates a woman called Mary Morstan, and is initially too angry with Sherlock to want to have anything to do with him. The pair eventually reconcile when facing death (or so John thinks) in subway-car-turned-bomb.

Although they return to solving cases together, things have undeniable changed between Sherlock and John; following the latter’s wedding to a now pregnant Mary Morstan the two don’t speak to each other for a whole month and when they do, it is because John has stumbled over Sherlock in a drug den while searching for a neighbor’s errant son. Sherlock claims that he is not falling back into bad habits; it is merely a plot to fool newspaper magnate and blackmailer extraordinaire Charles Augusts Magnussen. In order to get close to the man, he is even dating his PA Janine, a friend of Mary’s whom he met at the wedding. During a break-in into Magnussen’s office, Sherlock is surprised to find Mary already there and threatening to shoot Magnussen – he is more surprised still when she shoots him instead. He and John learn of Mary’s past as first a CIA agent and then ‘freelance’ assassin, and when Sherlock’s plan to have Magnussen arrested in attempt to protect Mary and John fails the detective kills the newspaper magnate. He is sent into exile (and to a certain death) by Mycroft, but is called back home when a GIF of Jim Moriarty’s face accompanied by the audio message “Did you miss me?” appears on every screen in England.
Eye of the Beholder

What you have just read is my summary of Sherlock. While I have strived to offer as succinct and correct recap of the series as possible, it is still and inevitably based on my own interpretation. I am a devoted Moriarty fan, and my reading of the text is shaped by my assessment of Sherlock and Moriarty’s rivalry being of central (though certainly not exclusive) importance to the developing plot. Others experience the text differently and choose to highlight different features of it; while the fans of Sherlock (mostly) agree on the actual events of the show – such as Sherlock getting strangled by a Chinese mafia member, John failing to tell his girlfriends apart, or Mrs. Hudson being the landlady of Baker Street 221B – the interpretation of what these events mean and how they are connected vary, sometimes quite remarkably so. “Puzzles,” Sara offers in response to my question about the show’s central motif after we have watched the first season of Sherlock together in a small group. “Sherlock’s character development,” suggests Lorna, and elaborates on how he has changed and grown through the seasons, going from cold and distanced to emotionally involved. Many other of my informants point to the relationship between the two main characters as the defining quality of the story. One of them is Hedgelock who, upon my e-mailed request, describes how the central theme of the show – as she sees it – develops throughout the seasons. She notes that many viewers were dissatisfied with the third and latest season, which focused more on the interpersonal relationships and less on the cases Sherlock solve. She proceeds to explain:

But what is left of “BBC Sherlock” when we consider, that even TPTB [The Powers That Be – a common name for the creators/showrunners of any media text] describe the show as “not a detective story, but a story about a detective”? What if one looks at the show leaving out all the cases?

Then series one is about two soulmates meeting and moving in with each other, working together absolutely in sync, completing each other in every sense and unconditionally accepting (and liking) each other’s flaws – going even as far as agreeing to die together for the sake of a bigger cause. With a look.

Series two confronts both of them with feelings from all sides. John “I am not gay” Hamish Watson suffers from all stages of vivid jealousy as soon as Irene Adler shows real interest in Sherlock. He [Sherlock], who thinks that “caring is not an advantage”, finally realises in “The Hounds of Baskerville” [season two, episode two] that John is his friend. His only friend. Sadly, this is something John only admits in front of Sherlock’s corpse after “The Reichenbach Fall” [season two, episode three]. According to his therapist, where we see him again after his best friend’s suicide, there’s still “stuff he wanted to say”. They were more than friends, or at least could have been,
and John knows this. But admitting it – it wouldn’t change anything, it would even make it worse. Sherlock is dead.

No surprise he grieves for over two years like a widower. And forgives Sherlock for what he’s done to him within days after his comeback in “The Empty Hearse” [season three, episode one] (compare that to his reconciliation with his pregnant wife Mary months after her shooting Sherlock). #Sherlocklives means #JohnWatsonlives.

Sherlock, realising that Mary is not one of John’s many girlfriends, but the woman he plans to marry, tries everything to at least make John happy (if he can’t have him back), abandons his detective work for wedding planning and is so daunted in the face of being John’s best friend man, that he seeks help from everyone he knows, even his brother Mycroft. “The Sign of Three” [season three, episode two] is nothing but a declaration of love to a man Sherlock knows he will never be able to have, not after all that happened. The only vow we see in this episode about a wedding is Sherlock’s, swearing to literally do everything in order to keep John (and Mary) safe.

The worst follows: Not only does the woman John married turn out to be an assassin and almost kill Sherlock, the man who blackmails exactly this woman and therefore is able to turn their whole lives apart proves to be a case Sherlock is unable to solve – and in order to safe John the only thing Sherlock can do is to sacrifice himself and become a murderer. He willingly goes off to his certain death at the end of “His Last Vow” [season three, episode three]. This will be the last time he will ever talk to John, but instead of confessing his love to him, he decides to make him laugh one last time, because, what would it change, saying it now? It would hurt him even more, even if it is Sherlock’s last chance to say it. Which, as it turns out, it isn’t. Again, he comes back “from the dead”. As does Moriarty.

There are still two more series to come, and if that trend the narrative established until now, continues, the “BBC Sherlock” will never be only about simple cases anymore.

In fact, it never has been.

The show is and ever has been about Sherlock and John.

Hedgelock, like many of my informants and many Sherlock fans in general, is a so-called Johnlock-shipper. A shipper is a fan who is particularly fond of a certain romantic and/or sexual pairing of characters, which may or may not be featured in the actual text: in hedgelock’s case, the favoured couple consists of John and Sherlock. Hence Johnlock; combining the involved characters’ names is a common way of creating ship names. On the show, Sherlock and John have not yet expressed any overt feelings of attraction for each other, yet hedgelock – and many other fans – do not only find the pairing feasible but hope and expect that it will be actually featured on the show. The notion that Moffat and Gatiss are planning to have the main characters end up in a romantic relationship is often referred to as TJLC – the Johnlock conspiracy – and the believers of the ‘conspiracy’ find ample textual
evidence to support their reading. Yet others are as convinced that these fans are seeing things that aren’t there. “I’m not a believer because there is literally no evidence for TJLC,” writes one of respondents in a big fan survey conducted by Sherlock fan and media major multifandom-madness (2014).

A text never contains everything it hints at. The words in a book do not explicitly state all that is suggested by them; a movie has the appearance of actual motion, but is made up of still pictures showed in quick succession. Our minds fill in the blanks and draw – or jump to – conclusions; they find the patterns that bind the disparate elements together into a narrative flow. The act of reading – watching, listening – is never a passive one, because part of the text’s content must always be supplied by the reader/watcher/listener. Perhaps this is why we occasionally turn so defensive over our interpretations – they always contain something of our own selves and do not only generate textual significance, but are also linked to overall real world significance in that they are partly the product of our perceptions of value (and sometimes causality, but this is a more complicated issue since our familiarity with genre conventions etc. gives us clues as how to interpret various textual codes). By studying how the narrative is interpreted and reinterpreted by the fans of Sherlock, we may better understand the process in which significance is created, negotiated, maintained and transformed – in relation to fictional text and to our factual world.

A Theory of Significance

significance [mass noun]
1. The quality of being worthy of attention; importance
2. The meaning to be found in words or events

meaning [mass noun]
1. Implied or explicit significance
2. Important and worthwhile quality; purpose
( Oxford Dictionaries)

The quest for meaning has long since occupied scholars of the humanities and of the social sciences; by psychologists and neuroscientists. Considering the popularity of the subject, it strikes me as somewhat puzzling and entirely unfortunate that ‘meaning’ has not been better defined (or defined at all) by those who would study and speak of it. Anthropology is for instance rife with ethnographic account concerned with significance in one way or another, but few of these delve deep into the very core of significance, and never answer the question: what is significance and why do we seek, create and need it? For this reason, I turn to
psychology to provide a framework that – in my developed form, detailed below – might offer us further insight.

Kenneth Pargament and the Psychology of Coping

In his treatise on the psychology of religious coping, American professor of psychology Kenneth Pargament (1997) proposes that human beings constantly strive to maximize their ‘sense of significance’ at the least possible cost to themselves. While he does not clearly define what a sense of significance is, beyond referring to it as “hot spot in man’s consciousness” (1997:92), he describes it as having to do with significant objects and others, the things and relationship that give meaning to our existence. A sense of significance is made up and maintained by both ends and means; our goals (such as health, a good relationship with our parents and/or a bright red car) and the ways to reach them. When either means or ends are threatened, our sense of significances is threatened and we experience stress. According to Pargament we cope with the threat and stress by employing conserving and transforming strategies. We usually prefer to conserve both means and ends, as this normally represents the least ‘costly’ solution, but if necessary we might transform ends or means or both. Our attempts at coping are not necessarily successful, and sometimes our continued efforts increase stress and loss of significance rather than reducing it.

While the notion of maximizing gain at a first glance may seem informed by rational choice theory, it should be kept in mind that Pargament describes coping as an emotional process, not a (usually) calculated and informed choice. Although he does not delve further into why we find specific ends and means significant – beyond noting that they are often culturally and socially negotiated, as what is commonly valued in one context might not be so in another – he describes our attachment to them as emotionally motivated; the costs and gains he speaks of are emotional costs and gains, an increase or decrease in immediate wellbeing (a decrease may lead to long-term distress and potential depression if not dealt with). Coping is not calculated or rational; the costs and gains are emotionally evaluated and selected, as we will see in the following analysis of Sherlock fans and their handling of narrative challenges: what feels reasonable, what feels right. Of course, our feelings may lead us astray and so coping is not always successful, and our actually employed strategies are certainly not always the most effective ones, as we generally lack both the knowledge and ability to objectively consider all possible alternatives. But although emotions do play a crucial part in the creation of significance, this study focuses primarily on the no-less crucial
cognitive aspects of sense-making (i.e. how information is consciously and unconsciously processed); given the scope of the study, a tight focus on one aspect seemed more likely to yield relevant insights, even if it meant spending less time on other interesting facets of the phenomenon. Fans are not only feeling creatures, after all; they are thinking ones as well.

Pargament describes coping as a process, and makes eight assumptions about this process. Apart from the two of them listed above (people seeks significance and we cope by using transformative and conserving strategies) they are (Pargament §997:viij):

- Events are constructed in terms of their significance to people.
- People bring an orienting system to the coping process.
- People translate the orienting system into specific methods of coping.
- People cope in ways that are compelling to them.
- Coping is embedded in culture.
- The keys to good coping lie in the outcomes and the process.

Pargament writes as a psychologist; hence the last, evaluative assumption. He also writes about religious coping specifically, but notes that the process of coping remains the same whether we bring a religious orienting system with us into it or not; thus it is applicable to non-religious coping as well. Of particular interest to my investigation of the Sherlock fandom is the cultural and communal aspect of coping, and on that note it should be emphasized that while our individual coping is shaped by societal expectations and norms, the way we cope may in turn influence society; it may as well challenge and transform the current state of affairs as reproduce and reinforce them.

An unpleasant or painful event need not constitute a threat to significance just because it is unpleasant; for instance, although a good friend of mine was deeply saddened by the death of her beloved grandfather, she was comforted by the thought that one day they would be reunited again in Heaven. ‘Death’ was already incorporated into a meaningful – and in this case Christian – narrative of the world, and posed no threat to her sense of significance. 20 In a similar manner, my informant Sara experienced no particular stress when faced with the death of her favourite character on Sherlock, Jim Moriarty. Unlike many other dedicated Moriarty fans – myself included – she neither wishes nor believes he might return from the dead. “He’s

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20 Then again, the fact that certain events are accounted for in various religious narratives does not necessarily mean that they won’t be experienced as a threat to significance. A pious mother might find herself questioning the existence of a good and omnipotent god following the death of her child, and even if death itself is not construed as unfathomably meaningless the loss of a cherished friend or relative might still unsettle us as we can no longer engage in the same way with the deceased.
dead,” she tells me. “He won’t come back. It’s not in his character.” To her, Moriarty’s suicide on the rooftop of St. Bart’s was the only fitting ending to his character arc, and while sad it did nothing to take away from the sense of significance her interpretation of his persona generated.

These are the basics of coping as understood by Kenneth Pargament. While it provides useful tools for a closer inspection of the process of coping, it fails to answer the two fundamental questions posed at the beginning of this chapter: what and why? While Pargament’s description of significance as “the hot spot in man’s consciousness” (1997:92) is certainly poetic, it doesn’t actually tell us all that much. In an attempt to ratify this deficiency, I propose a definition and draw some general assumptions implied by it in the section below; then, as we move on to a closer inspection of the meaning-making strategies of the Sherlock fandom, I use these assumptions to make sense of the fan’s sense-making – so to speak – but also allow for the emergence of new assumptions as suggested by the data. Thus, this text is not only an examination of the Sherlock fandom; it is an examination of the nature of meaning, and a test of my developed theory of it.

**What and Why: The Significance of Meaning**

Significance, as we can read in the Oxford Dictionaries’ definition above, implies importance, denotes ‘the quality of being worthy of attention’. A sense of significance, then, might be defined as a sense that there are things worthy of attention, important things; as a sense that things do matter. Now, this might appear so simple as to be self-evident, yet in the definition we might find the key to the function.

Human beings, unlike other animals (as far as we know), are conscious and self-aware. Although much of what we do might be done out of habit or reflex, we, to a much larger degree than any other animal, need to choose not only how to act but to act at all. In order to make such a choice, we need to believe that things do matter; that what we do matters. Consider the following quote from *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (Carroll 1865:36):

> “Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?”
> “That depend a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the Cat.
> “I don’t much care where – ” said Alice.
> “Then it doesn’t matter which way you go,” said the Cat.

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21 An argument might be made that we are not conscious at all; we are merely hallucinating or imagining consciousness. I am neither qualified nor particularly interested in engaging in that particular debate right now, but will merely state that we experience ourselves as conscious and able to choose between actions, and this experience informs our cognitive processes and appraisal of the world.
In her monograph *Shadows of War*, anthropologist Carolyn Nordstrom describes how a lack of faith in the future leads to people becoming apathetic. They give up; they stop trying. Why would you bother, if nothing can be changed, if nothing may be affected; if nothing you do matters? While we might be able to exist without having a sense of significance, it seems that the chances of survival would be that much greater for people who, rather than aimlessly and blindly wander through life while accepting whatever gets thrown their way, *strive* to live; to make things better for themselves; to affect the world and try to turn it into a place more into our own liking. (And this, of course, might be the evolutionary basis for the supposedly inherent and universal tendency amongst humans to search for significance.)

If we accept that a sense of significance is a sense that what happens and what we do matters, and that it serves as a motivational tool, we might reason that to uphold a sense of significance we need:

- An idea of what the world looks like and how it works. This serves as *the map*, and includes our perception of causality and ourselves. In order to be able to foresee and plan the impact of our actions upon the world we need to understand it and experience it as coherent.
- At least one goal, as they are defined by Pargament. This is what we strive for; this is what ultimately motivates us to act; this provides *the direction and destination*.
- The perceived *ability and means* to reach our goal/s. If a seemingly coherent world-view provides the map and our goals the destination, this is not only an idea of how to get there but the walking boots, a big backpack and the money to buy food for the trip. It is also the courage to get going and the conviction that we might reach our goal. It is the sense that not only might the world be affected; *I* (or *we*) have the power to change it.\(^{22}\)

### Meaningful Readings

Can a text be significant in the sense outlined above? The short answer is yes, obviously. Obviously – because I screamed for pure joy as Moriarty appeared at the very end of *His Last Vow*. Because Hobbes has written approximately 640,000 words of *Sherlock* fan fiction. Because Lorna cries as she listens to John telling Sherlock that he is his best friend. Because

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\(^{22}\) I first formulated these specifics as I developed the theory for a course paper for the course Bateson Applied at Uppsala University, spring 2014.
Hedgelock spends 4-6 hours a day at *Sherlock*-related activities. Because there are fans so enraged by the actions of Mary Morstan’s character that they send death threats to the actress who plays her (Burgess 2014). Because:

Watching series 3 - especially "The Empty Hearse" - live as it aired felt kind of overwhelming, because I kind of felt how thousands of people were sitting in front of their TV or trembling in front of their computer screen, praying for the live-stream not to break down at the exact same moment that I was. It felt kind of reassuring to know that I was not alone in this emotional roller-coaster, that there are so many people who feel the same. (DoYourResearch, e-mail interview.)

Texts matter. Stories matter. Characters matter. They are not real – but the emotions they inspire *are*. Why texts matter – why we should care at all about what happens to these entirely made-up worlds and beings – is an entirely different question, and one I neither can nor am committed to answering here; for the purposes of this study, it is enough to note that they *do*. But not all texts matter to all people – and some people never find themselves very invested in any sort of fictional texts at all. It might be argued that whether we consider ourselves fans of a text or not depends upon how much emotional value we attach to our interpretations; while we interpret all text we encounter, not all interpretations are of particular significance to us. However, just as the question of why we care about fictional texts at all falls outside the scope of this study, so does the question of why anyone would care about *this* text rather than another.

When reading a text we form an idea of what the fictional world looks like and what sort of logic governs it; we interpret some of the plots, themes, characters and/or relationships as more essential than others; and we look for the textual clues that support the assumptions we make about the text. In short, from our reading of the text we create a sense of significance, complete with map, goals and means. But as Henry Jenkins (2013:106) notes, the assumptions we make about the text always run the risk of being “contradicted or thrown into crisis” as the narrative and/or the characters develop in that manner inconsistent with our subjective interpretation. Jenkins, however, focuses mainly on how disillusioned fans “fall out of love” (Jenkins 2013:xli) with the text (i.e. rejecting it as source of significance) – which is but one of many possible responses, and not usually the first chosen. Following Pargament’s argument, we might reason – or deduce, as Sherlock would put it – that the decision to reject the text entirely is a very costly solution; it might relieve the stress of a having our text-related/generated sense of significance threatened, but it does so at the cost of giving up on this particular aspect of our sense of significance altogether. Many fans are reluctant to pay
such a price, and are often quite adept at integrating new information in a way that allows for a continued – and meaningful – enjoyment of the show. In the following chapters, we’ll take a close look and the whys and hows of that process.

The sometimes intense emotional investment to fictional characters and worlds is often as hard for the fan to explain as it is for non-fans to comprehend. http://im-sherlock-ed.tumblr.com/post/103144967586/me-watching-trf-sobbing-its-okay-whispers
4. Preferences, Perception and Reception

I love that the fans use the show as a canvas onto which they paint the stories that are most meaningful to them. (Misha Collins, quoted in Flicks And The City 2014).

When fan scholar Matt Hills discusses media cult texts he notes that they are both *found* and *created* (2002:131) and I would argue that the same is true of meaning. Though the reading of a text is an active process, it is not always experienced as such by the reader:

If Johnlock never happens, I as a fan will be upset at the missed opportunity but ultimately I will NEVER be embarrassed or tolerate being talked down to for thinking it could happen. The text supports it. *It just does* [italics mine]. (irrevocably-johnlocked 2014)

I hate johnlock with a passion. I am not homophobic by any stretch, but I just don’t see the appeal of forcing a romantic relationship between two heterosexual characters (yes, this has been confirmed on numerous occasions by Moffat, Cumberbatch, Freeman, etc). *If there was some indication in canon for it, then I would not have a gripe* [italics mine]. (Freemania, e-mail interview)

To Tumblr user irrevocably-johnlocked, the textual evidence for Johnlock is irrefutable; for my informant Freemania the lack of such evidence is equally unquestionable. They just don’t see what the other sees – and neither of them is likely to agree with my assessment of Moriarty’s importance not only to the plot but to Sherlock’s personal development. We all watch the same show, but the narratives we discover and/or create differ; the way we ‘fill in the blanks’ and bind the various textual elements together into a coherent whole varies from fan to fan. But the fact that we are active participants in the creation of meaning does not mean that we freely choose what meaning to find or what narrative to see. Something in the text speaks to us – *makes sense* to us – and just how or why that is may be very hard to explain to an outsider. Writing on the strange silence of fans when asked about why they like a particular show, Matt Hills (2002) ponders the difficulty of justifying and explaining in rational terms our emotional responses to a particular text. “I… have no idea what makes the show good,” Petra tells me during our first meeting in Stockholm. “I can’t answer that.” When asked, most of my informants *could* provide answers to what they liked about the show, but I always noted a certain hesitancy, a pause, during the face to face interviews (whether the informants who responded via e-mail struggled with similar difficulties, I do not know.) The answers finally offered typically included high production values (i.e. good photography, etc.), fantastic actors and ‘it’s clever’, but although *Sherlock* arguably boasts all of these fine
qualities, it is questionable if these are what truly sparked the fans’ emotional engagement with the series. After all, there are many clever films and television shows with high production values and fantastic actors that lack *Sherlock’s* fan following, and most *Sherlock* fans admit to being fans of other shows of ‘lesser’ quality. Based on his meta-study of research on fandom, Hills reasons that fans make use of common discourses on the textual qualities of a favoured media object to rationally justify and make legitimate their love of the object, to themselves and others. As the source for our affection for the media text itself remains, to some degree, beyond articulation, so does the source of our prioritizing one reading over another. Notes Tumblr user Toknowyourealive as she ponders the seeming contradiction between her professed dislike for the portrayal of Irene Adler as a woman defeated by her emotions and her fondness for the scene where Sherlock *does* use her emotions against her:

OK, maybe I rationalized that I didn’t like Irene after the fact to make it all “fit” but at the time it was a purely emotional response. The fact of the matter was that the reveal of that scene was so amazing that I had a physical reaction to it. I gasped aloud then forgot to breathe and felt a trill ring the nerves of my body as though I had touched a live electrical wire. It is very rare (but not unheard of) for me to have such a strong physical reaction to the intellectual aspects of entertainment. In retrospect, the puzzle was so incredibly obvious but I never saw the twist coming. I was also cheering that Sherlock “won” just when it looked as though he had been soundly defeated and turned the humiliation back around. Instead of being beaten by emotions, he used the sentiment to be victorious. (E-mail interview.)

But while we do, perhaps to a much larger degree than we are usually happy to admit, point to certain textual features to rationally justify an emotional response after the fact, our readings are hardly random; something in the text has sparked that emotional response, has nudged us towards the spotting of one pattern rather than another. But interpretation does not end with the recognition or identification of a pattern; arguably, it never ends, as long as we keep revisiting the text (if only in passing thought). As the text develops, and/or as we re-read it, our interpretations are continually tested against the text, just as the text is tested against our interpretative expectations.

**Mycroft, Moriarty and The Fall**

My likes and dislikes are quite Mycroft-driven. […] The Blind Banker had some nice character moments and I like the Sherlock & John general puzzle solving sections, but no Mycroft and it's a distinctly a bit racist. Hound was again lacking in Mycroft, and while it's a very memorable story it's still
limited in being about a dog scaring people on Dartmoor. I love both Scandal and Empty Hearse for all the Sherlock & Mycroft goodness, and Scandal comes with some bonus Mycroft-angst as well. Plus I enjoyed Irene in Scandal, she mixed things up nicely and Lara Pulver was excellent. (Crimsonpetal, e-mail interview.)

Twenty-eight year old Crimsonpetal is a fan of Mycroft Holmes, Sherlock’s older and supposedly even more intelligent brother. Born in Britain, Crimsonpetal watched Sherlock when it first aired in the UK during 2010, but doesn’t recall paying too much attention to it at that time. She rewatched it, however, just before the second series aired and was hooked, soon getting involved with the online fandom: “I definitely remember contributing to some watch-along threads on a livejournal community for Hound – and I wrote a couple of pretty slapdash fic around then as well. A few months after the second series I joined tumblr and got very much sucked in.”

Her fandom related activities – such as reading and writing fan fiction and meta as well as creating GIFs and attending two Sherlock events in the UK – are firmly rooted in her appreciation for Mycroft Holmes, his relationship with his brother and the actor who plays him (Mark Gatiss, also co-creator of the show). Although the umbrella-wielding government official isn’t the only aspect of the series that she enjoys, she carefully – as evident in the block quote above – evaluates each installment with respect to how prominently Mycroft is featured in it. She also names “not enough Mycroft” as the series’ biggest flaw: “That’s far and away the main one!”. On the subject of favourite scenes/least favourite scenes:

> Until series three I’d have said [that my favourite scene is] the morgue scene with Sherlock and Mycroft. Having them interact with no one else around for the first and only time was just amazing; seeing what they were like with only each other. Now we’ve had several more scenes like that in Empty Hearse and Last Vow, so I’d say they’re all tied together! Christmas smoking scenes\(^\text{23}\) across both series are particularly lovely. [My least favourite scene is] the vast swathes of time in Blind Banker and Hound without even a sniff of a Mycroft scene.

In the chapter on text reception in Textual Poachers, Henry Jenkins reasonably argues that we evaluate new episodes of an ongoing TV-series in accordance with how well it fulfills our expectations of the show. Now, we may have many expectations that are thwarted without us minding one bit, and as the text unfolds our expectations may change because of new plot developments; but the expectations that matter to us, the ones closely connected to what makes us fans of the text in the first place, play a crucial role in our evaluations of new

\(^{23}\) In season two, Mycroft offers Sherlock a cigarette after Irene Adler’s supposed death at Christmas; in season three, the two brothers share a smoke outside their parents’ home.
installments. While admitting to having somewhat mixed feelings about the third series of *Sherlock*, Crimsonpetal expresses delight over “the reveal that Sherlock and Mycroft had been working together to take down Moriarty – that vindicated all the pro-Mycroft fans feels from the past two years!”. In the last episode of the second season, Mycroft is shown as having been fooled into feeding Moriarty vital information regarding Sherlock, enabling the criminal to orchestrate the detective’s downfall and (faked) suicide. However, in the first episode of the third series, Sherlock explains that he and his brother had been playing Moriarty the whole time; Mycroft never betrayed him. This – naturally – delighted the fans of Mycroft, three of whom I chatted with in the middle of a particularly hot September night:

**Hobbes**
Ahhhh. I never once believed he betrayed him. I was convinced all along that they were setting the whole thing up.

**crimsonpetal**
Personally I never believed he did really 'betray' Sherlock...

**Hobbes**
That said, I constantly had to defend my point of view, and even put the "I believe in Mycroft Holmes" badge on my site.

**crimsonpetal**
at the most I thought that Sherlock and Mycroft joined together in a Sherlock-self-sacrificing way with genuine info being given to Moriarty.

**agentumbrella**
I knew he "betrayed" him but he had to have his reasons

**Hobbes**
Mycroft, ACD or BBC, was imo [in my opinion] too smart to have done that.

**Hobbes**
Yeah - I wasn't sure of the actual plan but I was convinced they were in it together.

**crimsonpetal**
Perhaps Mycroft could have inadvertently had to release info to Jim and then Mycroft & Sherlock joined together after that.

**Hobbes**
I think it went back a lot further than that, back to the middle of the season in Baskerville at least.

**agentumbrella**
For Mycroft to release information on Sherlock I felt that he would only do it if his hands were tied, or if the end would justify the means

**crimsonpetal**
Wasn't 100% whether it had all been planned from the very started (Scandal/Hounds/earlier) or if was more somewhat damage control.

**agentumbrella**
ya, not sure there as well

**Kee**
But why did they let Moriarty go in the first place? Considering that torture was on the table, why was a little extrajudicial murder not?

**crimsonpetal**
Afraid with a trio of Mycroft fans you may have slightly skewed perspective here!
Hobbes
I don't think they really made it clear - this is one of those things where it's
fanon vs canon for me.

[...] 
agentumbrella
Let him think he had the upper hand?
crimsonpetal
I expect there were wider Moriarty's web of influence problems to deal with.

[...] 
Hobbes
Yes, I think they were trying to go higher.
Kee
Higher than Moriarty?
Hobbes
I'm not sure. But yes.
crimsonpetal
You can't just squash Jim and expect everything else would sort itself out;
his 2nd in command might be worse/less unstable and Sherlock-obsessed!
agentumbrella
I think maybe they didn't want to jump the gun (no pun intended)
Hobbes
crimson: good point.
crimsonpetal
In a Hitler being the best person to leave in charge because he was quite
deusional type way...
agentumbrella
wanted to make sure all their ducks were in a row before they moved to get
him for real

In this case, the fans of Mycroft never lost faith in him, even though the narrative at an earlier
stage seemed to suggest that he had made a mistake and unwittingly helped Moriarty destroy
his brother. The notion of Mycroft making such a mistake did not square with these fans’
interpretation of his character, and since Mycroft plays a central role in their enjoyment of this
show – is highly significant to them – they did not accept it at face value. Rather, they found
alternative explanations for what happened, ones that allowed them to continue to view
Mycroft as both more intelligent than anyone else and very devoted to his brother. The sense
of significance built on Mycroft’s importance, power and loyalty was maintained – even if it
did, for a while, demand that they reject what was overtly offered by the text, i.e. that he had
been fooled into betraying Sherlock. The goal was maintained, but the means were adjusted as
the reading required rejecting the presented narrative. (The strategy of reinterpreting textual
features to better fit them with an already establishes understanding of the show is common
enough among fans, and one we will have reason to return to later on, as we turn to discuss
how Johnlock fans have reacted to, for instance, the inclusion of Mary Morstan in season
three.) When the fans’ faith in and reading of Mycroft was seemingly vindicated in season
three, this was met with delight, if not surprise.
**Seemingly vindicated?** Well, yes. In “The Empty Hearse” we are treated to three different explanations of how Sherlock survived his jump off St. Bart’s roof. The first two are very heavily implied to be fake, but the third one is offered by Sherlock himself to former-foe Anderson, and has been described as “highly plausible” (“The Empty Hearse” DVD commentary) and “the real solution” (“Empire’s Sherlock Series Three Spoiler Podcast Special”, 2014) by the creators of the show - although they admit to opening up for “the possibility that Sherlock lying his ass off” (Jones 2014, January 15). The fandom remains divided on whether or not this explanation – commonly referred to as ‘Lazarus’, after the code word used by Sherlock and Mycroft to initiate it – is actually true. ‘The empty fall’-tag on Tumblr is dedicated to musings on and discussion of the inconstancies and plot holes of the Lazarus explanation, and among my informants the doubters outnumber the believers – although not everyone thinks the issue is a very important one: “I don't think there's any way to really know, and I'm OK with not knowing,” writes WorseThanEver in an e-mail. On the other hand, Hobbes and Crimsonpetal both embrace the Lazarus explanation, even if Crimsonpetal is ready to accept that it was ‘damage control’ rather than a long-term plan (see the excerpt from the chat above):

It’s as good a solution as any – he didn’t hit the pavement one way or another, and Molly and Mycroft and the homeless network were involved, it ticks all the boxes. (Crimsonpetal, e-mail interview.)

Mostly, I took it at face value. I think a lot of the frame-by-frame meta that goes on is fun but overkill. It’s a show. The writers are good (and I was under the belief for all of season 2 that Mycroft and Sherlock were in on the Fall together), but they don’t pack as much meaning into tiny things as fandom reads into it, in my opinion. (Unrelated: it was nice to see Mycroft vindicated). (Hobbes, e-mail interview.)

The Lazarus explanation fulfills their expectations regarding Mycroft as an active co-conspirator rather than accidental traitor during The Fall; questioning what Sherlock tells Anderson might reintroduce the threat to significance so successfully neutralized by rejecting the overt narrative of “The Reichenbach Fall” (which, if Lazarus is true, was not only an effective way to maintain significance but also the correct reading of the narrative as the creators intended it). Furthermore, the theory of confirmation bias suggests that we are more likely to notice the details and facts that support and confirms our beliefs, than we are the details that contradict them. The closer to our heart the issue – the more significant – the stronger the tendency (Nickerson 1998). While Hobbes, Crimsonpetal and Agentumbrella are all Mycroft-fans, the former two are arguably more tightly focused on him; Hobbes confesses
to being more invested in “her own corner” of the *Sherlock* fandom than in the actual show and spends most of her fandom time writing Mycroft-centric fic, and Crimsonpetal notes that the theme of her main blog is Mark Gatiss rather than *Sherlock*. Agentumbrella, on the other hand, estimates that she spends her *Sherlock* time dedicated to “34% Mycroft, 10% Irene Adler, 15% Moriarty, 20% Sherlock, 2% Watson, 5% Mary, 10% Molly, 2% Lestrade, 2% Donovan”. She is also the one to express some doubts regarding the Lazarus solution: “I still believe that [Sherlock] didn't tell Anderson everything, why would he?”. But while her willingness to doubt Mycroft may partly be explained by her finding enjoyment in many other aspects of the show, it may also be related to him meaning something different to her. Later on, in another group chat focused solely on *The Fall*, where neither Crimsonpetal nor Hobbes are present she notes that “I feel like a lot of people want Mycroft to be this big omniscient being.” The statement implies that she has no similar wish. To Agentumbrella, Mycroft’s appeal is not necessarily in his cleverness or unfailing devotion to Sherlock. Rather, she identifies with the older Holmes brother because:

My sister has suffered with mental illness for most of her life and in the last 5-6 years it went from bad to worse. As a result the stress and tension became worse and worse on my parents and as a result me. At this time I was still in post-secondary education and in order to remain focused I had to shut myself of emotionally from what was going on, much like Mycroft with Sherlock. I love her dearly and with all my heart, as Mycroft does Sherlock, but I have had to keep my distance in order to not become hurt, especially now that she is dabbling in drugs, etc. If something were to happen at least I have myself distanced already in preparation. Yet at the same time like Mycroft my emotion will slip or I'll let down the wall for those small amounts of time where we will "play operation". So Mycroft in a sense has become my confidant, someone who is going through the same things I have, fictional or not. (Agentumbrella, e-mail interview.)

In Mycroft, Agentumbrella can recognize the difficulty of loving someone who causes you pain. As such, Mycroft’s fallibility proves no threat to her sense of significance; quite the opposite. If he was perfect, always in control, he would hardly serve as an effective ‘confidant’; would hardly be able (fictional or not) to validate her own ambivalent reactions towards her sister. “Yes he is ‘the british government’,” she writes to me, “but he is also a human being with emotions, faults and he makes mistakes.” Contrast with Crimsonpetal and Hobbes who speculate during our group chat that Mycroft will need to be removed in future seasons, since he is too much of a deus in machina; it is not conceivable that anything truly bad will ever happen to Sherlock as long as big brother is around to stop it. Another of my

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24 In “The Empty Hearse”, Sherlock and Mycroft plays the children’s game Operations and discuss whether or not having friends is a good idea.
Mycroft-inclined informants, Giantratofsumatra (who was supposed to join us for the chat but a time mix-up prevented her participation), rejects that idea even if she, too, believes in Mycroft’s active cooperation with Sherlock’s successfully feigned death. Interestingly, she, like agentumbrella, can recognize aspects of her own role as an older sibling in Mycroft: “I can see how hard he tries, and how painful it is for him to deal with Sherlock when he’s being deliberately provocative. I can’t help but admire the tenacity of his love for his little brother, and how far he is willing to go to protect him.” She is happy to dismiss details of what Sherlock tells Anderson, but to her the central aspect of that explanation, and the aspect she trusts, is Mycroft’s coming to his brother’s aid: “for me the heart of the Lazarus explanation was that Mycroft didn’t betray his brother, and that he not only knew all along, he helped in significant ways to pull off the disappearance and deception.” Additionally, she explains her conviction with a reference to Mycroft’s role in the original Arthur Conan Doyle stories:

I’m under the impression that, for a lot of us Mycroft fans, ACD canon was something we trusted to a certain extent when we were insisting that Mycroft would not genuinely betray his brother. Moftiss may not always follow canon exactly, but they do have a genuine love of the source material, and I seriously doubted they would betray the heart of Mycroft’s character so much as to abandon this particular piece that is such a central Mycroftian appearance in the canon texts. (E-mail interview.)

Giantratofsumatra was a fan of Sherlock Holmes long before Sherlock existed, and in our discussions she often refers back to ACD canon, which isn’t something all fans feel the need to do; we will return to that particular topic in the next chapter.

As for Mycroft Holmes, the significance ascribed to him varies from fan to fan, and shapes the perception and interpretation of the text accordingly. Given the understanding that Mycroft is incredibly intelligent, it doesn’t make sense that he should so foolishly share important information with a criminal mastermind obsessed with his brother; there has to be another explanation. Unless, of course, you are prepared to adjust your view of Mycroft as incredibly intelligent – but if you are highly invested in the interpretation of him as such, you are likely to avoid doing so for as long as possible.

**Similar Means for Different Goals**

As appealing as the Lazarus solution may be to the fan of Mycroft’s power and cleverness, as appalling is it to the devoted Moriarty fan. In the above excerpt from our September chat, you may notice how I question why Mycroft would let Moriarty go after he has been taken in and tortured for information. While this is partly justified by an interest in how the Lazarus
believers make sense of this potential plot hole, it was also born out of a very real and fannish wish to disrupt the narrative presented by my three informants. The idea that Moriarty has been so easily fooled by Mycroft is as threatening to my sense of significance as the reverse idea is to, for instance, Hobbes. To me, it seems like a betrayal of the narrative of the first two seasons. Or, in the words of Consultingtimelord, from the group chat dealing with the Fall: “saying that mycroft and sherlock actually had control of the entire situation just... It negates Moriarty as this Big Bad they’ve been setting him up to be”. To me as a Moriarty fan, whose enjoyment of the show and fandom activities is to no small degree tied to the consulting criminal, Lazarus effectively challenges my interpretation of the show. Thus, like Hobbes and Crimsonpetal upon the airing of “The Reichenbach Fall”, I reject the overt narrative. Lazarus is not true; Sherlock lied or at the very least left out several pertinent details in his explanation to Anderson; the truth about the Fall will play an important part in future installments. The latter claim is almost as important as the first one, because as disturbing to my sense of significance as the idea of Moriarty being outwitted is the notion he didn’t matter, that he was just some random baddie whom the hero needed to defeat and then can forget all about… When “The Empty Hearse” aired I was fairly disappointed. In part, this might have been due to the fact that no piece of fiction, no matter how brilliant could ever have lived up to my expectations, but my main issues with the new installment was that it failed to answer the, to me, most burning questions left in the wake of “The Reichenbach Fall”: what the hell was I.O.U all about? No conclusion or comment was offered to what I had deemed the most important plot thread, which suggested that it was never a very important plot thread to begin with. By hoping – by believing, if cautiously – that the series will return to the issue at a later date and that the withholding of the information for now is actually part of a grander scheme, I can keep my assumptions about the text and Moriarty’s importance intact. In terms of coping, the goal has been conserved, but the map of the text has changed to allow for existence of an unreliable narrator: what is presented as truth on the show can no longer be trusted to be true, which also makes for a tweaking of the means to reach my goal as overt textual elements are rejected. By a mixture of conservative and transformative strategies, my

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25 This claim was repeated by several of those of my informants who professed similar disappointment, and is in and of itself a coping strategy: rather than placing the blame with the text, it places it with the unrealistic expectations of the fan and thus allow them to still think favourably of the text, even when their reactions to it was less than completely enthusiastic. This, of course, is not to say that this assessment is factually wrong: it may very well be that no text could ever have been anything but disappointing after such a long time of expectant build-up.

26 In “The Reichenbach Fall” Jim Moriarty claims that he owes Sherlock a fall, and the throughout the episode he leaves I.O.U. messages for Sherlock; carved into an apple, sprayed onto windows, graffitied on a wall. Exactly why he owes Sherlock a fall is never explained.
sense of significance has been preserved – for now. It is more or less identical to the strategy employed by Hobbes and Crimsonpetal in the face of Mycroft’s apparent betrayal of Sherlock in “The Reichenbach Falls”, which not only speak to its effectiveness in terms of conserving significance but also of our similar priorities: to maintain an interpretation of our favourite characters as everything we imagined them to be. Conceivably, we might have opted for a different coping strategy if our priorities had been different; if, for instance, the reliability of the over text had been our main concern. If so, we might have had to discard or at least adjust the idea of Mycroft or Moriarty as quite so able and important as we had first believed them to be. We very rarely care about only one thing, after all, and this is true of texts as well of real life; in Crimsonpetal’s quote on page 57 she describes her preferences as “quite Mycroft-driven”. Quite – but not exclusively. She describes disliking “The Blind Baker” for being rather racist and mentions liking “A Scandal in Belgravia” not only for the interaction between the Holmes brothers but also because she appreciated Irene Adler. On a similar note, while I have no interest in a romantic relationship between Sherlock and John, their fantastic friendship still strikes me as the beating heart of the show – no matter how much I adore Moriarty or how important I think he is – and my discontent with the third series has as much to do with the distanced and strained relationship between the two main characters as it has to do with the lack of attention paid to Moriarty’s storyline. Furthermore, I remain deeply conflicted about my favourite character’s potential return: while I absolutely want him on the show, I am concerned for how it will affect the text’s credibility if no characters actually die (to date, both Irene and Sherlock has faked their death, the former twice). In our meaning-making we are constantly juggling different goals and when two or more of them are at odds with each other, we need to prioritize: a sometimes difficult and painful process as we – in accordance with the claim that we strive to maximize significance and prevent its loss – struggle to find a way to keep everything. Writes my fellow Moriarty-fan Tabletop in an e-mail interview: “I love Jim’s character and it would be awesome to see more of him, but it needs to be in a believable way. If we get another explanation like Sherlock’s then I don’t really know. It will be very hard to accept.”
Interlude: On Fans and Self-Reflexivity

tjlc be like

"...hmmmm"

To demonstrate how believers in TJLC – The Johnlock Conspiracy, i.e. the idea that it has always been the intention of the creators to make Sherlock and John a couple eventually – make mountains out of molehills (in the opinion of the user) thirtymillionquid created and posted this picture set on Tumblr. (http://thirtymillionquid.tumblr.com/post/100199786392/tjlc-be-like-hmmmm)
Writing on how our preferences shape our perception, it is easy to slip into a language that suggests that this is a one-way street, with the fan wilfully ignoring parts of the text or consciously twisting it to serve her purposes – sometimes while being oblivious about doing it. And often it may appear as if they are determinedly ignoring all evidence to the contrary in their desire to maintain a specific reading – at least if the person doing this is someone whose interpretation we do not agree with. It is always them that are seeing things that aren’t there just because they want them to; we always read the text as it is, without projecting our own desires and expectations on it.

A slightly less dismissive comment than thirtymillionquid’s graphic one above is offered by jimzuccofromit who notes that:

We’re all watching the same show but certain expectations have developed due to influences of the fandom and personal interests in the relationship of two characters and that has warped the way people perceive things. If you want two characters to be gay for each other, that’s what you’re going to see. That doesn’t mean it will be or is canon. (jimzuccofromit, “We’re all watching the same show”)

At first glance, this might read as a general comment on the nature of preferences and perception, not at all out of line with the arguments of this thesis. But it is tagged with ‘tjlr’ and ‘anti Johnlock’, and the use of the word ‘warped’ strongly implies that those ‘want two characters to be gay for each other’ are seeing things that are not actually there. The same argument is rarely turned on those who share the fan’s own preferences, although it does happen: while Petra is adamant that the Johnlock subtext is far more ‘text’ than ‘sub’ at this point, she still describes how certain other Johnlock shippers take their analysis a bit too far, for instance when putting forward the theory that various shirt patterns represents different sexualities.

But though fans are sometimes quick to dismiss as delusional the ideas of others while maintaining notions no less far-fetched, fans also often display remarkable self-awareness:

I think most people who hate on [Mary] (including me, mostly in my own mind) are more vitriolic than they would otherwise be — if she wasn’t in the midst of our OTP.
I think we’d hate her less if she was doing the exact same things, even shooting Sherlock, and wasn’t married to one John Hamish Watson.
Be honest. It’s true. I know it’s true if me. (captaindylant, 2014)

I mean, when I rant about something I'm so passionate about, I'll obviously be carried away a little, it just happens that you get over-enthusiastic only

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27 Tjlr – The Johnlock Refutation. A ‘movement’ dedicated to proving that TJLC is wrong.
concentrating on all the factors that support your own reading, finding what you are talking about more and more obvious and plausible as you go. (DoYourResearch, e-mail interview)

People often appear vitriolic in their defense of favoured ideas and rejection of disliked ones; this is perhaps even more true online, when never having to face your opponents allows you to speak with less consideration than you otherwise might. Yet, when we ask carefully, we often find that others are almost always capable of being as reflective and thoughtful as we think ourselves to be. It is a useful thing to bear in mind, for academics as well as fellow fans.
5. Negotiated Significance: The Social Aspect of Sense-Making

Petra says: “You could tell it was a certain attraction, a special chemistry between them. But I never really thought about it, not so explicitly, not then.”

We have just seated ourselves in the café, Petra and I, and she is cradling her cup of tea as she slowly, thoughtfully, tells me of how she first came to identify as a Johnlock-shipper. I already knew she was one prior to our meeting: “yes, I believe in TJLC too”, she wrote when first responding to my call for informants in the Facebook group for Swedish Sherlockians28 (https://www.facebook.com/groups/340613925968586/). Now she explains that when she first watched the show, as it aired on Swedish television, she didn’t really consider the potential romantic entanglement between the two main characters. It was a good show, a clever update; but that was about it. With a hint of laughter in her voice she tells me that she found Benedict Cumberbatch ugly.

That might just as well have been the end of it, and we would never have met, Petra and I. She would never have bought the JOHNLOCKED t-shirt she is wearing, she would never have started reading fanfic, would never have travelled for two hours to Stockholm just to chat with a complete stranger about a passion she can’t quite understand.

But: following burnout and a lengthy sick leave from her specialist job, she began to watch YouTube videos. With her concentration shot to pieces, focusing on full-length movies was too difficult, but short videos provided decent distraction without being too taxing. She began by seeking out fan videos and clips from the television show The Mentalist, a series she had watched while working and living away from home some time earlier. Often various Johnlock videos were suggested to her – and eventually she watched one. And then another, and another, until she no longer went on YouTube to look for The Mentalist material but to seek out more Johnlock. Now when she talks of the series, she remarks that “[t]here’s so much subtext that it’s almost ridiculous, all those long looks, standing so close to each other… There are so many things they could have done differently, if they didn’t want people to think that… “ She shakes her head, smiles. “Johnlock, that’s all I’ve got to say.”

From the vague awareness of a special chemistry to passionate conviction, by the way of YouTube videos and – later – Tumblr and AO3. Sometimes we need a bit of a nudge; sometimes it is not until someone else suggests it that we see. Goals and means are shaped by society and culture, writes Kenneth Pargament (1997). We need our view of the world

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28 The Sherlock Holmes fandom is perhaps the oldest ‘modern’ fandom. Fans of Arthur Conan Doyle’s written works and the various adaptations of it are often referred to as Sherlockians. In contrast, fans of the TV-series Sherlock are most often referred to simply as Sherlock fans.
confirmed and reproduced by those around us, notes Peter Berger (1967). Interpretations are negotiated between readers, observes Henry Jenkins (2013).

Meaning is subjective, but it is not found or created in a vacuum, and it is not found or created alone.

**Resolving Narrative Strangeness, Or Not**

The general gist of Petra’s story is not unique. Tumblr user multifandom-madness conducted a survey about Sherlock and shipping, and after analyzing the over 2,000 responses she concludes that the typical TJLC ‘conversion’ story involves the consumption of meta (multifandom-madness 2014). By reading the thought and analyses of others, the fan is introduced to aspects of the show he or she might not have previously considered – and when re-watching, they carry these new ideas with them into the interpretative work. Reading fan fiction or just a general involvement with fandom can also spark an interest in certain textual features (or extrapolated features, such as ships) that the fan might not have noticed or appreciated on their own. Such new interest or insights may also be sparked in conversation, as fans discuss the text and strive to make sense of it, as do DoYourResearch and I while watching one of the last scenes of “His Last Vow”. DoYourResearch is upset at John’s callous attitude during his and Sherlock’s supposedly final farewell:

**DoYourResearch:** I could’ve imagined it so nicely, they could’ve put that quote from Sherlock in TGG (that thing you did, it was good” or something the like) and now have John say it...

[...]

**Kee:** That would have been neat.

**DoYourResearch:** but to me it just felt like, okay, we had a good time, whatever, bye Sherlock 😞

**Kee:** Yes, he seems to accepting of it.

**Kee:** Maybe Mycroft let him in on the little secret?

**DoYourResearch:** well THAT would be a solution to it that I’d like

**DoYourResearch:** be like, that was the first overwhelming feeling i had when the episode finished

**Kee:** OR John found Moriarty - how? who knows? - and convinced him that they couldn’t let Sherlock rush off and die, and they planned it together!

**DoYourResearch:** how out of character John is, and i couldn’t understand him at all

**Kee:** My Johmlock heart would like that...

**DoYourResearch:** well, I’ll agree with that theory for your sake cause it would mean more Moriarty screentime 😬

**Kee:** ✋ You are a good friend.

**DoYourResearch:** but like actually i think it would be brilliant if John and Mycroft had worked it out together
DoYourResearch: cause like, they’ve been working together all the time, keeping sherlock safe
DoYourResearch: 😊
DoYourResearch: so yeah, i’ve never thought of that possibility, but i love it

On the 15:th of September in 2014 I arranged an online watch-along and chat, and over the course of six hours and three episodes of *Sherlock* – the entire third series – I was joined by five of my informants. DoYourResearch was the only of them who stayed on from the very first minute to the last, and during the above exchange, it was just her and me left. The scene we are watching is the so-called ‘tarmac scene’, where John and Sherlock say goodbye to each other before Sherlock boards a plane that (supposedly unbeknownst to John) will take him to his death; the doctor only knows that the detective is unlikely to return to England, since Sherlock has recently killed the blackmailer Magnussen to protect John and Mary from him. We have earlier discussed the possibility that it is Mycroft that has arranged for the ‘did you miss me’ message that enables Sherlock’s immediate return to the mother country, but now DoYourResearch is upset that John seems so unmoved by this (seemingly) final separation from Sherlock. To her, this isn’t at all fitting with how she has read John’s character and his relationship to Sherlock, and the discrepancy has been preying on her mind – “bc like, that was the first overwhelming feeling i had when the episode finished […] how out of character john is, and i couldn’t understand him at all” – and prompted her to describe John as a psychopath during the first part of our e-mail interview. The narrative ‘solution’ I present her with is eagerly accepted; it removes the discrepancy by turning John’s seeming indifference into the calm of a man who knows that he won’t be parted from his beloved (for that is what Sherlock is to John, in DoYourResearch reading of the text) for very long at all. It also seems plausible to her, since John and Mycroft has a history of working together to protect Sherlock before.

Plausible and preferred; when an interpretation (subjectively) fulfills both of these criteria, the likelihood of the fan accepting the reading as ‘correct’ is very large indeed. If the reading is plausible but undesirable we might resist it; if the reading is preferred by deemed implausible we have trouble upholding it. To me the notion that John has turned to Moriarty himself for help is exceedingly enticing but unlikely in the extreme, whereas the idea of Mycroft creating the Moriarty GIF and letting John in on the fact is reasonably plausible, but highly undesirable. The reason that I offer the latter to DoYourResearch in spite of my own dislike for it may partly be attributed to the incessant search for a pattern, for reasons, for meaning: I had noticed John’s rather casual attitude, but had written it off as an effect of his
and Sherlock’s somewhat strained relationship in season three. Or something. It really was not that big of a deal, and certainly nothing that occupied my mind after the credits had rolled. Once DoYourResearch expressed her anger and frustration, however, my mind immediately, automatically, searched for an explanation that might solve the seeming discrepancy. We do these things, us humans – but usually only if the discrepancy, the contradiction or strangeness, matters to us in some way. It seems that the less something matters to us, the vaguer an explanation for it are we inclined to accept. Sometimes no explanation at all is sufficient: during our group viewing of the third series, Sofie wonders what happened to the original documents of blackmailer Magnussen’s ‘mind-palace’\textsuperscript{29}, but after a short, half-hearted discussion the topic is abandoned without us providing any reasonable or compelling explanation. Sofie is obviously not satisfied with this, as she raises the subject once more fifteen minute later. However, no one else seems to find the issue – and potential plot hole – very relevant, and no one struggles to find a way to resolve it. It seems we are perfectly able to deal with inconsistency and unanswered questions – as long as they are of no significance to us. In the case of John and his indifferent attitude, I found and offered a solution in spite of my own largely indifferent attitude, and I did it because she is a fellow fan girl and a friend, and you help your fellow fan girls and friends out. “I’ll agree with that theory for your sake,” she in turn responds to my wishful second proposal.

**The Pain of Contradiction**

Small instances of communal sense-making, or negotiations of meaning, occurred through all of the watch-alongs I arranged, both off- and online (and, indeed, has every single time I have watched a movie or TV series with another person). During the second group viewing I arranged in my home we watched the second season, and during Sherlock’s very emotional goodbye to John right before he fakes his suicide by stepping of a roof at the end of “The Reichenbach Fall”, I complain about the implications of accepting Lazarus as true:

\begin{quote}
Kee: If the explanation in The Empty Hears is real then everything you felt watching this is false. I feel deceived and used.
Elin: Yeah.
Lorna: You could think of it as Sherlock being sad because John is sad and then Mycroft is sad because Sherlock is...
Kee: But that’s not the same.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{29} Sherlock uses a memory technique that involves ‘storing’ all information you wish to retain in a visualized space; in Sherlock’s case a mind palace. In theory, you will never forget anything as long as you can ‘find your way back’ to where you put it. At the end of "His Last Vow" it is revealed that Magnussen has no secret vault under his home where he stores all his blackmail material; it is all kept in his very own mind palace.
Neither Elin nor I – both of us Moriarty fans, incidentally – buys Lorna’s attempt at saving the emotional impact of “The Reichenbach Fall”. However, as she switches track somewhat and begins speculating about what Sherlock told Mycroft when, I join in, and for a moment we reach a sort of consensus, even if it doesn’t actually address my initial objection. Later on, Elin and I repeatedly point out several plot holes, arguing that Lazarus must be false. Lorna makes no other attempt to find solutions for us, but after a while decisively interjects: “Listen, I get that you can find errors and whatever, but I just want to focus on the relationships and it is kind of ruined when the two of keep seeing plot holes”. She appears genuinely upset, just as I (and, I believe, Elin) are genuinely surprised by her outburst. Perhaps I shouldn’t have been; I know from experience that it can be very upsetting to have someone rip apart a narrative you love. “Why focus on the bad stuff, when there is so much good?” Lorna asks after the episode has ended and we somewhat hesitantly discuss our different views on what had happened. It is awkward; Lorna is a close friend, and while we appreciate different aspects of Sherlock we have both enjoyed our shared love for the show, to the point of arranging a very small half-day convention dedicated to it half a year earlier. “I don’t think we see it in the same way, finding plot holes,” I offer now, eager to reclaim common ground. “It hasn’t to do with things being wrong or bad.”

It hasn’t – not to me or Elin. In this particular case the identification of textual features that contradict Lazarus is a way to tease out of the narrative a confirmation of the fact that Lazarus is not true. Failing verification of this theory in future installments of the show, the plot holes still offer the so-inclined fan a way to justify such a reading and maintain the sense of significance generated by it. But Lorna has little interest in whether Lazarus is true or false – “I don’t think anyone told the truth in season three, but… canon is still canon, even when there is vagueness or hesitancy. […] I am prepared to just accept whatever they show” – and questioning the overt narrative becomes a disruptive practice that “destroys me engagement with the show”. When seeing no reason to question what is happening on the screen, the fact
the others are doing so might threaten the plausibility of the text and might be seen as demanding a rewriting of the map – our idea of what the text is and contains and how it operates logically – which in turn threatens our sense of significance. As such, even just the exposure to differing opinions can sometimes be experienced as threatening and painful, and might necessitate the employment of coping strategies to conserve or transform our interpretation of the show to maintain significance.

Differing opinions do not always come in the shape of open questioning; the failure of others to acknowledge the importance or strangeness over certain features can be almost as disconcerting, as in the example of Sofie and her questions about Magnussen’s mind palace about (even if it is reasonable to assume that this question was of less importance to her than was the issue of not seeking out plot holes to Lorna, as evident by the difference in reaction to others not responding as wished). We tend to seek confirmation from others, express our opinions not only because we need them heard but because we want them validated: can you see what I see? Is it really there? Is my interpretation reasonable? When dealing with a fictional text, we have few other ways of ‘testing’ our tentative assumptions about the text and thus the need for affirmation by others arguably become even more important.

**Canon vs. Fanon**

Not everyone finds canonical evidence for their favoured aspects particularly important (which isn’t to say that the favoured aspects in question are not anchored in their interpretation of the actual show):

notyourbreadbaker: I can’t find my old post about this but literally one of the best parts about fandom is discovering and exploring ships that could never become canon, I was a massive fan of Dramione [Draco/Hermione from the Harry Potter series] but I never really entertained it as becoming canon, shipping is a lot about creativity and veering away from the “reality” a show has set up for us, I’ve said this before but… Never in a dream would I actually feasibly consider Marylock [Mary/Sherlock] as becoming canon but it’s just FUN to explore and think about and it’s for me and if you don’t like it that’s entirely fine, and however you choose to ship is totally fine as well, honestly it’s all fine, we’re here to enjoy and be creative and maybe even learn something new about ourselves, fandom is what you choose to do with it and of course there’s always going to be conflict but we should all do our best to respect each other’s spaces, it’s not always rainbows and butterflies and that’s not what I’m asking for, but there is no “right way”

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30 Whereas in the real world you can usually test your assumptions about the world by doing things and observing the consequences (even if the reliability of these test may sometimes be questioned, partly due to confirmation bias and partly due to the utter complexity of the world; pinpointing the exact cause and effect of various events is often impossible).
within fandom when we’re all just enjoying a television show or book or movie for our own entertainment and amusement.

trickybonmot: Yeah, this! I’m honestly kind of confused by the emphasis on ships being/becoming cannon—even Johnlock! Like, to me, that is not even close to the point of shipping. It’s more like, let’s just toss these elements together and see what happens, test the limits of what we’ve been given, enjoy playing this glorious game. (trickybonmot 2014)

The sentiment is echoed in e-mail interviews. “[A]s a Johnlock shipper, I’m okay with them not getting together in the show. I might be a bit weird like that, I don’t know,” writes thesilenceofgallifrey. But evidence suggests that she is not ‘weird’, or at least not alone in her indifference to the canonical status of their favourite ship: to WorseThanEver “shipping a pairing just means that you want to see them together, not that you expect it to become canon. I will enjoy ship in fan-made spaces, where the fact of John's marriage can be gotten around in numerous different ways.” The same clear differentiation between fanon and canon, as used by fans to describe various spheres of textual ‘truth’, can be found in metafan03’s e-mails:

Textual evidence in canon is very important to whether or not I believe it might happen in canon. Whether or not I 'fall' for a ship depends on whether I find it believable, and since my headcanon versions of characters can be heavily influenced by fanon, I can find some ships believable when there's not a shred of textual evidence within canon (but loads of fanon development of the characters in a way that makes it so). (metafan03)

Hobbes takes it one step further when she states that she “is more interested in my imaginary relationships (with minor characters or pairings) and how they would progress than I was in the actual relationship that was being portrayed onscreen” (e-mail interview). Hobbes wrote her first Sherlock fan fic before she had even watched the show, and based her portrayal of the characters on extrapolations from what she had read in other fic. Her interest is primarily in the fandom rather than in the show itself, and the main reason she is excited about season four of Sherlock is that it will keep the fandom alive. As for what happens in the series, she hasn’t given it a great deal of thought and notes that “[t]he only things I don’t want to happen is for them to make Mycroft into The Bad Guy”. Likewise, her objection to the one pairing she doesn’t particularly care for – i.e. Johnlock – is not only grounded in her disapproval of the way John treats Sherlock in series three (an interpretation which she admits is partly fuelled by her dislike for Martin Freeman and his insensitive comments outside of the show) but also in her feeling that “too much has been made of it by fandom”. Metafan03, on the other hand, elegantly bridges the gap between canon and fanon by proposing that the various
‘fake solutions’ of the Fall presented in “The Empty Hearse” is the creators way of acknowledging the fan’s own scenarios and stories as no less valid than “the official version according to the show” (e-mail interview).

The sometimes easy disregard for canon is a relatively new phenomenon. Henry Jenkins describes how various ‘alternative universe’ scenarios in fan fiction were fairly uncommon back when stories were primarily distributed in edited fan zines (Jenkins 2013). One of my oldest informants, adagio, confirms this in an e-mail interview and admits to sometimes feeling as if fandom is deviating too far from the story told on the show: “I don’t really see the point when the names is all that’s left. I don’t get things like fawnlock or tunalock at all, but I guess it’s amusing. […] Sometimes I think the internet has made it too easy to publish stories.” Other fans, such as Petra, glory in the freedom of fan fiction: “Everything is allowed! I think that’s what I really like about it, that there are no rules.”

However, appreciating the great diversity of fan works does not necessarily lead to a disinterest in whether or not favoured readings are confirmed by the show. The very core of the Johnlock conspiracy is the expectation that John and Sherlock will eventually be portrayed as a canonical couple, and several of my Johnlock-inclined informants describes how they would be devastated if the detective and the doctor never ended up together. Yet, some of them have already devised ‘back-up plans’, in uneasy anticipation that their expectations might never be fulfilled. alwayslookingfordistractions writes that “[i]f it’s not going to be canon at all, I’ll be hoping for some good explanation/nice case plot to distract me from the disappointment. Still, I’m going to ship them whatever happens!” and hedgelock has devised an interpretative strategy that will allow her to think of Johnlock as canon even when lacking overt proof:

I mean, to me it still would be canon if they didn’t end up together on screen, because that’s just what ACD did. This whole subtext thing is there in ACD because homosexuality was illegal back then and everyone who was involved knew how to read the subtext, so it was a way of… communication between insiders. (hedgelock, e-mail interview).

Do a primary focus on fandom and fanon lead the fan to do less interpretative work than someone who is highly invested in canon confirmation of favoured readings? None of the empirical data I have gathered support such a notion; in individual interviews and group discussions, during watch-alongs and on Tumblr, fanon-oriented WorseThanEver and Hobbes have as many opinions and ideas about the text as do canon-invested freemania and DoYourResearch. However, since their overall enjoyment of Sherlock is more related to fan
works than the source text, their sense of significance may not necessarily be disrupted by having their expectations thwarted by the text - but on the other hand they may be more sensitive to disruptions of fandom, such as shipping wars or in-fighting. Hobbes has dealt with what she describes as a growing divisiveness in the fandom by retreating to her “own little corner” (Hobbes, e-mail interview), an expression also used by WorseThanEver in an e-mail interview: “I'm aware that there is immaturity, wank, ship-hate, and other sorts of dickishness out there, but I usually find my little corner to be fun, funny, kind, and intellectually stimulating”.

But no matter on which you place the greater emphasis – canon or fanon – the link between the two remains (and remains blurred, sometimes to the point where you can no longer say for certain if the little detail you remember is a product of the source text or a fan fic, if it is head canon or just canon). Fan works – fic, art, GIFs, meta, cosplay, roleplay discussion, etc - are extrapolated from the text and no matter how fanciful or developed, something of the original remains, if only in the invocation of familiar names such as John and Sherlock. On the other hand, when we return to the original text we carry with us the ideas and assumptions we have encountered and created in conversation with other fans, and it informs our on-going interpretative work. Sometimes the effect of fanon on our understanding of canon is negligible, or at least too subtle to be readily apparent; at other times, it very directly and overtly affects how we react to the developing plot – as in the case of Sebastian Moran.

The Curious Case of Sebastian Moran
When watching Sherlock for the first time back in 2012, I was personally immediately struck by the chemistry between Sherlock and Moriarty. Their romantic and/or sexual potential seemed obvious to me, and once I had watched every episode (only six of them at the time) I happily went online to look for fan fiction. Much to my chagrin, there was very little ‘Sheriarty’ to be found; instead people was pairing Moriarty with someone called Sebastian Moran. This was not a character from the show, and I was both baffled and admittedly quite annoyed that my fellow fans should be busy writing about this obviously fan-created person that I couldn’t care less about. Having exhausted what meager supply of Sheriarty fic there was, I ended up reading a Mormor (Moriary/Moran) story – and ended up loving it. This ship intrigued me, appealed to me; made sense to me. Later, I would learn that Sebastian Moran appears in Arthur Conan Doyle’s original stories as Moriary’s chief of staff and ‘the second
most dangerous man in London’. Fans, ever creative, had taken it upon themselves to produce an updated version of the old criminal to fit into the modern *Sherlock* world. During the long hiatus between season two and three, the Mormor fans discussed the possibility of a canon Moran in the new season with a mixture of eager excitement and dread. The Tumblr blog issebastianmorancastyet declared itself “dedicated to the question all Mormor shippers and the sherlock fandom at large want answered” (issebastianmorancastyet.tumblr.com) and when the actor Tomi May was announced for the third season, many fans guessed that he was cast as Moran. As it turned out, he wasn’t. The first episode of season three, “The Empty Hearse”, is (very) loosely based on *The Adventure of the Empty House*, the Arthur Conan Doyle story that featured Sebastian Moran seeking revenge on Sherlock Holmes for destroying James Moriarty. In BBC’s version one ‘Lord Moran’ appears as a British minister in the employ of North Korea and responsible for the attempted terrorist attack that Sherlock and John stops. The Mormor fans were not convinced. As Tumblr user Thursdayplaid notes:

> One thing I love about season three of Sherlock is that no one’s quite satisfied with lazy hotel Moran. We met Sebastian Moran in episode one and the whole fandom just sort of collectively went *you’re not my real mom.* (thursdayplaid, 2014)

They exaggerate, of course: during the group discussion after watching season two in a small group, Lorna impatiently tells me that we *do* have a Moran when I complain about the lack of him in season three, and another one of my informants tells me in an e-mail interview that she doesn’t like Mormor because she doesn’t think Moriarty and Moran (as in the character from “The Empty Hearse”) “look cute together”. In all likelihood, the majority of fandom doesn’t care either way about Sebastian Moran; they have other thing to think about, other priorities. But among the Mormor shippers, the rejection of ‘Lord Moran’ as Sebastian is univocal. In the tags to the above post, thursdayplaid adds ‘but after so many years of trying to figure out the type of tiger hunting sniper that hung out with moriarty’ ‘the most causal moran does not impress’. Although extrapolated from the canon creation of Arthur Conan Doyle, the modern Sebastian Moran is purely creation of fandom – shaped in fan fiction and fan art, in GIFs and fan videos, in discussions and dreams – and yet this creation directly influenced how fans received and evaluated the text. ‘Lord Moran’ did not fulfill expectations (not only was he a far cry from the fandom version of Moran, but he had no discernible connection to Moriarty at all), and was thus rejected. The fact that he was never explicitly named ‘Sebastian’ makes this

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31 Whether or not this was actually a burning question for the Sherlock fandom at large may be debated. Most of my informants – admittedly not a representative sample, but still – did not mention Sebastian Moran with one word, and among those who did several explained their confusion over the existence of the Mormor ship.
rejection easier; it does not actually contradict the text. Some fans speculate that he is supposed to be Augustus Moran, Sebastian’s father in the original stories; a lord and minister to Persia (compare to ‘minister of foreign affairs). Some wonder if he might be a red herring\(^{32}\) and hope that the real Sebastian Moran will make an appearance later on (perhaps as the source of the mysterious ‘did you miss’-message at the end of “His Last Vow”). Yet others predict an expanded – and perhaps more fitting - role for our Lord Moran in future episodes. Most commonly, it is assumed that Mary Morstan has taken over many of Moran’s original traits and will later be revealed to have worked for Moriarty. The Mormor fandom still survives, but it is no longer quite as large and lively as it once was; fewer fic are written, less fan art is drawn. Once touted as the second biggest ship in the Sherlock fandom – based on the number of fic featuring the pairing on AO3 – it is now being surpassed by Sherlolly (Sherlock/Molly), Mystrade (Mycroft/Lestrade) and the canonical Warstan (John/Mary). Although a fanon creation, Mormor and fandom’s Sebastian Moran cannot be completely divorced from the text, and as the chance of any further textual ‘food’ for the ship diminishes – with one part of it supposedly dead and the other likely to never appear in any form even vaguely resembling what the shippers wants him to be – so does the ship\(^{33}\).

Extra-Textual Sources in the Sense-Making Process

In the case of Sebastian Moran, fans turned to the original stories of Arthur Conan Doyle to find inspiration for a character they thought missing in the updated BBC version, and the same was done with Victor Trevor, Sherlock Holmes’ close friend from college who has yet to make an appearance on the show. But fans do not only go looking such raw material in the first tales of the famous detective; so-called ‘ACD canon’ is also invoked to aid interpretation of the modern-day adaptation.

Comparing how Doyle handled the effect of John Watson’s wedding on his relationship to the detective, Tumblr user and Johnlocker anigrrl2, points out that in the original stories Watson and Holmes drift apart because Watson is too busy being happily married to have much time for his old friend. But in Sherlock, John is portrayed as bored and dreaming of Sherlock just a few months into his marriage.

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\(^{32}\) A ‘red herring’ is a textual false lead, something that intentionally draws the reader’s attention away, usually in order to preserve surprise at a later plot development.

\(^{33}\) This need not always happen; some ships grow so large and popular that they continue to inspire fans long after the text that gave birth to them has ended. Yet most ships – like most fandoms – shrink and eventually fade into a (hopefully) fond memory some time after the last credits have rolled or the epilogue has been written.
So, Mofftiss\textsuperscript{34} has taken the canon separation of Holmes and Watson and turned it on its head. Instead of domestic bliss, John is bored and stroppy. Instead of a sweet wife who consumes all his attention, Mary is an assassin. Instead of Watson barely noticing Holmes’ absence in his life, John is dreaming of him, thinking about him constantly, talking to Mary about him until she’s openly annoyed about it. T.J.L.C. (anigrri2, 2014)

Here the new canon is contrasted with ACD canon, and the difference is used as an argument that Gatiss and Moffat will take a route different from the one Doyle chose, i.e. they will have Sherlock and John end up together on the show.

In a long and very detailed meta post entitled “The Sign of Three Plus One” finalproblem uses Doyle’s original *The Sign of Four* as the main reference when discussing the potential identities of the three (or, as they argue, four) robbers seen in “The Sign of Three”. They also note that several of the key elements of Doyle’s tale (such as a boat chase on the Thames or a stolen treasure) that at first glance appears missing from the BBC’s version is actually present, but in disguised form. Spotting such ‘hidden’ winks to the original stories has become something of a sport for many viewers, and a source of enjoyment in and of itself. During our group viewing of “The Empty Hearse” Lorna is loudly excited when she determines that the person Sherlock and Mycroft deduces is a geek because the brothers’ deduction game originally appears in a story called “The Greek Interpreter”, which has become “The Geek Interpreter” in a post on John Watson’s blog (http://www.johnwatsonblog.co.uk/blog/16june) Familiarity with the Doyle’s writing offers these fans an added dimension that remains closed to those who have not read the novels and short stories, or have read them but casually. Or rather; a dimension that *would* have remained closed to the rest of us, had the discoveries not been shared on Tumblr, by finalproblem and others.

Although the ultimate source of the many various adaptions of the stories about the detective, the works of Arthur Conan Doyle are not the only ones invoked when fans attempt to make sense of *Sherlock*. Other works of fiction are brought up as well, as when captain-liddy asks if the show “remind[s] anybody else of Pride and Prejudice?”. Comparing Mary to the unpleasant Wickham of Jane Austen’s classical tale, and Sherlock to Mr. Darcy, she concludes that “[t]he way this whole thing is told is just such a love story” (captain-liddy, 2014). Incurablylazydevil, meanwhile, uses GIFs to demonstrate the similarities between *Sherlock* and the cult movie *The Princess Bride* (based on William Goldman’s novel and

\textsuperscript{34} Mofftiss is the portmaneu used to denote the creators of Sherlock, Stephen Moffat and Mark Gatiss. Sometimes Mofftisson is used, when the fan wants to include Stephen Thompson, who wrote the script for “The Blind Banker” and “The Reichenbach Fall”, and co-wrote “The Sign of Three”.

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Picture sets from top to bottom. 1. A solemn vow made to the beloved, in Buttercup’s case Westley; in Sherlock’s John. 2. Westley and Buttercup needs to brave the dangerous Fire Swamp, and Sherlock must rescue John from being burned alive in a Guy Fawkes bonfire. 3. Buttercup is made to marry Prince Humperdinck, a man she doesn’t love, and John marries Mary Morstan. 4. Westley is tortured by the evil Prince Humperdinck, Mary shoots Sherlock. 5. Westley is brought back to life by his love for Buttercup, Sherlock is brought back to life as his mind palace’s version of Jim Moriarty warns him that John is in danger. (incurablylazydevil)
allegedly\textsuperscript{35} one of Stephen Moffat’s favourite movies) and to argue that, like Buttercup and Westley, John and Sherlock are lovers separated by cruel fate. The GIF set requires the fan to be familiar not only with *Sherlock* but with *The Princess Bride* too. The set is posted without any explanatory commentary such as the one I have provided above, and it is a reasonable lack because with the commentary there, the dramatic effect is dramatically lessened, much like that of a joke that needs explaining. Without ever overtly stating their purpose incurablylazydevil seems to say: ‘well, you know *The Princess Bride*, which contained all of these elements? You know how that story ended? See here, *Sherlock* contains all of these elements, too, so what might we deduce about its ending?’ Hardly watertight proof, and hardly intended as such; it is not aimed to convince any skeptics, but is a playful commentary that assumes the fan’s familiarity with both of the fictional universes invoked.

User herberthenryasquith presumes no such cross-literacy when she carefully explains why the novel *Maurice*, the love story of two gay men written in 1913-1914 and published after the author’s death, might reasonably be used as a template for what is to come in *Sherlock*. Again, it is doubtful that the poster actually believe that this is proof of a future romance between the two main characters, but apart from pointing to similar turns of phrasing and noting that Rupert Graves (Gregory Lestrade in Sherlock) plays one of the major parts in the film, they also write that “there is utterly no doubt in my mind that Gatiss has read the book” (herberthenryasquith 2014). They do not only use another piece of fiction for interpretative reference, but calls upon what we know or might assume about the creators of *Sherlock* as well. In this case, herberthenryasquith – rightly or not – guesses that Mark Gatiss, an openly gay man with a fondness for litterature, must have read this classic tale of homosexual love; and thus it is no accident and not incidental that Sherlock’s quote “Just the two of us against the rest of the world!” (“The Empty Hearse”) echoes the “he felt they were against the whole world” from *Maurice* (Forster 1993:201).

herberthenryasquith is not alone in speculating about the writers. As fans occasionally call upon other works of fiction – or, indeed, non-fiction – to better understand *Sherlock* or illustrate a point, so do they occasionally call upon the nature and experiences, the work and comments, of and by the cast and crew members of the show:

\textsuperscript{35} This was pointed out to me by hedgelock after they had read the thesis. However, I cannot find a valid source for the Moffat quote circulated on Tumblr: http://loudest-subtext-in-television.tumblr.com/post/93292430219/the-princess-bride-moffat-and-tjlc
Moffat: The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes is the only genius Sherlock Holmes film, it’s haunting and beautiful.

Gatiss: The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes is my favourite Sherlock Holmes adaptation, you see Sherlock falling in love with Watson but it’s so desperately unspoken

Moffat: writes two married!femlock adaptations

Ben Stephenson, commissioner of Sherlock: When the big gay script comes in I will definitely commission it

People: LOL the writers are homophobic and think that everything should be heterosexual, you tjlc people are DELUSIONAL, also the BBC wouldn’t allow it

Me:
Me: So let’s talk about the first johndlock kiss

(piningjohn)

Invoking the creators works and personalities when interpreting the show, or arguing for a particular interpretation of it, often involves references to other projects of theirs, as when piningjohn writes of Stephen Moffat’s fondness for ‘married!femlock’. Apart from co-running Sherlock with Mark Gatiss, Moffat is also the head-writer of Doctor Who, a long-running British science-fiction television series. In it, he has introduced the happily married characters of Vastra and Jenny, a non-human detective and her assistant and wife. In Jekyll, a six-part series written by Moffat alone, another female detective and her wife appears in pivotal roles. Particularly the former couple is a rather obvious nod to Holmes and Watson. However, others use Moffat’s work on Doctor Who to argue the misogynistic portrayal of women on Sherlock, an issue will we return to below.

Like herberthenryasquith when she speculates upon the potential influence of Maurice on Mark Gatiss, piningjohn references the creators’ own media consumption and preferences, and uses their self-proclaimed fondness for the one-sided romance of The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes to counter the argument that the writers are homophobic (an accusation leveled more often at Moffat than at Gatiss; the latter is after all married to another man). Others infer meaning from comparing single and sometimes seemingly unrelated quotes to what happens and is said on the show:

I’ll leave you to your own deductions

"A girlfriend?" Moffat laughed, upon questioning. "He’d poison a girlfriend just to see if it worked."
—Stephen Moffat, San Diego Q&A

The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes is a movie adaptation directed and produced by Billie Wilder in 1970. In it, Sherlock Holmes pretends that he and Watson are a couple to avoid the amorous interest of a ballerina. Later, it is heavily implied that Holmes is, in fact, homosexual and in love with Watson. Mark Gatiss has described it as a the film that changed his life (Morgan 2010) and noted that it is both his and Stephen Moffat’s favourite Holmes film (Leader 2010).
"Now, John I'd poison. Sloppy eater. Dead easy. I've given him chemicals and compounds that way, he's never even noticed."
—Sherlock, The Sign of Three
(deduce-my-heart 2014)

While herberthenyasquith, piningjohn and deduce-my-heart all see evidence of a potential happy-ever-after for John and Sherlock in the words of Moffat and Gatiss, others have found the very opposite. Timetumblingconsultant is a devoted Johnlock shipper and tells me that she would “absolutely swoon” if it ever became canon. However, she doesn’t believe it will “because the writers won’t do it. That’s just how they are. [...] It has nothing to do with canon evidence, it’s because the writers have thoroughly rejected any idea of it, with unnecessary repulsion to the idea.” Throughout the years, both Moffat and Gatiss have denied that they are planning to make Sherlock and John a couple, with Moffat noting that “John isn’t wired that way” (Rosenberg 2012) and Gatiss claiming at Mumbai Comic Con that there never was any temptation to make John and Sherlock gay (24Shining Stars 2014). The repeated renunciation of canonical Johnlock has angered many shippers, some of whom feel that the creators of Sherlock are deliberately playing with a homoerotic subtext in order to attract certain audience segments while having no intention of ever delivering on the implied promise of a romantic development for the two main characters. The tactic (actual or imagined) is referred to as queerbaiting, and whether the show is guilt of it or not cannot yet be determined according to several of my Johnlock-inclined informants. When I ask DoYourResearch about the show’s potential flaws she told me that it very much depends on what happens in future installments.

I'm one of those who think that Sherlock and John ought to end up together in one way or another after seeing the 3 series they have done so far. Like, there was tension between them in series 1 and 2, but all of that could still be ignored if one really wanted to. But with season 3 for me it's become so central that it absolutely can't be an accident - the writers as well as the actors are experts at what they do, I can't possibly imagine them portraying Sherlock and John as in love with each other (despite both believing it to be one-sided) if that wasn't exactly what they wanted to come across. So the question for me is, are they doing it in order to be "funny" or are they intending to actually do something about this complex relationship they have built up. For me it would be a big flaw if they had done all that without any intention of ever acknowledging that this love is real and possible (instead of their "no idea why you would think that" attitude so far). Like, I really hope that's not what's happening - if it was, that'd be plain cruel on the writers' part - but since we can't know yet (probably won't before, like, 2020) as far as I'm concerned there are no flaws so far. (DoYourResearch, e-mail interview.)
The notion that all the homoerotic subtext cannot be accidental is a common discourse among Johnlock shippers, and echoed by several of my other informants. thehiddekingdom maintains that “it can’t all be queerbaiting, and it can’t all be mistakes” since the people involved with the show are all professionals. Like DoYourResearch, she would be upset if Johnlock was never made canon, “because then that would mean Gatiss and Moffat were actually just toying with us and using the whole gay factor to keep us watching”. hedgelock, on the other hand, says that “[e]ven if I am convinced this is canon, I wouldn’t call it queerbaiting if it wasn’t”. As we saw in the quote on page 76, by referencing the perceived strategy of Arthur Conan Doyle, she has effectively ‘emancipated’ her interpretation and it can no longer be disproved by the source text; part of the overt narrative or not, Johnlock will still be canon to her.

To the uninitiated, it may perhaps appear strange that the expectations – however tentative – of canonical Johnlock still flourish in the creators’ outright rejection of it. However, this is not necessarily a case of selective deafness on the part of hopeful shippers; Stephen Moffat is known to offer outright lies in response to questions about the future developments of *Sherlock* and *Doctor Who* – and he has never been shy about admitting to this fact himself. “I’ve been lying my arse off for months,” he told fans at a Comic Con panel in 2013 (Blair 2013), and before series three of *Sherlock* premiered he repeatedly claimed that Andrew Scott (who plays the supposedly deceased Moriarty) was only on set “to be a dead body. And, in fact, it was cheaper to get Andrew Scott than a mannequin” (“Sherlock’s Showrunner Offer” 2013). Moriarty did indeed appear as a dead body in series three – but also as very much alive (if not necessarily real) in several other scenes. Mark Gatiss is considered to be somewhat more restrained, but essentially no more trustworthy. The creators’ unreliability has made for a situation where the exact same statement can conceivably serve as both proof and disproof. ‘They have said it won’t happen many times, so it won’t happen,’ says one fan. ‘Of course they can’t say it’ll happen, then the surprise would be ruined,’ says another.

When hedgelock maintains that Johnlock is canon whether it is ever overtly presented as such on the show or not, it not only frees her interpretation from potential textual refutation; it also frees her of the potential pain of having the creators of a show mocking her interpretation – as timetumblingconsultant perceives them doing when they reject the notion of Johnlock with “unnecessary compulsion” (see quote on page 84). As already noted, having our interpretations questioned or challenged may constitute a threat to significance, and this threat is made all the larger if the challengers is the authors of the text, who ought to know what it is all about. To some fans, the greatest insult wouldn’t be a lack of canonical Johnlock but
failure of the writer’s to acknowledge it as a reasonable alternative. DoYourResearch tells me that she is about 60% certain Johnlock will be canon and would be sorely disappointed if it is not, but notes that what would really upset her is the creators sticking to the attitude they have displayed towards Johnlock so far.

Like, all they ever say is "Oh, two men living together nowadays, it's so clear everyone would assume them gay", like that was the only thing ever to support the interpretation of Johnlock belonging together, like thousands of fans had made a far-fetched assumption for the sole reason of them living together, people being full of prejudice and assuming, 2 blokes, 1 flat - they automatically have to be in a relationship. But that is not at all what is happening. Sure, probably not all the signs and hints on the show are bound to have been intended to be seen like that, but some of them MUST be consciously included on a show where the set designer makes an effort to have phoenixes on a restaurant wall symbolizing Sherlock's resurrection (even though the wall can hardly ever be truly seen in focus) or where Benedict consciously leans in to explain the final link in his deduction to Irene at the end of the episode in order to have his face being seen in the shadow of her head while delivering the line 'because this is such a very dark part of Sherlock showing' (he actually said something along the lines on the ASIB commentary, I believe, though I don't know the exact words anymore). In a show where people make such deliberate decisions I can't believe all the stuff implying Johnlock could happen with no one noticing. So if they are not intending to have Johnlock as endgame, I at least want them to be honest about it, about how there were all these implications for fans to find, gimmicks they hid for pure fun or something, just really them acknowledging that the fans are in fact not crazy and delusional for seeing the chemistry and the love between them, cause for me the patronizing "why would you ever think such a ridiculous thing, there was nothing at all on the show that supports your theories lol" is much worse than just the possible outcome of Johnlock not happening. (DoYourResearch, e-mail interview.)

DoYouResearch acknowledges the creators’ right to develop the show as they see fit, and she won’t stop watching it just because her OTP is not made canon. However, the suggestion that she and her fellow fans are “crazy and delusional” and that her interpretation of the show lacks any textual basis is unsettling as it implies that the text as she understands it, the text that she loves and in is highly invested in, that text never existed at all.

To DoYourResearch, what the creators of the show say and think about it matters. To others it do not, and these fans reject the notion that any sort of extra-textual utterances – no matter whom or where they come from – need to be considered when the fan shapes her interpretation of the show. “Ignoring Moffat is only traditional,” claims Tumblr user thoughtlessthinkythoughts (2014), and goes on to compare such disregard to the long-standing Sherlockian practice of trying to find cohesive explanations of all the contradictions and continuity errors of Doyle’s works. But ignoring the creators has arguably become more difficult in the past two decades, as internet and countless media channels offers said creators
a plethora of opportunities to elaborate on their works. In her article *Fandom in the Digital Era*, Roberta Pearson describes how some fans and acafans regret this development and the way it restricts interpretative potential by forcing upon fans the ‘right’ answer. Not only does it remove one of the chief pleasures of watching at text – that of active interpretation – but it also shifts the power more firmly in favour of the producer (Pearson 2010) and raises the question of who does a text ultimately belong to? *Star Wars* fans have occasionally criticized the creator of the films, George Lucas, for meddling with his creation as he has reworked the movies over the years. Having invested a lot of time and emotion in the original versions, the fans feel as if Lucas is taking unseemly liberties with something that is no longer only his. In the *Sherlock* fandom, we have (yet) not had to deal with retroactive rewriting of our favoured text, but fans still debate over and occasionally struggle with how to deal with extra-textual statements – if we think the text supports a reading of Sherlock as asexual, do we have to accept that he isn’t just because Moffat says that his abstaining from sex is “the choice of a monk, not the choice of an asexual” (Jeffries 2012)? thoughtlessthinkythoughts posits that not only is it permissible to ignore the creators, it is almost imperative if you are a true *Sherlock* fan. By referring to the practices of fans gone before, she legitimizes a disregard for the opinions of “the literary agent” (thoughtlessthinkythoughts 2014) who in her account become the mere channel of fictional truth and not necessarily more knowledgeable about it than the fan. My informant freemania, however, does not agree:

I am all for shipping (that’s what fan fiction is for), but I think you should also respect the creators, writers and actors say about their characters and not blindly ignore what they say or think about the characters. […] There are some folks in the fandom who maintain that Sherlock is asexual, despite the fact that BC has stated that Sherlock is most certainly not asexual; he does have a sex drive, but he chooses to suppress it to focus on his work. Hey, if you want to continue to believe Sherlock is asexual, have at it. Knock yourself out. Just don’t rain on my Sherlolly parade. (freemania, e-mail interview.)

Her objection is not to fans forming their own opinions; in a follow-up e-mail she explains that what disturbs her is when others “dissect every single thing that [Benedict Cumberbatch], [Martin Freeman], [Stephen Moffat], [Mark Gatiss] say and then twist themselves into pretzels trying to tell everyone that what [Cumberbatch] said, for example is not really true. […] I have much more respect for people who say, ‘I know what Moffat or [Cumberbatch] has said, whatever. I still ship it.’” freemania is a Sherlolly shipper, and she is particularly critical of Johnlock shippers and fans who maintain that Sherlock is asexual since members of both of these groups engage in the sort of activities she has described below; maintaining their
interpretation as a canonically plausible in spite of the cast and crew’s refutations. These need to be considered, in her opinion – but as we have seen, not everybody agrees. As with most other aspects of fandom, what needs to be taken into account and how it should be dealt with is a matter of opinion and negotiation. It is also a dynamic and on-going process, in which the fan may well adopt both stances at various times: the fan who gleefully jumps at a comment about Sherlock needing Moriarty as much as he does John may happily disregard another one made about how the Sheriarty kiss in “The Empty Hearse” was included because Moffat thought it was the only pairing no one really shipped. Another case of confirmation bias, perhaps – but also a reminder that people are complex, and so is the sense-making process. The coping strategy that seems appropriate in one situation might prove less appealing in another, and so the fan utilizes them at their discretion.

**Sense-Making and Real World Politics**

While DoYourResearch’s worry about Johnlock never becoming canon is tied most directly to her own feelings about the show, others apply a sociopolitical perspective when they decry queerbaiting as offering fake representation; a promise to attract audiences, but a promise never intended to be fulfilled. On the issue of potential queerbaiting in Sherlock, fandomandfeminism (2012) writes that “[i]t hurts and it isn’t fair. It’s like being teased with the one thing you want more than anything and having it yanked away after it was promised to you. Maybe that’s over dramatic, but it isn’t ok. It turns queer representation into a game, into a ploy to draw in viewer and never delivering.” Taking it one step further, one of the respondents to multifandom-madness’ shipping survey writes that they, as a queer person, even rejects the notion of actual Johnlock because of the harm it would bring to the queer community: “[i]f Moffat & Co. has been going through all the trouble of denial in the show canon and making fun of/shaming the fans in real life, just to turn around and say ‘haha! This is what we’ve been working for all along!’ then they’re despicable people, and harmful to the queer community” (multifandom-madness 2014).

What parameters and standards we use to evaluate the text may differ between individuals; we might consider the structure and logic of the narrative, the characters, the aesthetics, the message – or, as in the examples above, the potential impact of the text upon society, and the moral implications of the writing. Using real world politics as the primary frame of reference when appraising a text is not uncommon on Tumblr where social issues – primarily racism, sexism and homophobia – are often discussed. *Sherlock* is occasionally accused of being both
racist, sexist and homophobic, with critics denouncing the primarily white cast, the lack of
developed female characters, and the perceived queerbaiting.

One of the characters most often discussed and judged in terms of representation and
politics is Sally Donovan. Second in command to Greg Lestrade, she is a black woman in a
work environment dominated by men and white people. In the series, she serves as a foil to
Sherlock, calling him a freak and attempting to dissuade both John and Lestrade from
associating with him: “he’ll always let you down,” she tells her boss, and warns John that
“one day we’ll be standing around a body and Sherlock Holmes will be the one who put it
there” (S01E01 “A Study in Pink”). In “The Reichenbach Fall” she is the one to suggest to
Lestrade that Sherlock might have been responsible for the kidnapping of a little girl,
unwittingly (presumably) aiding Jim Moriarty in his scheme to bring the detective down. By
and large, Sally has been relegated to the position of ‘enemy’ by the fandom, alongside with
her colleague and sometimes lover, Anderson. Following series three, it appears the dislike
has waned somewhat; in the season, Sally features but briefly but is shown to be an
accomplished and happy professional who has not succumbed to the obsessive guilt over
Sherlock’s suicide that led Anderson to lose his job.

Sally has never been completely without supporters, however. As a successful non-white
woman she is heralded as an example and inspiration: “she is fantastic: smart, dedicated, and
achieving considering that she’s a non-white woman” onlyclueingforlooks writes in a
message to which sylviatietjens replies publicly to on her blog. In a call for others to stop
‘posting hate’ in the Sally Donovan tag another Tumblr user writes “believe it or not, some
people actually like her character because she a hard working female poc [person of colour]
(which, newsflash, means a lot to some people) who doesn’t tolerate some rude asshole
wandering into her workplace insulting everyone while getting away with it because he is just
so damn °˖✧° clever °˖✧°” (fanchildobsandsillyart 2013).

Liking a character that many others dislike or hate can be a stressful experience. In terms
of significance, the dislike may constitute a threat to: if this person is actually fantastic, why
do so many people hate her? The question begs an answer, and fans of Sally have used
different strategies to provide it. Some are content to like her while acknowledging her flaws
– such as calling Sherlock a freak – or reason that it is pretty normal to side with the series’

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37 Dislike may constitute a threat to significance, but it is not necessarily so. The reason for the dislike is
important: if someone dislikes Jim Moriarty for being evil and killing innocents that doesn't threaten my sense
of significance as it doesn't challenge my meaningful reading of him. Moriarty is arguably evil and he does kill
innocents. But if someone was to say that they dislike him because he is an unbelievable and over the top
villain, then I will turn resentful and defensive.
protagonist against a minor antagonists, as our emotional loyalty is ‘supposed’ to be with Sherlock. More common, however, is to point to the perceived misogyny and racism of either her portrayal or fandom’s reception of her. timetumblingconsultant puts forward the first view when she explains why she thinks Sally has been treated badly by the writers:

I think Donovan and Anderson are the exact same. They are both police officers who at first antagonize Sherlock, they bring up the theory that Sherlock is a fraud together. They should be treated the same, and they're not. Anderson has been turned into comic relief that makes the audience love him. We learn about Anderson's life, we learn his name for goodness' sake. Sally gets a brief cameo, and is regarded as a "bitch". There is no defense on behalf of Sally from the creators, absolutely none. (timetumblingconsultant, e-mail interview).

timetumblingconsultant is critical of the fact that Anderson gets a redemption arc in season three, one which “makes the audience love him”. The same view is expressed by Lorna during the group discussion after we have watched season one together in my home: “It’s a pity Anderson gets to be the crazy one,” she notes. “Would it have been too uncomfortable having a woman be so insane?”

On the other hand, many of my other informants and what seems to be the majority of Sally fans, cites it as an example of Sally’s strength that she manages to keep and thrive in her position rather than collapse like Anderson. These fans are less likely to condemn the portrayal of Sally as racist or misogynistic, but rather maintain that it is the fans’ reaction to her that is riddled with such discriminatory assumptions. “So much of the fandom hates Sally, without any real reason,” Gigantratofsumatra explains. “I mean, you get fans who adore Moriarty, who’s a mass murderer, and who also treat Sally like utter shit. There’s something wrong with that, IMO.” Pointing to the double standards of some fans is common among the supporters of Sally, who often note that Sherlock is forgiven for being rude while Sally is vilified. In a long exchange between supporters and detractors of Sally, sherlockfandomhateswomen (2014) maintains that “an und[ue] amount of energy is spent harassing a black female character when a large majority of fandom ignores that their white male faves are hella problematic”. Here, the dislike of Sally is understood as a result of racist and misogynistic mindsets rather than a reaction to her function on the show. When deadbuckyismoving (2014) urges us to “STOP THROWING SALLY DONOVAN, A WOC, UNDER THE BUS FOR SHERLOCK HOLMES, A PASTY ASS ASSHOLE” the interpretation of the text decisively stops being just about the text itself and enters the realm
of social responsibility: don’t sacrifice the oppressed minority for the sake the privileged white male.

No text is created in a vacuum. It will always be a product of its times, and have the power to either reinforce or challenge current structures and hierarchies. To which degree we are willing to see a piece of fiction as disengaged from political concerns varies – as so often! – from fan to fan, but on Tumblr is evident a strong trend towards holding the text – and its fandom – accountable for the way it handles issues of race, gender and sexuality. The fact that it is these issues – rather than, for instance, matters of class or religion – is telling; these are the real world issues most often discussed on Tumblr outside of fandom. While no text is created in a vacuum, neither are any interpretations. Or in the words of thehiddenkingdom in an e-mail interview: “My opinion of misogyny on the show was formed through a bunch of really well-written posts on the matter on tumblr. I wouldn’t have seen it myself, I guess.”
6. Crises of Meaning

The world is constantly changing; and if we are fans of an evolving text, so is the textual world. Sooner or later, there comes a time when something in the text contradicts or challenges our assumptions about it. Sometimes the contradiction or challenge is small and inconsequential, easily adjust to; but sometimes the new development throws our most treasured ideas about the text into complete disarray. It is at such times of crises that the need for coping becomes the most acute, and thus it is in such instances that we may best study the process of maintenance and transformation of significance.

Johnlock, Season Three and Mary Morstan

I am a Johnlocker, and that’s what I see when I watch the show. (hedgelock, e-mail interview)

i feel like i’m living in some sort of paradox where johnlock is simultaneously canon and not canon because everything in the universe continually confirms that it is canon and yet we are still waiting for it to become canon (wimpytentacle 2015)

To Stephen Moffat and Mark Gatiss the story of Sherlock and John is (supposedly) that of the greatest friendship ever. To scores of fans, it is something more - or at least different. Ever since the first episode aired in 2010 there are those who have interpreted the relationship between the two main characters as romantic and sexual rather than friendly and brotherly. “Two characters who only feel truly at ease when they are together, who try to be better persons for each other, who would unhesitatingly give their life to protect the other – soul mates, if I ever saw any,” explains DoYourResearch. To her, and to many other shippers, Johnlock has become one of the most important aspects of the show; in terms of the theory of significance outlined above, we may think of it as a goal, or a destination. In spite of John’s repeated claims that he is not gay, most of the shippers have found it easy to identify ample textual evidence for their reading of Sherlock and John’s relationship as one of burgeoning romance. “It has gotten to the point where the subtext is overshadowing the text,” Petra notes during our interview in Stockholm. “It’s almost ridiculous. Some of the plots absolutely don’t make sense unless you include Johnlock.” She is talking specifically about the wedding party in season three – not a wedding between Sherlock and John, but between John and Mary. To the casual observer, this union might appear as the death knell of any hopes of canonical Johnlock, but in the year since season three aired, it has proved to be anything but. While
John taking a wife certainly challenges the notion of John and Sherlock being each other’s true soul mates, Johnlock shippers have utilized a number of strategies to maintain their sense of significance, either by finding a way to incorporate this plot development into an overreaching Johnlock arc or by shifting their focus from this particular slash pairing to something else.

The series three introduction of John’s fiancée Mary Morstan was expected; in the original stories by Arthur Conan Doyle John Watson does marry and move away from Baker Street. Prior to season three, the potential appearance of Mary was one of the most talked about issues (although not nearly as talked about as how Sherlock survived jumping off a building) and when Martin Freeman’s real life partner Amanda Abbington was announced for the part of Mary no one was particularly surprised.

In “The Empty Hearse”, Mary first appears at John’s side by Sherlock’s grave. Later Sherlock interrupts John’s proposal to her by showing up at a fancy restaurant to dramatically reveal his ‘return’ from the dead. Rather than being pleased and overjoyed by the other’s return, John is shocked and angry, and the night ends with him storming off, leaving Mary to promise Sherlock that she will talk him around. However, it takes John being kidnapped and saved only by the joint efforts of Sherlock and Mary (who displays her mental faculties by
recognizing a skip code) for the detective and his old friend to start working together again and eventually reconcile. By the end of the episode, the three gather together with a few friends at Baker Street to celebrate John and Mary’s engagement. In the following episode, “The Sign of Four”, John and Mary get married, with Sherlock serving as a very dedicated best man. Not only does Mary actively push the two of them to solve crimes together like “it’s still the good old days” (Mary, “The Sign of Four”) during the preparations for the wedding, she also joins them when they hurriedly leave the reception to save the life of John’s old commanding officer. Throughout both of the first two episodes, Mary is shown as independent-minded, clever and capable – and in the third episode, “His Last Vow”, it is finally revealed that she has a past as a CIA agent and freelance assassin. While seemingly genuinely fond of Sherlock, she appears quite ready to kill him in order to protect herself/her marriage to John, and she does shoot Sherlock when he steps in on her preparing to kill the blackmailer Charles Augustus Magnussen. Following the revelation of her action and her past, it takes John several “months of silence” (Mary, “His Last Vow”) to decide that “the problems of your past is your business. The problems of your future are my privilege” (John, “His Last Vow”) and that he won’t look at the memory stick containing information about Mary’s past that she’s offered him. The couple - Mary heavily pregnant – shows up together to bid Sherlock farewell as he leaves for his exile after killing Magnussen in order to remove the threat he poses to John and Mary.

Mary plays a pivotal role in series three; she is too prominent a character and too enmeshed in the plot to be completely ignored. Otherwise, simply turning a blind eye might appeal to those fans whose map of the fictional world is built around a Johnlock destination. As it is, the only way to keep the map intact would be a complete rejection of the third series. Such fan rejection of parts of a text is not unheard of; in the Harry Potter fandom, the abbreviation ‘ewe’ – epilogue what epilogue? – is commonly recognized and an accepted attitude towards the last pages of the seventh installment of J. K. Rowling’s book series. But it is arguably far easier to ignore five pages that have little or no bearing on the meaning and significance of the 3,402 (in the UK edition) preceding them than to block out one third of a show that is still evolving. Any fans who choose to do so would have limited opportunity to stay involved with the fandom, as their conception of the show would radically clash with that of most other fans. If enough fans decided that series three never happened, the rejection of it might prove a viable strategy: there are a fair number of Star Wars fans who don’t accept the three prequel movies and they form a group large enough to keep their own corner of fandom running without any particular problems. However, in the case of Star Wars, the text that (some of)
the fans is rejecting was produced after but takes place before the original movies that the fans still enjoy. In the case of *Sherlock*, for fans to ignore the third season while additional ones are being produced would mean effectively robbing themselves of further engagement with and enjoyment of future installments. It is, perhaps, not surprising that I have encountered no examples of this drastic coping strategy.

This doesn’t mean that there aren’t fans that have entirely lost interest in the show after the third season. But, predictably, they are not represented in my data since my call for informants went out on Tumblr seven months after season three had aired, and it is unlikely that anyone who no longer considered themselves a fan would have a, seen it, and b, been inclined to participate. However, my general impression, from years of involvement in the fandom and months of active field work, is that while season three was not received with quite as much enthusiasm as season two it has not led very many fans to abandon the series completely. Yet, there are fans among my informants who - to a smaller or larger degree – have lost some of their faith in the writers, and we will return to them in due course. For now, we turn our attention to other strategies employed by the Johnlock fans to maintain a sense of significance in the face of John’s marriage to Mary. They are certainly not the only ones utilized, but they are the ones I have identified as most common among the Johnlock shippers on Tumblr.

**Comparing and Contrasting: Mary as Proof of Johnlock**

Her coat and scarf look cheap, “less than,” and her denim jeans are “less” than Sherlock Holmes’s designer trousers. Her dark hat is a visual echo of Sherlock’s dark hair. This whole shot is set up not only to remind us that *Sherlock used to stand here at John Watson’s side*, but also that *This is some lesser, fake, replacement-Sherlock standing at John Watson’s side*, and whether consciously or unconsciously, John has chosen a pale imitation indeed. (fuckyeahfightlock 2014).

As mentioned above, the second episode of the third series, “The Sign of Three”, centers almost entirely on the wedding of John and Mary. Rather than abhorring it, many shippers list it as their favourite, with Petra explaining: “My Johnlock feels are given free reign. The hug, the puppy eyes… it doesn’t get better than this”. Admittedly, she regrets John marrying Mary, but notes that “[s]o many feelings [John’s and Sherlock’s] are brought to the surface… and that’s why they got married, I suppose”. In her estimation, the creators of the show use the wedding to bring forth the hidden emotions neither man has previously been prepared to
acknowledge. The same interpretation is expressed by DoYourResearch during one of our group chats. Commenting upon a scene taking place in Sherlock’s inner ‘mind palace’ she explains what happens there as “sherlock realizing john was in love with him and that so is he and that its too late now”. In the scene, Sherlock’s mind palace takes the shape of a court room where he interrogates several women who have dated a mysterious ‘Mayfly Man’, who might or might not be a ghost. (Spoiler: he isn’t.) Intercut with the interrogation is Sherlock’s best man speech, which takes a turn for the serious as he goes from reminiscing over old cases he has solved, or attempted to solve, to realizing that someone is about to be murdered at the reception. To the casual observer or a non-Johnlock fan – such as myself – the scenes may seem fairly straightforward and related to the main plot of the episode, but they take on whole different meaning for some shippers who, like DoYourResearch, assumes them to depict the moment when Sherlock realizes that he loves John (and/or that John loves him).38

Rather than taking John’s marriage as the final blow to a potentially romantic entanglement between John and Sherlock, those who embrace this interpretation see the wedding as a way to emphasize the special bond between the two men, comparing and contrasting John’s relationships with Mary and Sherlock: “i love how john doesnt care about countless people hating mary […] [wh]ile he gets super pissed if someone doesnt like Sherlock (chief superintendent in trf anyone?)” notes DoYourResearch. Perhaps most illustrative of this interpretation of Mary as proof – not refutation – of Johnlock, is this assertion made by one fan: “I don’t want mary to die I want john to reject her, I need them to be separated by john’s conscious decision to make Sherlock come before everything else in his life” (thebusyililbee 2014).

In this coping strategy, the fan has allowed the map (the idea of what the text is and contains) to change (by including Mary and the wedding) in order to preserve the subjectively experienced coherence between the fan’s interpretation and the text; with a changed landscape the route (means) towards the desired and preserved destination (Johnlock) is somewhat different, but has been framed as to enhance the value of the destination/goal rather than detract from it. It might even be argued that a sense of significance has not only been

38 For a very detailed and well-written Johnlock meta on the scene I recommend deducingbbcsherlock’s Sherlock’s Mind Palace: The Baker Street Room, which may be found at http://deducingbbcsherlock.tumblr.com/post/77248066893/sherlocks-mind-palace-the-baker-street-room. Note her disclaimer at the top of the page: “I’m not saying I 100% believe the writers did this intentionally, although I do think it’s possible. Obviously, there are other interpretations/theories that totally work, too. But this is how I prefer to view the Mind Palace scene, because it does fit, and [for me] it makes the entire episode even more beautiful and poignant” (deducingbbcsherlock 2014).
maintained but heightened – explaining the fans fondness for “The Sign of Three” and keeping in line with Jenkins’ (2013) claim that fans deem as successful those installments that best fulfill their assumptions of the text.

**Johnlockary: Threesomes Solve Everything**

“Sex.”
“Yep,” John said, with a little nod. Mary felt almost proud with how well he was doing this.
“You want me to … have sex. With…”
“With both of us, yes,” Mary said cheerfully.

If the 'Mary as Johnlock enhancer'-approach adjusts map and means to reach the already established destination, those embracing Johnlockary – John/Sherlock/Mary in a polyamorous relationship – maintain their sense of significance by selecting a new destination. Rather than maintaining the reading of the show as strictly Johnlock-centric, they include Mary in a potential happy-ever-after, and thus succeeds in keeping the perceived centrality and romantic nature of John’s and Sherlock’s relationship intact without negating Mary’s importance. These fans point to canon quotes such as John’s explanation to Sherlock that “[i]t’s the biggest and most important day of my life, and I want to be up there with the two people that I love and care most about in the world” (John, “The Sign of Three”).

Johnlockary is no more explicitly canon than Johnlock is, but it can arguably fit into a coherent overlap between text and interpretation without the fan having to discredit statements made and actions taken by the characters; among the practitioners of the ‘contrast and compare’ approach, it is common to claim, for instance, that John doesn’t truly forgive Mary in spite of saying that he does, or that Sherlock doesn’t actually want John to trust Mary in spite of telling him to. Johnlockary fans, on the other hand, have less need to reinterpret overt textual elements: “I absolutely love that mary encourages the relationship between johnlock from the first instant she meets Sherlock,” writes WorseThanEver during our online watch-along of series 3. By focusing on and valuing John’s affection for both Sherlock and Mary, as well as Sherlock and Mary’s affection for each other, they need not reinterpret overt textual elements to quite the same degree as the fans who see Mary as being but a bump on the path to a Johnlock bliss. However, the popularity of the ship took a quick dive after the airing of the last episode of series 3; Mary shooting Sherlock proved hard - though not impossible, as the ship still exists - to reconcile with a Johnlockary-centric interpretation.
Sometimes when speaking of interpretation and confirmation bias, it is easy to slip into a language that subtly suggests that fans see what they want to see and nothing more, but interpretations are constantly tested against the text and if they are experienced as too poorly matched, one or the other will have to be discarded.

In some cases, the shipper takes one step further and completely abandons the idea of canonical Johnlock, and develops an interest in Mary/John – Warstan – instead. The overt text may then be taken completely at face value, no second-guessing or reinterpreting of it necessary, but on the other hand it means abandoning a previously significant goal, i.e. Johnlock. Whether or not this appeals to the fan may depend on many variables, but presumably hints at less of an emotional investment in Johnlock, and/or a lesser inclination to question the overt narrative. Maximize significance at the least possible cost, as Pargament teaches us. Yet, and as noted before, it is not a question of consciously considering and choosing which narrative would afford the fan the greatest satisfaction. Below I will consider two coping strategies that are arguably maladaptive, or failed, in that they offer the fan no joy or comfort.

It should be noted that fans don’t necessarily have to choose between Johnlock, Johnlockary and Warstan. While some fans are so invested in one particular couple that seeing either of the characters involved with someone else proves upsetting, others are perfectly comfortable enjoying several different ships involving the same character. Compare Lorna’s reaction of shuddering and looking away as Sherlock kisses Molly onscreen in a fantasy sequence to serial-shipper timetumblingconsultant who exclaims in glee over everything from Mystrade to Janlock (Janine/Sherlock) during our online watch-along of “His Last Vow”. Some fans are happy to ship several ships as long as it doesn’t involve the same characters: Lorna loves Mystrade as well as Sherlock, but cannot stand the idea of Sherlock with anybody else. Myself, I’m happy to ship Jim with just about anybody, but have no interest in any ships not involving him. It is also possible for fans to still enjoy Johnlock in fic, but accept Warstan as canonical endgame. In general, however, my data – which is admittedly limited and not necessarily representative of the Sherlock fandom at large – suggests that relatively few Johnlock shippers have abandoned Johnlock for Johnlockary or Warstan. Instead, those who have lost faith in the pairing appear to have done so for different reasons entirely.
Less Successful Coping Strategies: Bad Writing and Haters

Coping is not always successful. Sometimes the price we pay for a world that makes sense is very steep indeed; consider the woman who internalizes the idea of her worthlessness and need to be punished because the only other alternative is that her abusive husband isn’t actually a good man, doesn’t actually love her. And sometimes we fail to at all find a coping strategy, a meaningful narrative of what is happening, and our continued attempts at making sense of the world causes us nothing but frustration and distress.

Although – obviously - not comparable to the reality of a battered woman, a few of the coping strategy utilized by Johnlock (and other Sherlock) fans to explain the third seasons failure to fulfill expectations is arguably less successful than those outlined above; in this case, less successful either means that the cost for maintaining significance is a lessening of the fan’s enjoyment of the show, or that they do not manage to find any narrative that plausibly incorporate all new facts, i.e. that the coping fails.

Failure to account for a few facts does not necessarily constitute a threat to significance. WorseThanEver remains a devoeted Johnlock shipper although she was disappointed with a pivotal scene in “The Empty Hearse”; John and Sherlock’s reconciliation at a subway car.

I also felt that the train scene between John and Sherlock in The Empty Hearse did not ring true emotionally, which was a big disappointment, as I had a lot of emotional investment in John and Sherlock's reconciliation. [...] As for how I deal with the disappointment, I guess I mostly just try not to think about that scene too much. :-) I think there's a part of me that wants to dismiss it, just say, the writers messed up, I'm not going to count this scene in my understanding of these characters. (WorseThanEver, e-mail interview.)

In spite of describing the reconciliation as a “big disappointment” and in spite of having found no way to incorporate the unsatisfying behavior of the main characters into a meaningful narrative, WorseThanEver remains a dedicated Johnlock shipper and fan of the show. Disregarding that which doesn’t appeal to us or makes no sense can be a successful strategy (see the above discussion of Star Wars fans, for instance), particularly if a rationale for the dismissal can be found. In this case, WorseThanEver concludes that “the writers messed up”, going outside of the text to point to external factors. For her, this strategy seems a success as it allows her to maintain a Johnlock centric reading and doesn’t appear to detract from her overall enjoyment of the show, potentially as a result of her being less concerned about canonical Johnlock than are some other fans. For others, however, relying on bad writing to explain the things they do not approve of may end up with them becoming less invested in the show, losing it as a source of significance and losing the enjoyment they found in it before.
“It’s not a fun thing losing faith in the show’s writers and I’d love nothing more to be proven wrong on this,” writes tabletop. Disappointed with season three – and particularly with how the Fall was explained – she has begun to lose interest in Sherlock. While other fans – myself included – hope that the lacking Lazarus explanation will prove an important (and preferably ingenious) plot point later on, tabletop finds such a scenario unlikely. She has, as she herself describes, lost faith in the writers; bad writing seems to her to be the most reasonable explanation for the flaws of the series. Perhaps this conclusion is more readily arrived on as she has experienced a similar deterioration of quality on Doctor Who, another one of her favourite series – and another one helmed by Stephen Moffat. Among my informants, those who draw upon the bad writers narrative are typically the ones who describe the show as sexist, racist and/or homophobic. They still enjoy the show, but their relationship with the text and its authors is fraught with tension; Sherlock is a show enjoyed in spite of all its perceived flaws, and as such is not quite as enjoyable as it might otherwise have been. Generally, the need to make use of external sources or facts to explain (as opposed to support or strengthen a certain narrative interpretation of) a plot point or character’s actions tends to weaken the show’s persuasiveness; it is no longer self-contained, cannot support itself, and consequently loses some of its sway and its attraction. Coping does not allow us to simply choose the most preferable way to view the world; we do not consciously construct a narrative that fulfills our desires, even as we – sometimes unconsciously, sometimes less so – strive for it. The conclusions we arrive on are the result not only of our preferences, but our experiences and the facts known to us, and as such it is possible for them to be disheartening or even harmful rather than beneficiary. Tabletop would have preferred not to lose faith in the writers; but their deficiencies are what strike her as the most plausible explanation of season three’s lack, and there is little she can do about that.

For all that the conclusion drawn by tabletop and a few other informants is an unhappy one, it still offers an overreaching narrative – one that includes the writer’s incompetence – to coherently account for the text diverging from their expectations. However, there is one instance of fan response to season three that is conceivably best understood as a failure to cope, a failure to find a narrative that manages to put together all that is known and deemed important into a meaningful whole. Although none of my informants expressed anything harsher than reasoned dislike for Mary Morstan, there are fans who hate her with a passion that might not readily be explained simply by the character’s actions on the show. After all, Amanda Abbington, who plays Mary, received death threats from fans before the third season aired. Supporters of Mary will sometimes call these fans misogynist, dismissing their hatred
as the result of patriarchal structures that teaches us to forgive men but condemn women (thus leading us to accept Sherlock and John’s bad behavior, while judging Mary for shooting Sherlock). But while there might be some merit to some of these accusation – certainly we are often more ready to accepted flawed male characters than we are female ones – it, again, does not account for the fact that threats were sent before we knew anything about her character other than that she was to be John’s new love interest. In *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas (2002) posits that the things that fall outside of known categories, either is elevated as holy or decried as evil and dangerous. In the terms employed here, we might think of the things than cannot be meaningfully incorporated into a narrative of the world – the things that do not fit but cannot be dismissed – as the indefinable things of Douglas’ account. Failing to find a way to cope with Mary’s appearance in the show, and what it means for their interpretation, a (very) small group of fans have lashed against the character and the actress who plays her. Evil and dangerous, she needs to be destroyed, and lacking the means to do so (figuratively, presumably; it is unlikely in the extreme that anyone would actually try to kill the actress to stop her from being a part of the show) the frustrated fans react with anger and hatred.

Fortunately, for themselves and sometimes others, the fans that have resorted to the desperate tactics above are few in number. While the failure to find a successful coping strategy is an ever present possibility, people – fans - are both resourceful and inventive when they make sense of an evolving text, even when new installments contradicts the fans’ assumptions about it. By drawing upon their own experiences and preferences, upon different texts and the ideas of other fans, as well as upon a myriad of other sources, the fan continually weave the various fictional elements into an unfolding and changeable, but more or less cohesive whole. Texts change; fans change; significance change, and so the work of interpretation – of sense-making – is never done; or at least not until such time as we move on from a favoured text and find something else to care about.
7. Conclusions and Reflections

In the introduction I posed a number of questions, and have spent the rest of the text detailing the answers; now the time has come to summarize and discuss my findings, and ponder the (potential) success of the theoretical framework used to analyze the data. Has it made for a coherent story, as suggested in the brief note on ontology and truth claims in the humanities on page?

I think we may safely conclude that the interpretations told and shared by fans are in fact meaningful to them. Although this study has not delved into why fans attach meaning to fictional stories, it is clear that they do, and that this subjective sense of significance influence not only their emotions but also their actions. Fans identify/create themes, characters and plot point that are meaningful to them, and justify and defend these interpretations. The latter would hardly make sense unless we concede that the various interpretations matters to these fans; one is not as good as the other (subjectively speaking). However, we have also seen that there are fans who are less concerned about how the actual source text – in this case the TV series *Sherlock* – develops, and eagerly engage in fanon extrapolations without expressing any desire or wish for these extrapolations to be canonized. This suggests that fans attribute varying levels of importance to overt validation from the source text itself; some wish to argue that their interpretation is the textually correct one, others are happy to concede that theirs do not match – or are at least not the only one to match – canon. Potentially these differences may be explained by different ideas about the ontology of texts and textual truths, which would be an intriguing field for further inquiry. However, there is nothing to suggest that fans who are less concerned about overt textual confirmation engage in less interpretative work, and just like the fans who insist on presenting a canonically correct interpretation, they point to existing textual features to form and justify their readings.

While it is not really possible to make a sweeping general claims about the contents of the meaningful interpretations – the narratives need to be considered on their own, as I have done in the previous chapters – it seems that they often center on characters and relationships. Although varied, particularly in their specifics, fans of Sherlock often seem preoccupied with the characters’ feelings and emotions and plot developments are explained and evaluated in accordance to what they mean to various characters. Whether this is the cause or the result of a fandom where fan identity and sub-groups coalesce around which characters and pairings you particularly like, I cannot say (though I tend to think it is both; but this assumption may simply be the result of a general fondness for dynamic and dialectic processes). This is not to
say that plot development and other aspects are not discussed; many Sherlock fans spend quite a lot of time trying to tease out the intricate plots (for instance by trying to find textual evidence for what actually happened during the Fall, if one does not buy the Lazarus explanation), but in general what happened seems less of a concern than what does it mean to character x that this happened? In Textual Poachers, Henry Jenkins notes that the primarily male fans of Twin Peaks focus their fan talk on theorizing about the plots, and attempt to decode hidden clues within the series, whereas the primarily female fans of for instance Beauty and the Beast are more interested in the characters’ emotional lives and interpersonal relationships. This apparently gendered division of labour can be found within one single fandom as well; as a Star Wars fan and member of the Jedi Council Forums, I noted that the fans interested in sorting out all the various books, comics, games and movies and their sometimes wildly contradictory narratives were most often male, while the fan fiction writers were most often female. I have not addressed gendered fandom in this text, since the format allows for but a rather tight focus, but it would be interesting to compare the narratives and discourses common to the (primarily female) Sherlock fandom of Tumblr to those of other (and perhaps primarily male) loci of fan activity. It ought to be noted, however, that this is a qualitative rather than quantitative analysis, and that the Sherlock fandom is much too large and wide-spread even on Tumblr for anything truly decisive to be said about it as a whole: it is possible that delving into other tags might have yielded different results as far a type of content is concerned.

Interestingly, the way narrative content is created, shared and negotiated both depends on the medium and remains the same regardless of it. Offline, the content is typically shared during face-to-face interactions, when watching the show together or discussing it. Online, fans also discuss the show, both in real time and in delayed discussions by reblogging post or responding to comments made by others. However, it is also common to present various interpretation, narratives and discourses by the creation of transformative works, which may include fan fiction, fan art, fan videos and a number of other fan-made products. Unlike meta – which explicitly discusses the show and potential interpretations – the narratives of transformative works are often implied rather than spelled out, and sometimes requires familiarity not only with narratives and discourses within the Sherlock fandom but with other media products as well. What remains the same regardless of medium is the fact that once and if an interpretation is shared it becomes communal work. When the fan first encounter the text, they bring with them not only general preferences but experiences and knowledge of genre and sometimes the text itself too (as is often the case with text one discovers through
other fans), all of which shapes how the text is interpreted and received. When sharing one’s own interpretation and/or encountering that of others, differing ideas and discourses may not only inspire the fan, but sometimes necessitates the use of various coping strategies when they threaten the fan’s own interpretation, either but openly challenging it or simply by failing to validate and acknowledge it. In communication, direct in discussion or indirectly through the creation of various transformative works, the fans find various way to negotiate meaning; the ideas of others might be adopted, (subjectively) disproved by pointing to delegitimizing textual features or extra-textual utterances, or the fans find ways to synch the differing opinions, either by allowing for the acceptability of plurality or by constructing a new narrative that encompasses both interpretations. Fans have been known to ‘help each other out’ by offering narrative solutions to struggling sense-makers, but may also dismiss others’ concerns as being of little or no importance. One of the more intriguing, and perhaps, unexpected, results of this study is the apparent readiness to accept incoherence and contradictive data when it does not relate to anything experienced as significant. If it does not affect anything we regard as important or worthy of attention, then the effort needed to find a place for that which is out of place might be too great for any anticipated gain; in fact, finding room for the irrelevant may in fact threaten that which is relevant, and is thus not desirable. Of course, this idea is seemingly challenged by the instances of fans coming to each other’s aid even when such aid is offered at the potential expense of one’s own sense of significance. However, one sphere of significance does not exist completely independent of another. There are few of us who can truthfully claim to have a single significant goal, and when one or two of them come into conflict – as might happen when the goal of being a good friend and fellow fan comes into conflict with maintaining a significant reading – we may choose to sacrifice one for the other, unless another option can be found.

Further emphasizing the communal aspect of sense-making is the fact that there was a significant overlap of the narratives and discourses detailed by my informants, at least among fans who shared a fondness for specific characters and relationships and were active on Tumblr. The shared platform made for a number of shared ideas, although there was also a fairly wide variety in the way fans related and valued the discourses they called upon. It is common for fans to point not only to features of the actual text, but to other media products, extra-textual utterances, and real world politics to make sense of the text. However, not everyone believes that such practices are necessary or legitimate; what is considered a potential source of relevant information for valid interpretations is too a matter of debate. Additionally, it is not unheard of for fans to accept one instance of extra-textual information
as legitimate, but dismissing another as unimportant – a fact that only goes to show that while we need to experience our grasp of the world (fictional or real) as coherent, it isn’t always, or even very often, so.

It is not only the encounter with differing interpretation that may throw the fan’s sense of significance into shambles; when dealing with a developing text the risk of the story taking a turn not at all in keeping with the fan’s assumption about the text is ever present. Although some of these ‘crises of meaning’ encountered by my informants dealt with ‘pure’ plot points – such as a lacking explanation for Sherlock’s faked suicide – or too much focus on relationships rather than on cases in season three, most of the related to characters doing things that did not square with the fans’ idea of them. In terms of the theory of significance, it was most commonly the goals – the perceived significant themes, characters and plot points – that were threatened by new information, and the map (the idea of what the text is and contains) and means (the way various readings are formulated and justified) then had to be adjusted accordingly if the fan wished to conserve the goals; if not, the fan might abandon the goal in order to preserve map and/or means. In this study I have concentrated on examining how various narratives and discourses serve as coping strategies, demonstrating when and how maps, goals and means are transformed and/or maintained; what I have not investigated is why one strategy is selected over another, apart from noting that the least costly – the ideally both plausible and preferable – option is the one chosen. This is merely an assumption at this point, however, and further inquiries might fruitfully focus on the structures of value and significance that makes one strategy appear more appealing and/or more easily achievable than another.

Speaking of such development: has any been made? The aim of the thesis was to study the process and function of the creation, negotiation and transformation of meaning by examining the interpretative strategies formulated by fans of an evolving text. The purpose was not only to offer an analysis of the practices of one specific fan community, but also to test the proposed theory of significance. By and large, analyzing the data through the theoretical framework formulated in chapter 3 has proved both possible and fruitful, yielding new insights into the Sherlock fan community and their sense-making. Although this cannot be said to prove the theory of significance – particularly not its universalistic claim – it does support it, and I feel confident that further investigation and further fine-tuning of the theoretical assumptions would lead to a better understanding of the process of sense-making and coping. Such understanding, in turn, would not only provide a fuller (though obviously not complete) understanding of human beings as a whole – always a rewarding thing in and of
itself – but would potentially pave the way for better help offered to those who face real life crises. This is absolutely not to suggest that any problem may be solved by finding a way to incorporate them into a meaningful story of the world and ourselves (particularly not since not all coherent stories are benign or helpful to people; consider again the battered woman who stays with her husband because she has convinced herself that he only hurts her because she has earned it). Still, since our ability to function as healthy human beings appears tied to a sense that things do matter, it seems important to understand how such a sense is created and maintained; I hope that I in this study has provide some small, tentative insight into it.

Coda
As I write these concluding notes, the first official *Sherlock* convention is well under way in London. I am, sadly, not able to attend, but several of my informants have made their way there. One of them is Petra, the Swedish mother of three who was so adamant about the need for her identity to be protected when we first met six months ago. She no longer has any such concerns: since our October meeting she has hosted several *Sherlock* screenings in her home, eagerly seeking out other fans to share her obsession with. She proudly sports her printed T-shirts. She actively works *Sherlock* references into every professional lecture she holds. She posts a picture of herself and a fellow fan posing in a replica of the 221B set on Facebook. “I have completely embraced my inner fan,” she tells me. “If anyone recognizes me in the thesis, well, then they do.” Her fanship no longer needs to be hidden away; it no longer signifies something strange and vaguely embarrassing, but is enjoyment and community and new experiences. Significance is not created in a vacuum, we have noted before and we may note now that the effects of sense-making are not necessarily confined to the sphere that gave birth to it. It is not only our ideas about the text that may change when we engage in fandom, but our ideas about ourselves and the world we inhabit, too.
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APPENDIX A

Meaning-Making in the Sherlock Fandom:

Note regarding the questions: This is the standard set of questions I send to everyone who participates in this study. It is designed to identify areas of particular interest and lead to more in-depth questions. You will be asked whether or not I may contact you again with further questions; it is my fervent hope that you will say yes.

Feel free to write as little or as much as you like in response to each question. Generally, the more detailed the answers, the better for me, but there is no pressure. 😊

Some of the request for personal data may seem odd in these particular circumstances. I make them because certain social categories – such as sexual orientation – are often presented and perceived as particularly important aspects of identity on Tumblr.

You are of course free to ignore any questions you are uncomfortable answering. However, the more data you provide, the fuller my analysis will be.

You will be anonymized in the thesis, and the raw data you provide here will not be shared with any others without your express, written permission.

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Tumblr username:

Age:

Gender:

Occupation:

Family:

Ethnicity:

Nationality:

Sexual orientation:

When and how did you start first watching the show?

How do you watch the show? (When it’s aired, downloaded, streaming, etc.)

When and how did you become involved in the fandom?

What do you think of the Sherlock fandom?
How do you participate in the fandom (i.e. what sort of activities do you engage in that relates to Sherlock? It could be talking to friends about the series IRL, scrolling tags, reblogging artwork, writing fanfic… Anything you do that is related to Sherlock)?

How much time a week do you estimate that you spend on Sherlock-related activities?

How would you describe the series?

What do you like about the series?

Which are the series’ flaws (if any)?

Favourite episode/s?

Least favourite episode/s?

Favourite season/s?

Least favourite season/s?

Favourite character/s?

Least favourite character/s?

Favourite scene/s:

Least favourite scenes/s?

Do you ship any pairings? Which ones?

Can you describe these pairings (if you are a shipper) and what attracts you to them?

Are there any pairings that you actively dislike?

Do you identify with any of the characters?

Did Sherlock tell Anderson the truth about how he survived the Fall in The Empty Hearse?

What do you think of season 3 and the way the series are developing?

What do you think will happen in season 4? What would you like to happen?

Are you a fan of any other series/books/films/comics? Which ones? Are you involved with the fandom?

What are your interests outside of fandom?

Would it be okay to contact you with further questions?

Do you have any questions for me?
APPENDIX B

Looking For Participants In An Anthropological Study On Sherlock Fans

Hello! My name is Kee Lundqvist and I am a graduate student at the Department of Anthropology at Uppsala University. I am writing my Master thesis on meaning-making in the BBC Sherlock fandom, and am currently looking for fans who would concede to be interviewed individually via mail, and/or to participate in a chat group discussion, and/or to join in at an online watch-along. (For a lot more information about the focus and aim of the project, please read my project description under the cut.)

The questions for the interviews and group discussions concern involvement with fandom, interpretation of themes and scenes, perceived strengths and flaws of the series, etc. Basically, I want to know what and how you think about Sherlock. 😊 During the watch-alongs I will both observe (and later analyze) the comments made, as well as join in by making comments of my own (this method is called participant observation; see FAQ below for more details).

Interested? Send me a mail as soon as possible at keewritesathesis@gmail.com and let me know in what way you wish to participate: individual interview via mail, group discussion in a chat room, and/or online watch-along. If you are interested in group discussions and online watch-alongs, please include information about what time zone you’re in and when you are usually available. (And if you HAPPEN to live near Uppsala and would like to meet in the physical world for an interview or the like, that is very, very doable too.)

Even if you don’t want to participate yourself, I’d be incredibly grateful if you could spread the word by reblogging. Thanks and much love!

FAQ

Are you a Sherlock fan?
God, yes. If you have a look over at my personal blog – keeloca.tumblr.com – you’ll find that I mostly reblog and post Sherlock-related stuff. I am a major Moriarty fangirl, and ship Sheriarty, MorMor and Johnlock. I write fic sometimes, and you can find those at http://archiveofourown.org/users/RageSeptember/works

I also run the small project Interview With A Sherlock Fan Fic Writer, and have hosted a small Sherlock convention in my hometown of Uppsala.

But what exactly are you studying?
Please see the project description below the cut.

What does your research consist of?
Apart from individual and group interviews and watch-alongs in which I join in as a participant observer, I spend a lot of time following discussions and tracking tags here on Tumblr. I read lots of meta and fan fic, I watch fan videos. (You can find more details in the project description under the cut.)

What is participant observation?
According to Wikipedia (who does get it right), “participant observation is one type of data collection method typically done in the qualitative research paradigm. It is a widely used methodology in many disciplines, particularly cultural anthropology […] . Its aim is to gain a
close and intimate familiarity with a given group of individuals (such as a religious, occupational, sub cultural group, or a particular community) and their practices through an intensive involvement with people in their cultural environment, usually over an extended period of time. […] Such research involves a range of well-defined, though variable methods: informal interviews, direct observation, participation in the life of the group, analysis of personal documents produced within the group, self-analysis, results from activities undertaken off or online, and life-histories."

Basically, the aim is to study people in ‘their natural habitat’. The method is often coupled with formal in-depth interviews.

Will you use my real name/username in your thesis?
Everyone who participates will be anonymized in the thesis, meaning that not only will all names be changed, all potentially revealing details (such as age, location etc) will be changed as well. The only exceptions are if and when I include direct quotes from public posts or fic (since changing someone’s username would be pretty pointless in those cases).

When will the thesis be finished?
Hopefully I will present it in the beginning of January (which marks the end of the Swedish fall semester). The primary phase of research/fieldwork will be concluded at the end of September, and I will spend October and November writing the first draft. This draft will then be sent out to all informants – and potentially posted on Tumblr as well – to give everyone a chance to offer feedback and opinions. Once the final draft is completed, it will be made available for everyone on my research blog.

Other questions/concerns? Send me an ask or e-mail me at keewritesathesis@gmail.com

More details about the project below the cut.

Working Title
A Story of Significance. The Creation of Meaning in the Sherlock Fan Community.

Background
Healthy human beings are in constant and relentless pursuit of meaning. Not only do we want to know what is happening; we want to know why it is happening and what it means. Meaning can seemingly be found in the most random of things – in the alignment of distant stars when we leave our mothers’ wombs, in the wearing of the colours sported by an eleven man gang of grown men kicking a ball, in the stories we tell ourselves before we drift off to sleep.

It can also, as I will suggest in my thesis, be found in the interpretations of a popular TV show as articulated by the interactions and creations of fans online. A large part of the blogs on the social media platform Tumblr is dedicated to such activities, and one of the most lively fandom communities there today is the one dedicated to the BBC TV series Sherlock, a modern adaptation of Arthur Conan Doyle’s classic detective stories. Several thousands of Sherlock fans, primarily women between 15-30, discuss theories, express opinions, post pictures and gif sets as well as fan fiction and fan art. Many of them do spend many hours every day doing so, these activities and the discourse on the source material (the actual TV series) it shapes are seemingly deeply meaningful to them.

This, then, is the focus of my study. On the one hand, I wish to study this particular community (both on- and offline) since as a culture it is of interest on its own, but on the other

39 These statistics need checking as they are currently based only on my own experience, but I believe them to be fairly accurate.
I hope to – as many anthropologists are wont to do – be able to draw some general conclusions from a very particular case and so through my studies shed more light on the stories of significance and the nature of the human creation of meaning.

**Overall Research Question**

How is text-related meaning created, negotiated, sustained and shared in the Sherlock fandom, both on- and offline?

**Operationalising Sub-Questions**

In what – if any – sense can the interpretations/stories told and shared by fans be said to be meaningful?

What are the contents of the potentially meaningful interpretations/stories told and shared by the fans?

How is this content created, shared and negotiated (on- and offline)?

How does an individual’s meaningful interpretations relate to various discourses in and outside of the community?

What ‘crises of meaning’ can be identified in the fan’s interactions/discourse?

How are these crisis points dealt with?

**The Field and Methodology**

Time was when the only people you would interact with were the ones you could actually see or hear.\(^{40}\) This was, admittedly, a very long time ago, but even after the invention of techniques and devices that enabled communication with those outside of one’s immediate physical surroundings – e.g. writing, radio, the telephone – the immediately reciprocal social and cultural interactions (in contrast to the one-way communication of mass media, for instance) were still largely based on a shared physical space. This is no longer true; today many of our social and cultural interactions take place online, and a great many communities exists primarily, or even only, in digital form. Once dubbed as sub-cultures, these online communities are now arguably one of the most important platforms for social interaction and are as such of great interest to anthropologists. Yet, most of the scholarly interest that has been paid to these communities have not been anthropological – the field of digital anthropology occupies itself more (though certainly not exclusively) with human-technology interactions than with the social ones enabled by said technology. It seems to me a strange and sad lack, though I am confident that it is one that will be dealt with in due time.

Not only are online communities and cultures of interest for anthropologists in and of themselves; they also provide an excellent field for certain kind of thematic studies of cultural creation and sharing (as well as discourse analysis) because the interaction and content is all there on the computer screen – in the gifsets and text posts and drawings – to be seen and followed and traced.\(^{41}\) However, it also presents unique difficulties, as there is no obvious way to conduct participant observation in such a milieu.

As with physical spaces, the popularity and demographic of digital spaces vary. Ten to five years ago, most ‘fangirls’ would discuss and celebrate their favourite movies, books and TV-shows on the blog platform LiveJournal, but these days the majority of such activities takes place on the microblogging platform and social networking site Tumblr. With 184 million blogs as per May 1:st 2014, Tumblr is structured similarly to Twitter, but allows the posting of longer text posts and multimedia. Content can be tagged, as on Twitter, and by ‘going into

\(^{40}\) This is, perhaps, a claim that needs to be modified and elaborated on, but in this very short thesis project description it will have to do.

\(^{41}\) Of course there are some complications and problems with this, but I’ll save that for the actual thesis – this is already getting long.
the tag’ one can see all posts marked with, for instance, ‘Sherlock BBC’. You can follow other blogs, and the content posted on them will appear on your dashboard.

In a sense, this is a field I entered almost two years ago when I created my very own Tumblr blog – mainly to be a part of the Sherlock community and access the fan creations offered by it. However, participation only makes up one half of the method ‘participant observation’, and so I won’t enter the field properly until I do so with a clear research goal and strategy in mind. Ideally, I will do so in July and spend two months gathering data by tracking relevant tags, observing and participating in discussion, and interviewing fans. The last point is particularly important as the content posted on Tumblr is often fragmented (i.e. a gif set) and the significance (if any) it holds to the creator or others is not available without a more in-depth discussion of it.

But even though a large part of the interactions between fans takes place online, not all does, and so I am meeting fans offline as well, for interviews, group discussions and watch-alongs.

**Theoretical Approaches:** Fan studies is a fairly young field, but has already produced rather extensive theoretical works, of which I will particularly utilize Henry Jenkin’s works. Favouring a broad cross-disciplinary approach\(^{42}\), I will combine theories from sociology, psychology, evolutionary neurobiology, philosophy and – of course – anthropology. My starting point for the analysis is Kenneth Pargament’s theory of coping, potentially mixed up with a bit of Gregory Bateson’s thoughts on evolutionary change (if I can make that work), and for my method I will rely largely but not exclusively on discourse and narrative analysis.

**Update: What I Have Done So Far**
As of September 1:st I have been conducting field work for little over a month – although, in all fairness, quite some time has been spent trying to figure out just how to conduct participant observation on a platform such as Tumblr. Online I have been following, the discussions and fan works production there, tracking relevant and popular tags such as ‘johnlock’, ‘tjlc’ and ‘mary morstan’. I am currently looking for new informants to interview, individually and in groups (via e-mails and chats), and for people to join online watch-alongs.

Offline I have staged several viewing sessions, where I and between three and four others have watched the series together. I have both participated and observed the comments made and the discussions sparked during the viewings, which have been followed by group interviews. I am also meeting several people (some of whom have been part of the viewings) for individual in-depth interviews (one of these individuals is a professional magician, and I’ll be going to Stockholm to watch his show, which is in part inspired by the series).

In the next few weeks, I will continue to host viewings, interview people both on- and offline and hopefully find a way to participate (rather than just observe) the discussions and fan interactions on Tumblr. I will be attending a fan studies conference in Prague to present a short paper based on my fieldwork in November; this paper is due September 26:th.

I have also done a fair bit of reading, mostly the theoretical works of various fan studies scholars, but also some anthropological method.

**Literature (exceedingly tentative list):**
Broker, Will. *Using the Force*.
Coleman, Gabriella. *Ethnographic Approaches to Digital Media*.

\(^{42}\) I maintain that rather than strict and exclusive use of theories shaped by and for anthropologists, the hallmark of anthropology is a, the method of participant observation, b, the study of human beings in their cultural and social context, and c, the focus on making general claims based on very particular cases (the latter is admittedly not a focus shared by all anthropologists).
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