



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Representation of American versus non-American fans in Baillie Walsh's Springsteen & I

Wilkinson, M.C.

Published in:
Transformative Works and Culture

DOI:
[10.3983/twc.2015.0595](https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2015.0595)

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Wilkinson, M. C. (2015). Representation of American versus non-American fans in Baillie Walsh's Springsteen & I. *Transformative Works and Culture*, 19. <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2015.0595>

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

Transformative Works and Cultures, Vol 19 (2015)

Praxis

Representation of American versus non-American fans in Baillie Walsh's 2013 documentary *Springsteen & I*

Maryn Claire Wilkinson

University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

[0.1] *Abstract*—This article explores the representation of American versus non-American fans in Baillie Walsh's 2013 crowd/fan-sourced documentary *Springsteen & I*. The film—as much as it was fed by a wide and international range of fan-produced material—ultimately produced and presented one particular type of fan as privileged and appropriate to speak for all: the American Springsteen fan. The film does so in three main ways: by presenting American fans as more authentically connected to Springsteen's language and lyrics (they truly "understand" his work); by showing that American fans relate to Springsteen's world and themes in more authentic ways; and by presenting American fans as experiencing a better, closer, more authentic Springsteen when seeing him perform live. The essay thus reexamines fan stereotyping from the perspective of national identity. It aims to rearticulate the necessity of the vigilance and scrutiny of crowd-sourced fan texts because they have profound effects on how fans are taught to view themselves in and by the media.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Bruce Springsteen; Crowd-sourced film; National identity

Wilkinson, Maryn Claire. 2015. "Representation of American versus Non-American Fans in Baillie Walsh's 2013 Documentary *Springsteen & I*." In "European Fans and European Fan Objects: Localization and Translation," edited by Anne Kustritz, special issue, *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 19. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2015.0595>.

[0.3] We're here for one reason! Because *you're* here!

—Bruce Springsteen, *Springsteen & I* (2013)

[0.4] Regardless of their different life paths, [Springsteen fans] have all somehow experienced more or less the same thing, and this single experience is the touchstone of true fandom.

—Paul Greene, review of Linda K. Randall's *Finding Grace in the Concert Hall* (2010)

[0.5] Any one Bruce-fan could somehow speak for *all* Bruce fans.

—Linda K. Randall, *Finding Grace in the Concert Hall* (2010)

1. Introduction

[1.1] In late 2012, music video and film director Baillie Walsh, along with producers Ridley Scott and Svana Gisla, sent out a call to Bruce Springsteen fans all over the world. The call invited the fans to submit short personal video portraits that explained what Springsteen and his music meant to them for a new documentary entitled *Springsteen & I*. Inspired by the crowd-sourced documentary *Life in a Day* (2011, also produced by Scott), and distinctly not commissioned but merely approved by Springsteen himself, the aim of the project was to "invite people from all over the world to share stories that celebrate one of the greatest lyrical storytellers of our generation" (note 1). These contributions would then be cut together into a feature-length documentary by the team to produce "a unique cinematic experience...[based on] a wide variety of creative interpretations, captured in the most visually exciting way [that a fan could think of, whether they be] a hardcore Tramp since '73 or [had heard] one of his songs for the first time today" (note 2).

[1.2] The call spread quickly online (note 3). Importantly, the call, and particularly the extensive communication on Facebook from the production team, insisted that fans submit footage in their own language. It included comments such as, "Please note it is preferred that you say it in your own language, so you don't have to find the perfect English words!" and "Hello everyone!! Would love to know what countries you all live in??" followed by "Thanks to everyone for sharing, what a multi-national bunch we are!!" (note 4). This open source approach and decidedly internationally oriented ideal for the project was further illustrated by a secondary call, which asked the fans to upload still portraits of themselves holding up their favorite Bruce Springsteen album in their homes, cars, or other places. These portraits would then be incorporated into an interactive online poster for the film, featuring 350 clickable photos of international Springsteen fans.

[1.3] After receiving over 2,000 video submissions—more than 300 hours of footage—by late February 2013 (note 5), Baillie Walsh began to edit the material into a 75-minute film (<http://www.thewrap.com/movies/column-post/bruce-springsteen-and-i-fans-make-movie-and-it-rocks-104536>). The final film was promoted and released as a "digital cinematic event" (<http://www.ncm.com/press/release/springsteen-and-i-to-make-fans-rock-n-roll-dreams-come-true-in-us-cinemas-this-summer>), which fans all around the world could be a part of: it was to be simultaneously broadcast in over 2,000 cinemas in over 50 different countries on July 22, 2013. Surprisingly, the final film—despite of its insistence on international source material and its global promotion and release—featured very few foreign-language contributions and appeared to focus instead predominantly on North American and British fans. For myself, a Springsteen fan,

and my Springsteen fan friends (some of whom had submitted video to the site in Dutch), this was a disappointment. We thought that the film successfully captured the essence of what it was like to be a Springsteen fan but that it had selected a particular, singular voice through which to do so. Even though the film had been fed by a wide and international range of fan-produced material (this becomes clear upon review of the "I uploaded" comments on the Facebook page or of the interactive poster), the film ultimately presented and produced one particular type of fan, thus marking him or her as privileged and appropriate to speak for all: the American Springsteen fan.

[1.4] Here I examine how *Springsteen & I* constructs, produces, and regulates its own object: the Springsteen fan. More particularly, I examine how the film privileges a certain nationality for this fan in an analysis of fan stereotyping that has thus far remained overlooked in the field of fan studies. In *Springsteen & I*, the type of fan in focus is not a one that merely reproduces fans as socially awkward, geeky, or nerdy—the sci-fi fan stereotype that Henry Jenkins argues remains a normative categorization in *Textual Poachers* (1992) or that Lisa Lewis addresses in her edited volume, *The Adoring Audience* (1992)—but rather one that is defined and determined specifically by an American national cultural identity. The character of *Springsteen & I* is thus one of a gatekeeper (note 6). The film transparently invites and channels open source materials into popular media output, thereby reaching enormous audiences that would mirror in character the originally targeted respondents. However, something strikingly untransparent occurs instead when the shaping/selection process of the output takes place. The national character of one type of fan takes precedence over all others.

[1.5] The way that this precedence is constructed in *Springsteen & I*—or the premise by which a hierarchy among Springsteen fans is seemingly validated—can be related to the notion of authenticity, or more specifically to the more "authentic" Springsteen fan. The notoriously slippery and tenuous concept of authenticity has long been connected with rock and pop music. Scholars such as Simon Frith (1981) and Lawrence Grossberg (1992) have argued that rock emerged in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s as the more authentic counterpart to pop music's mass entertainment; there was a truth and directness about it, a rawness that countered commerciality and society's dominant norms and values (note 7). Similarly, ideas of authenticity are also key to an understanding of Bruce Springsteen's music, his themes, his public persona, and his live performances (Bird 1994; Pfeil 1995; Palmer 1997). Springsteen's lyrics are infused with apparently authentic images: real borders, reflections on aging, the effects of war and politics, the daily lives of working-class Americans. In terms of gender, his work presents traditional (that is to say, traditionally conservative) images of men and women. Likewise, in terms of class and labor, he generally

romanticizes American blue-collar workers—an image he himself affirms with his jeans, leather jackets, and T-shirts. This working-class authenticity is further reflected by his onstage performance, where the E Street Band is presented as a "well-oiled machine" of unified workers, to which Springsteen himself is a benevolent but hardworking Boss (Palmer 1997, 109). His live performances are fueled by an uncompromising energy and dedication to his fans, presented authentically through the visible strain on his muscular physique and his sweat, which mark his unparalleled endurance: his shows commonly exceed 3 hours in length. Through all this, he exhibits an ideology of authenticity through his simultaneous critique, support, and evocation of long-standing American ideals.

[1.6] The issue, however, is not whether or not this all is actually authentic (as opposed to a strategy, performance, or construction). Rather, what is at stake is that this part of rock music culture, and Springsteen's career in particular, is driven by notions of authenticity that also seem to inform and imbue its fandom. The more authentic fan knows, sees, understands, and appreciates Springsteen's constructions. As Kemal and Gaskell write of a different type of music, "We may listen to music, but we may argue that for our listening to have integrity, to be true to its object, we must understand the music we are listening to" (1999, 4). The more authentic music fans thus truly understand the music; they have an intimate, real connection to Springsteen and his work, and they can therefore be authentically moved by him. Such fans enjoy a special, close bond with the performer. This bond is perhaps partially inflected by worship, but it is mostly based on feeling honestly and personally connected through an acknowledged common understanding of what it feels like to experience life in a certain way—as well as, of course, the shared appreciation of how the produced music itself addresses and manifests this experience. This is exactly what *Springsteen & I* suggests the American fan is best equipped for. A close analysis of the film demonstrates that it suggests that some fans are more authentic than others. This occurs in three main ways: in how the fans are presented to connect to Springsteen's language and lyrics—their understanding of his work; in how the fans are presented to relate to Springsteen's world and themes; and in how the fans are presented with regard to the experience of seeing Springsteen perform live (the Springsteen fan pilgrimage par excellence) (note 8).

[1.7] I bring together discourse and textual analysis to examine both levels of constructed imagery and stylistic devices within the film; the spoken words and mise-en-scène of the original fan-produced portraits; and the way the film itself puts these portraits and images together through its use of editing, sound, and alternative footage. My aim here is to rearticulate the necessity for vigilance and scrutiny of texts such as *Springsteen & I* because they may have profound effects on how fans are taught to view themselves in and by the media.

2. *Springsteen & I*

[2.1] Bruce Springsteen, who is now entering the fifth decade of his career, has garnered an exceptionally loyal, wide, and collective fan base that "rang[es] from the teenagers to the liberal intelligentsia who 'hear' the significance in his lyrics that younger listeners may not" (Palmer 1997, 108). For Springsteen fans, the live experience is perceived as "the defining event" (108). It is interesting to note, then, that the 75-minute documentary intercuts its fan portraits only with extracts from vintage Springsteen live performances, as opposed to, for instance, interviews or other archival material. Furthermore, the "cinematic event" that heralded its release screened the documentary, then, after it ended, offered 35 minutes of exclusive, never-before-seen live footage of Bruce Springsteen at Hard Rock Calling 2012, followed by an 11-minute additional epilogue entitled "Meet the Fans." This last bonus feature showed Springsteen, after one of his concerts, personally meeting some of the fans who were featured in the film. The whole construction of the *Springsteen & I* cinematic event thus rewarded the true, loyal fans—that is, the authentic fans who stayed to the end. It also prominently advocated the live experience as essential through both the live concert footage that came after the film and the live fan face-to-face experience with Bruce at the very end. With this last offering, the film also pronounced the validity of its own authenticity by showing that some of the fans featured in the film were able to meet Springsteen face to face, thus bringing them authentically closer to him—but only after successfully submitting their fan confessionals for the film and, crucially, after seeing him live in concert.

[2.2] The main documentary incorporates fan portrait footage in three ways: in longer close-up portraits that last up to 5 minutes; in brief video appearances that last from a few seconds to up to a minute; and occasionally by voice only, in a sound bridge over live or abstract video material. The film presents 15 larger portraits (fans we get to know in greater detail, and/or to whom we return several times) and 51 smaller contributions, through video or voice only, as part of montage sequences that collect and present a number of fans consecutively (note 9). In the original call, the production team of the film also asked the fans submitting footage to present three words that summarized what Bruce meant to them. Many of the smaller contributions in the film are part of montage sequences that present a range fans articulating these three words to the camera, or the concluding montage where we see them say "thank you, Bruce" in a variety of ways.

[2.3] What is immediately striking about the film is that the selected fans presented within it are predominantly American, and almost the entire film is in English. Of the 15 larger portraits, eight are American, one is (made obvious as) Canadian, three are British, and three are Danish. (This in itself is remarkable: all

three non-Anglo/American fans are from the same country.) The three Danish contributors in the film speak excellent English, with American intonation and phrasing, evident in comments such as, "He's cool—we're all kings on the street," "My girl said to me...," and "Of course, I understand why he loves his woman." In addition, the two Danish fans who clearly identify themselves as living in Denmark (the third fan, a busker, leaves his location unidentified in the film) are called Jane and Jon, monikers that position them as, by extension, semi-Anglo American as well. Moreover, of the 66 total fan contributors to the film, only 16 are markedly identifiable as being of non-Anglo-American origin, and of those 16, only five speak their own language in the film: a Spanish fan, a French fan, and a German fan are shown in the "three words" montage sequences (their three words are subtitled in English), and in the final "thank you" montage, we see a French fan say "Bain—Merci, Bruce" and a Japanese fan say "Arigato" as she holds up a written sign that reads "thank you"—as though she herself has supplied the subtitles for her own message. This means that in the entire 75-minute film, the total number of non-English spoken words barely exceeds 15.

[2.4] There may be many reasons for this, of course. The film's production team might not have had the financial means or time to translate foreign-language submissions; non-English contributions might just not have been very good or suitable; or the film's production companies might have insisted the final film feature few subtitles so as to better cater to the Anglo-American market. But it is a striking ratio nevertheless, especially considering the size of Springsteen's international fan base and the production team's initial insistence on original-language contributions via their online communication. Ultimately, however, the reasons that produced this result are perhaps less important than its effects: through its elimination of non-English-speaking contributors, the film presents the majority of Springsteen fans—in a film that is entirely about Springsteen fans—as speaking and thinking his language: (American) English. However, Springsteen's fan base is significantly international: of the 133 concerts in his last tour, only 48 took place in America and five in Canada, with the remaining 80 shows spread out over 24 countries, including Mexico and Chile. His 2014 High Hopes tour even kicked off in South Africa. Aside from this, Springsteen has always had a particularly keen European following, with his Scandinavian, Dutch, German, French, Spanish, and Italian shows generally selling out in mere hours. David Brooks of the *New York Times* writes, "They say you've never really seen a Bruce Springsteen concert until you've seen one in Europe...The passion among the American devotees is frenzied, bordering on cultish. The intensity of the European audiences is two standard deviations higher" (http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/26/opinion/brooks-the-power-of-the-particular.html?_r=1&). Springsteen's Italian fans in particular have pioneered a strong academic interest in his work (D'Amore 2007). It is significant, then, that a music critic such as *Uncut* reviewer Michael Bonner wrote: "It's hardly a revelation, but Walsh's film

reminds us that—as with Dylan's Bobcats and Neil Young's Rusties—Springsteen's fan base is predominantly blue collar" (<http://www.uncut.co.uk/blog/the-view-from-here/first-look-springsteen-i#t1t7Tc5qJpXryAFX.99>). Not only does this assume Springsteen's prevailing type of fan is working class—which is odd because Linda Randall's ethnographic study of Springsteen fans, *Finding Grace*, concluded the contrary (Randall 2010, quoted in Greene 2012, 852)—but the term *blue collar* in itself presumes fans' Anglo-American heritage. It seems relevant and valid, therefore, to investigate this further. I now turn to representation of fan nationality in the film.

3. An authentic understanding of Bruce Springsteen's work

[3.1] A key recurring element of the fan-produced contributions selected for the final film is the emphasis on a deep, authentic understanding of Springsteen's lyrics. Significantly, the fans who mention such an understanding explicitly in the film—as opposed to just an appreciation for the music—are all American. Kitty, an Asian American young truck driver, thinks that Springsteen's lyrics speak to her. She reports that, thanks to Springsteen's work, she recognizes that she is the backbone of America, and she notes that she understands him to be simultaneously patriotic, political, and poetic. As an American male fan, shown driving in his car while wearing sunglasses, explains, "Bruce's lyrics always made me feel like I was going through someone's family photo album...and looking at their life, and feeling what they felt, and smelling their coffee...and feeling their sadness...and their triumph." The man then breaks down in tears.

[3.2] The central, emotional upsurge in this fan's portrait places further emphasis on his authentic, intimate understanding of Springsteen's lyrics; they move him because he truly understands them. In opposition to this, however, one of the shorter portraits, that of a Polish fan in the film, shown outdoors in a field with a wooden commemorative cross in the background, reveals that foreign fans are perhaps less adept at grasping the true message of Springsteen's work. In English, the fan explains:

[3.3] I think that in general Polish people could relate to his music, especially during communism, because he was singing about freedom...At the time people couldn't speak English so well, so when like in the song "Born in the USA," they could understand only the chorus, so everybody was thinking that, "Oh, he's praising the fact that he's an American. It's so great!" I guess that if you hear him singing "Born in the USA" with such charisma, you want to be like that. I want to be an American too.

[3.4] The film next cuts to a live performance of Springsteen singing "Born in

the USA." It cuts straight into the first line of the lyrics (skipping the musical introduction) with a sudden boom; we see a close-up of Springsteen delivering the following lines with great intensity and rawness:

[3.5] Born down in a dead man's town
The first kick I took was when I hit the ground
End up like a dog that's been beat too much...

[3.6] Through this abrupt, loud juxtaposition created by the cut—a technique that is distinctly opposed to the smooth use of sound bridges in and out of Springsteen's music in the rest of the film—the sequence emphasizes the content of Springsteen's lyric and identifies it as one that actually critiques the very idea of being born in the USA. The film thereby suggests, through the edit, that the Polish fans mentioned in the story actually misunderstood Springsteen's words and were wrong in their romantic beliefs about being born in America. Although the way the Polish fan recounts the tale subtly implies that he too now understands what the song is about, this short portrait—and particularly the way it is cut into the Springsteen performance, as well as the fact that we never return to the Polish fan to hear him finish the story—leaves hanging the idea that Polish/foreign fans don't quite hear or understand the true meaning of Springsteen's lyrics because they fail to comprehend the authentic meaning and complexity of his message.

[3.7] That such an authentic understanding comes more easily to American fans is made evident by two portraits of mothers, who proudly speak of their children knowing and understanding Springsteen's lyrics. Ten-year-old Dominic, Theresa Martin's son, is made to recount on camera how his mother taught him all the words to his favorite Bruce song, "Death to My Hometown," and how he *really* hears the words." A second mother, a soccer mom, talks about how all the CDs in her car are Springsteen's (with the exception of one Patti Scialfa album—Springsteen's wife), how her sons only hear Springsteen in her car, how they are "schooled in the music of Springsteen," and how proud she is they now know all of Springsteen's lyrics. Such portraits indicate that American fans have a strong generational prevalence. This is further illustrated by one of the first short portraits in the film, which shows an American woman holding up a dusty portrait of Springsteen to the camera. She explains she used to present it to her baby every night, and, pointing at Bruce, she would repeat: "Daddy—dad-dy!" This suggests that her child was instructed to value the importance of Springsteen and that Springsteen literally presents a fatherlike figure, specifically for the next American generation. None of the European or non-American fans in the film are shown expressing their Springsteen fandom in this way—although Danish Jon comes closest, in testifying that he liked Springsteen ever since he was a young boy. Generally, non-American fans are presented as older and childless in the

film (note 10). This in contrast to the featured younger fan portraits that are, again, all American. Aside from Dominic and recently graduated truck driver Kitty, a young American girl who is about 9 or 10 years old explains why Bruce is her favorite artist, whereas teenager Jillian, who has just discovered Springsteen's music, closes off the film by reading a thank-you letter she has written to Bruce, which sparks off the closing, three-word "thank you" montage (note 11). In presenting the American fan as having a more authentic, more advanced, and deeper understanding of Springsteen's lyrics, and by providing them with clearer generational prevalence, the film thus privileges their status.

4. Authentically living Bruce Springsteen's themes and world

[4.1] The representation of American versus non-American fans in *Springsteen & I* connects them differently to key motifs and themes in Springsteen's work. The car and driving—a commonly recurring motif in Springsteen's songs as well as an important American symbol of freedom and exploration—are dominant parts of three fan portraits in the film. All three are American and are featured in longer portraits, and all three are cut together relatively back-to-back early in the film, building up a force of presence. We first see Kitty, the truck driver, behind the wheel. She recalls listening to the album *Nebraska* while driving through Arizona (thus emphasizing a connection to specific American locales) and explains why Springsteen is her favorite artist to listen to on the road. We then see the soccer mom talking about how all the CDs in her car are Springsteen's and discussing Springsteen's schooling of her children. As the soccer mom begins to drive—the car takes on motion in the frame—she explains that she has taken her children "all over God's Creation" by road. The film then dissolves into a live performance of Bruce singing "Candy's Room." This song explicitly mentions driving as part of a romantic escape ("We go driving, driving deep into the night, / I go driving deep into the light...") and therefore positions the driving fan portraits as closer and more authentically connected to the content of Springsteen's music. The film then dissolves via a sound bridge into the portrait of the American man in sunglasses, who talks about understanding Springsteen's lyrics and who cries as we see him driving alone in his car. The sound bridge and dissolve techniques used in and out of the live performance connect the driving fans organically to the music, the lyrics, and Springsteen himself. The portrait of the crying man in the car additionally features some subtle jump cuts (the footage is presumably a cut-down version of a longer monologue)—a technique that speeds up and further emphasizes the progression of the car. The sequence of Kitty's static seating behind the wheel, the soccer mom's in-motion car, and the crying man's sped-up driving connects Springsteen's music directly to American driving—American drivers, American roads, American forward

movement and mobility. Because it remains an isolated construction in the film—no other fans are shown in their cars—the film again privileges the American fan as the fan type that has better access to and a better understanding of the authentic reality of Springsteen's symbolism, world, and writing. The idea of what the car and driving mean, in Springsteen's music as well as in life, is only and best experienced by American fans.

[4.2] Alongside this connection to the motif of the car, the film explicitly foregrounds the working-class fan (as was also observed by Bonner in his review of the film). It thus naturalizes the romanticized view of working-class life that is so deep rooted in Springsteen's work. Most of the fans who explicitly mention what they do for work are, again, American. Kitty the truck driver explains how she has a master's degree, but

[4.3] After graduation, I couldn't really get a job and so I started working at Jamba Juice making oatmeal in the early morning. I'd have to get up at three o'clock. I didn't have a car, so I rode my bike to work and that was when "Working on a Dream" came out. I would listen to that on my way to work and feel like, "Oh, I'm such a hard-working person." (*She chuckles.*) "I'm the backbone of America." That's what...Well, sometimes I feel like that when I listen to Bruce like, you know, like I'm really important, the work I do, the...The more physically demanding my job is, the more important I am, when I listen to Bruce. I don't know if that makes any sense, but that's how I feel.

[4.4] The fact that Kitty so sincerely stresses the connection between listening to Springsteen's music, her working-class background (she couldn't then afford a car), and her understanding that the more physically demanding her job is, the more important she will be for him establishes her authentic understanding of his lyrics and emphasizes the fact that she recognizes herself—her work and her purpose—in his music and themes. By so prominently selecting and featuring this portrait of a working-class fan who recognizes the validity of this sort of work, the film emphasizes and validates this romantic image. It does so without introducing a countering voice that would express the difficulties of the working-class position or providing a white-collar fan perspective, thus strongly privileging working-class status.

[4.5] Such discourse is furthered by another American fan couple in the film, from New York, shown seated together on their small sofa, her legs atop his, as they explain:

[4.6] We are kind of like the people that are in his songs in different ways. Very much so, blue collar. Blue collar. Together 28 years. Struggling. Yeah, struggling with the kids, and you go to work every

day in Manhattan, and [he] works with his hands and has been doing that for over 30 years. But we're still together. That's the main thing.

[4.7] The romantic implications of this fan story raise working-class existence to one authentically connected to Springsteen's work as well as one that is warmer, truer, and more long-lasting. Noting that they have never been able to afford to go to a live concert (they are the only fans in the film so presented), although Bruce is very much part of their lives, the couple are later shown dancing to Springsteen's song "Radio Nowhere" in their small kitchen. This is the only scene in the film where Springsteen music moves from the diegetic (it originally comes from their radio) via a sound bridge to nondiegetic sound, into live footage of the same song, all while keeping the same shot visually: as the couple dances in the kitchen, the music swells, becomes rounder and louder, larger than life or the diegesis, before we cut to Bruce performing the song in front of his fans. The film thereby suggests that the music played on the radio in that working-class kitchen is able to expand to take on the same grand (and more authentic) qualities of the live experience. These fans are privileged to such a degree by their American working-class status that the pilgrimage reverses: Springsteen comes to them; the live event enters their home.

[4.8] This is decidedly not the case for the British working-class fan shown in the film. A man in his fifties, wearing a T-shirt with a picture of Springsteen on it that reads "The Only Boss I Listen To," explains to the camera while seated in his attic, "Madison Square Garden. I'd worked in a factory for 20 years and I'd saved up enough money eventually to afford to go on a 'Bruce trip,' as we call it. Four days in New York, two concerts at Madison Square Garden..." This fan expresses his fandom by relaying his connection to Bruce as one that was validated by seeing him live—and not only that, but live in New York, in America. He goes on to say, "We went down to the bar to pick up our tickets on the night of the concert, the first concert, and excitedly opened the envelope, looked at the tickets, looked at the map seating plan—and we were right at the back, right at the top. So a bit disappointed. But we were in New York, America, for the first time." The fan again emphasizes the experience of America as one that counters hardships: he was disappointed by being so far away from the stage, but he was in America, which made up for it. The fan then explains in great detail how he and his wife were upgraded to front-row seats—the best tickets in the house—by one of Springsteen's infamous, mysterious American men in black (the fan even imitates the American accent). He continues, "I got so excited I bought my wife three glasses of Champagne at seven dollars a glass. And I was a factory worker at the time. And it was phenomenal. So that's what it's like to be a Bruce Springsteen fan." This portrait thus both begins and ends with the explicit pronunciation of the fan's identity as a factory worker—an aspect of his character that is emphasized even more by the sound bridge that follows the portrait, as

the image cuts to a live performance of Springsteen singing "Factory":

[4.9] Early in the morning, factory whistle blows,
Man rises from bed and puts on his clothes
[...]
It's the working, the working, just the working life.

[4.10] The aural and lyrical techniques used here doubly underline the strong connection between the working-class fan and Springsteen's music because it creates an echoing/mirroring between the two through the repetition of the word *factory*. This is made possible only because the fan speaks English. More importantly, however, this fan portrait suggests that real Springsteen fandom comes into being (the fan says, "So *that's* what it's like to be a Springsteen fan") at his moment of experiencing the live event in America. The fan's identity as a factory worker brings him closer to the themes and content of Springsteen's music, but it is the experience of seeing Bruce live in America (the pilgrimage)—one that, incidentally, was notably improved by virtue of an anonymous American benefactor—that ultimately brought this fan quite literally closer to Bruce and made his fandom more authentic.

5. Authentically experiencing Bruce Springsteen live

[5.1] Many of the fan portraits in the film are about seeing and experiencing Springsteen live. These portraits are, however, informed by a differentiation between those that are more authentic because they are intense and directly connected to the performer, and those that are less so because they rely on mediation or extension, or because they are experienced by proxy. The American fans all recount aspects of the live experience that emphasize their access to Springsteen's authenticity. The 9- or 10-year-old girl explains that she loves Bruce because "when he has a concert, he puts a lot of effort into his singing...You can just see his veins popping out because he's working so hard and after one song, he's as sweaty as a normal singer would be after he's done, like, 10 songs." It is an observation that not only expresses being close enough to gain such insights about the physical endurance in Springsteen's performance but also makes this performance more authentic in and of itself because it is marked by the recognition of an actual strain on his body. Another fan, an eloquent American woman who speaks into her laptop's camera in a large, art-filled apartment, recounts seeing Bruce "way back when," in 1976:

[5.2] As soon as I got there, as soon as the lights went out, I made my way to the front of the stage, back when you could do that. And I was front and center up against the stage, right in front of Bruce. Even after all these years and all the shows that I've seen, that concert still

defies description. And I think that only the people who saw him in the early days in the small venues, before the mega crowds, and when you could get so close that you were sharing the sweat and spit of whatever band member you were closest to, can really know the ferocity and intimacy of those concerts.

[5.3] Here the portrait of the American fan confirms a literal closeness—she was so close to the stage that she could share the sweat and spit of the band—as well as a temporal closeness: she was one of "the people who saw him in the early days in the small venues, before the mega crowds," which privileges this fan's more authentic fandom—a fandom that is more knowing and true because it recalls an earlier, purer, more direct experience of Springsteen.

[5.4] Among such testimonies, a Canadian man reveals that he held up a sign saying he had just been dumped at a concert in Ontario ([note 12](#)). Springsteen pulled him up on stage, hugged him, told the crowd he'd been dumped many times himself, and launched into the fan's personal request: a song about being dumped called "I'm Goin' Down." Here, the literal closeness that comes with being a fan in the golden circle—at the front of the crowd—translates into a personal/spiritual closeness. In that moment, the fan's and Springsteen's experiences of being dumped become one and the same. This conflation is also illustrated at the level of the film: the fan's portrait melds into a voice-over narrating the actual footage of the concert where this encounter took place; we see it all actually happen up close. The film thus privileges this (privileged) fan by actually bringing his portrait back, and thus closer to, the authentic reality of that event as it was caught on camera. A similar privileged position is attributed to an Elvis impersonator from Philadelphia. Philly Elvis recounts how he was pulled up on stage to sing after holding up a sign reading, "Can the King Sing with the Boss?" at a live performance in Philadelphia. Again, the narration of the video portrait becomes interwoven with archival footage of the actual event. Even though the impersonator was not quite himself at the time of the encounter—he was dressed as Elvis—his fan experience is still marked as authentic because it is presented as so essentially, so authentically, American. The man explains that when, midperformance, he moved from "All Shook Up" into "Blue Suede Shoes," "the band was right there with him." Here, the shared legacy of true American rock 'n' roll translates into an organically transitioning, collective performance on stage with Springsteen. This American fan's experience is presented as privileged because he is shown to naturally become one with the performers; they are extensions of the same roots.

[5.5] In contrast to these intense and directly connected fan experiences of live Springsteen performances, the non-American portraits in *Springsteen & I* are defined by more mediated, indirect, even proxy Springsteen experiences. When a

young British woman recounts what happened to her during a live show at Hyde Park, for instance, we see her walking on the grass at that very location. The wide tracking shot suggests that her current surroundings in the park—in contrast to those in her tale—are empty. This juxtaposition implies that the moment this fan is recalling is no longer there, that it was transitory; she is now far removed from that reality. The fan explains that during the concert, she wore a T-shirt reading, "I'll Be Your Courteney Cox" as she sat up on her friend's shoulders, which led her to being picked from the crowd to dance on stage with Springsteen during a rendition of his song "Dancing in the Dark." The girl's portrait is first intercut with footage from the music video that her story makes reference to—one in which the young actress Courteney Cox (later of *Friends* fame) is pulled from the crowd by Springsteen to dance with him on stage—before it leads into archival footage of the concert at Hyde Park that shows this happening to the fan. Although this fan was also pulled on stage and got close to Springsteen, the interweaving of three different video strands here (her portrait, the music video, and the caught-on-camera concert footage), as opposed to the simple two strands of the dumped Canadian and Philly Elvis portraits, emphasizes the addition of a layer of mediation. This is a retelling of a reenactment of a previously staged, fake live performance in a commercial video (note 13). The way that it is cut together does not bring the fan closer to the footage of the event. Rather, it further removes her from its authenticity. On top of this, as many Springsteen fans will know, pulling up a girl during "Dancing in the Dark" is a recurring element of most of his live performances. The British fan's story is therefore not as uniquely individual/authentic as its North American counterparts. She is merely one of many—a stand-in or proxy for the American girl used in the prestaged music video (where the live performance was not an authentic one to begin with).

[5.6] Another British fan portrait introduces David, an antifan (the only antifan in the film), in the documentary's most blatant comic turn. Within the shot, David is shown to speak and look directly into the camera as he leans over the armrest of his sofa. He directs his comments at his wife, a Springsteen fan, who is filming and whom we do not see:

[5.7] **Wife (off camera):** So, David, what does Bruce Springsteen mean to you?

[5.8] **David:** Bruce Springsteen means love, not for him, but for you. You being a fan, I've had Bruce Springsteen songs rammed down my throat 24/7. It tends to lose its edge. It really does. I've been all over Europe.

[5.9] **Wife:** So how many concerts have you been to?

[5.10] **David:** You—I think you reminded me. It was about eight. Eight that I've actually been to. Yeah, Amsterdam, Paris...I mean, I've seen some beautiful cities along the way, but then I've always had this little bit where I've had to go to a concert in the middle of it, which tends to spoil it for me.

[5.11] This charming and funny exchange stands alone in the documentary because it features a fan of a fan rather than of the performer. It again adds a layer of mediation, albeit in a completely different way than the "I'll be your Courteney Cox" portrait. Not only does the real European fan (though still Anglo-Saxon), the wife, disappear off camera here, but the story explicitly associates the spoiling of European cities with Bruce concerts. It is a comment that again sets this live experience apart from its American counterparts, where fans proudly proclaim having seen Springsteen in New York, in Philadelphia, or at Fenway Park in Boston. Most importantly, however, it presents the European man central to the portrait—David, the antifan husband—as one who is not really authentically a fan of Springsteen; he is merely one by proxy.

[5.12] The film does present a few rare exceptions that deviate from the pattern of privileging the American Springsteen fan. Toward the end of the film, we encounter Jane, a Danish fan, who films herself in an open spot in the woods in a visually stunning, different, yet natural environment. Confessionally claiming that this is the first time she has ever used a camera or made a film of herself, she uses the portrait to define her own fandom:

[5.13] I have listened to his music every day since '85. I know the lyrics. I know the music. Every day when I go home for work, I hear his records in my car. I sort of relax. I sort of get in a very good mood when I listen to Bruce. It doesn't matter whether it is the new music or the old music. I just love listening to his music. I'm not the kind of fan who knows the size of his shoes, or the names of his children, although I know he has three children and he has a lovely wife Patti...I'm the kind of fan who has attended all his concerts since '85 here in Denmark. I always stand in the first row, screaming and shouting and dancing like a teenager to a Beatles concert. This summer I was that lucky, that finally, after all these years, I touched him. We touched each other, twice, in Roskilde, in Denmark, and I cried like...I wept. Because it was so big.

[5.14] In this monologue, we see the European fan differentiate herself from other fans ("I'm not the kind of fan who..."). This in itself is quite common in fandom (Coppa 2006), but in this monologue, it becomes inflected with a specific national subtext emphasized by the background surroundings in the shot: the Danish forest landscape. When Jane subsequently defines her own fandom,

however, she proceeds to appropriate almost all the characteristics we have come to associate with the privileged American fan type. Her identity and the setting she chose may be different, but her behavior is the same: she knows the lyrics, she listens to him in the car, she stands in the first row, she touched him—and she wept, because it was so big. If we turn this around, through this non-American fan portrait, the film reaffirms that what defines the privileged American Springsteen fan is indeed privileged because it applies to all authentic fans. The American fan type thereby becomes entitled to speak for all fans because this voice knows and expresses best what it means to be a true Springsteen fan.

6. Conclusion

[6.1] *Springsteen & I* offers a distinctive hybrid phenomenon: part fan film, part fan tribute, part crowd-sourced film, part music documentary, part concert film, part global cinematic event. The film took an online open source sampling of fan-produced self-portraits (fan video selfies, as it were) and transformed them into a carefully crafted, tightly selected, singular object with a singular voice. This voice defines what it means to be a Springsteen fan, and, especially when screened in the more traditional closed cinematic structure or *dispositif* (note 14), it may have a profoundly powerful effect on its audience. A closer look at the film reveals that the construction of this singular voice promotes one particular type of fan—the American fan—as most authentic and privileged over all others. The film suggests that the American fan has a more authentic understanding of and connection to Springsteen's lyrics, that the American fan is more authentically able to recognize the themes in his work because they authentically embody them and live in his world, and that American fans experience a more authentic live performance because they see him in America, get closer to him, share direct experiences with him, and perhaps even know him from way back when. Non-American fans, however, are consistently positioned at a greater distance from Springsteen's work, be it through language and subtitles, American benefactors, or their fan partners, or be it that they act as substitutes for actors in reenactments of his music videos. For a film that was taglined as "by the fans and for the fans" (note 15), such constructions and hierarchies problematize this very definition and leave its audience—particularly international fans—feeling significantly more passive and distanced than its premise implied, if not outright excluded. *Springsteen & I* provides a good example of why the consistent deconstruction of such gatekeeper texts about fans should remain an essential component within the field of fan studies, especially if we aim to truly understand, and ultimately reappropriate, the image of the fan as it is globally dispersed.

7. Notes

1. Taken from the original call, no longer available online, but previously at <http://www.springsteenandi.com>.
2. From the original call.
3. It was sent out to Bruce fans through Springsteen's official Web site, an official promotion/submission Web site (<http://www.springsteenandi.com>), several official Facebook pages (including regional variants, such as <http://www.facebook.com/springsteen-I-Germany>), Bruce Springsteen fan sites, selected newspapers and music magazines, and online fan forums and mailing lists. See also "Be a Part of the New Film *Springsteen & I*," BruceSpringsteen.net, November 9, 2012 (<http://brucespringsteen.net/news/2012/be-a-part-of-the-new-film-springsteen-i>), and "Bruce Springsteen Wants You!" *Guardian*, November 13, 2012 (<http://www.theguardian.com/music/2012/nov/13/bruce-springsteen-documentary>).
4. A selection of comments from the production team is available at <https://www.facebook.com/SpringsteenI?fref=ts>.
5. Because the submissions were only allowed to be 5 minutes long, this would translate to roughly 3,500 submissions, but The Wrap (<http://www.thewrap.com/movies/column-post/bruce-springsteen-and-i-fans-make-movie-and-it-rocks-104536/>) claims there were 2,000.
6. I choose the term *gatekeeper* here in reference to Bourdieu (1993), who argues that the very construction of access to culture through, for instance, a certain selection process or a specific setting (think of art galleries or the selection of certain art house films for film festivals) in fact determines the content of what is produced within that section of culture to begin with. It is this kind of symbiotic relationship that defines the functions of the gatekeeper—one that is based, of course, on the interventions of specific power structures. This is the aspect I'm interested in addressing here.
7. The concept of authenticity is notoriously complex and slippery; much has been written about both Frith's (1981) and Grossberg's (1992) work on authenticity in the field of music studies. For current discussions, see Dettmar and Richey (1999) and Taylor and Barker (2007).
8. See Aden (1999) and Brooker (2007) on fan pilgrimages.
9. There are 55 smaller portraits in the montage, but four of these contributors are also part of the main portraits and have therefore here been only counted once.

10. There is one other shot in the film that features a fan with her two children. In the final montage sequence, we see a mother and her two children, who appear to be of Latin American origin, say "Thank you, Bruce" in unison, but because they appear for only a few seconds, far less weight—and much less of a generational story line—is provided than for any of American counterparts.
 11. The American fan turns to Bruce to thank him and seemingly, at the level of the construction of the film, inspires all other fans to do so as well. The American fan is here the instigator who sets the course for all other fans to follow.
 12. Interestingly, this portrait is first made more distant and obscure because the portrait consists of a self-made short film shot in black and white and filled with abstract details and images. It is thus set distinctly apart from the many American portraits in the film.
 13. Palmer (1997) extrapolates extensively on the nonauthentic nature of the music video in and of itself, especially compared to the experience of a live concert.
 14. *Dispositif* is a term used to describe the three-tiered construction in cinema of technology, content, and perception that fuels the force of ideology in apparatus theory (Baudry 1975).
 15. This tagline is featured on the back cover of the DVD.
-

8. Works cited

Aden, Roger C. 1999. *Popular Stories and Promised Lands: Fan Cultures and Symbolic Pilgrimages*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press.

Baudry, Jean-Louis. 1975. "Le dispositif." *Communication* 23 (1): 56–72.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.3406/comm.1975.1348>.

Bird, Elizabeth. 1994. "'Is that me, Baby?' Image, Authenticity, and the Career of Bruce Springsteen." *American Studies* 35 (2): 39–57.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1993. *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*. Cambridge: Polity.

Brooker, Will. 2007. "A Sort of Homecoming: Fan Viewing and Symbolic Pilgrimage." In *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, edited by Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington, 149–64. New York: NYU Press.

Coppa, Francesca. 2006. "A Brief History of Media Fandom." In *Fan Fiction and*

Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays, edited by Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, 41–59. Jefferson, NC: McFarland.

D'Amore, Antonella. 2007. "Bruce Springsteen's World Citizenship." *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies* 9 (1): 162–81.

Dettmar, Kevin J. H., and William Richey, eds. 1999. *Reading Rock and Roll: Authenticity, Appropriation, Aesthetics*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Frith, Simon. 1981. *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure and the Politics of Rock 'n Roll*. New York: Pantheon.

Greene, Paul D. 2012. Book review of *Finding Grace in the Concert Hall: Community and Meaning among Springsteen Fans*, by Linda K. Randall. *American Ethnologist* 39 (4): 851–52. http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1425.2012.01398_14.x.

Grossberg, Lawrence. 1992. *We Gotta Get Out of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture*. London: Routledge.

Jenkins, Henry. 1992. *Textual Poachers*. New York: Routledge.

Kemal, Salim, and Ivan Gaskell, eds. 1999. *Performance and Authenticity in the Arts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lewis, Lisa A., ed. 1992. *The Adoring Audience*. London: Routledge.

Palmer, Gareth. 1997. "Springsteen and Authentic Masculinity." In *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender*, edited by Sheila Whiteley, 100–117. London: Routledge.

Pfeil, Fred. 1995. *White Guys: Studies in Postmodern Domination and Difference*. London: Verso.

Randall, Linda K. 2010. *Finding Grace in the Concert Hall: Community and Meaning among Springsteen Fans*. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press.

Taylor, Yuval, and Hugh Barker, eds. 2007. *Faking It: The Quest for Authenticity in Popular Music*. London: Faber & Faber.

Walsh, Baillie. 2013. *Springsteen & I*. DVD. Eagle Vision USA.