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I am not a Vampire Slayer – Reflections on the Academic/Fan Relationship

I am not now, nor have I ever been, a slayer of vampires. I have never *imagined* that I was, nor *wished* that I were, a vampire slayer. I have no direct, nor to my knowledge *indirect*, vested interest in the slaying of vampires, and I have never physically assisted in the slaying of vampires—that is to say, I am not a *stakeholder*.¹

I have never believed that I was part of a special world, a world in which some of us know The Truth about reality and the existence of evil forces out to destroy our world, and that *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was a key to that truth. I do not possess secret information known only to the true followers of *Buffy*.

I also wish to state that I have never had a direct personal relationship with a vampire, a vampire slayer, nor any of the denizens of the world of vampires and vampire slayers. Yes, I did have a certain attraction to a *vengeance demon*², but my ardor quickly cooled when I discovered that the actress portraying said demon was an active member of a political party diametrically opposed to my own political and social beliefs. And, yes, there was a certain god³ that I considered quite diabolically appealing. However, she was killed before returning to her own hell dimension and my attraction correspondingly diminished.

I have never dressed up as a vampire slayer nor have I ever purchased vampire slayer paraphernalia, mementos, or any other artifacts connected with the One True Slayer.⁴ I have never attended Buffy Cons. I have never posted to an online *Buffy* group nor have I written or read a single word of *Buffy* fan fiction. I have not read *Buffy* comic books.⁵ I have not played *Buffy* video games, role-playing games or multiplayer games. I have (*had* actually⁶) never visited the website of *Slayage—The Journal of the Whedon Studies Association*. I have never purchased books by academics and others on the subject of Buffy, her friends, their nocturnal activities, and the deeper meaning of it all.⁷

1 I thought “stakeholder” was pretty clever until I discovered that every possible Buffy pun has already been used a number of times, a fact confirmed not only by Google but even by Google Scholar.

2 See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anya_Jenkins, accessed on 26 October 2010. There is no apparent proof that the fictional Anya Jenkins is related to Henry Jenkins.

3 Oddly not referred to as a goddess, although she was female. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glory_\(Buffy_the_Vampire_Slayer\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glory_(Buffy_the_Vampire_Slayer)), accessed on 26 October 2010.

4 The report that I had a Close Encounter with fandom and purchased a lifesize 5' 10" cardboard standup of Buffy the Vampire Slayer is inaccurate. My daughter intervened, and the purchase was never consummated.

5 Although now that my research for this paper has shown they exist, I may take a look at “Season Eight.”

6 In the course of this research I did visit the website a number of times. See www.slayageonline.com, accessed on 24 November 2010.

7 They were gifts.

I am not an academic

I must also state that I am not an academic. I have never accepted a faculty nor any other teaching position at an institution of higher learning. I have never accepted remuneration for research or writing papers of an academic nature. My work has never been cited in an academic journal. I have never been consulted by journalists or media corporations for my insightful opinions on popular culture. I repeat. I am also not an academic.

Although I do not consider myself to be a *Fan*, I still consider myself to be a “fan of” the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* television series. Although I am not, in any sense of the word, an *Academic*, I have done what can be termed academic work of my own, and I do enjoy academic research and programs—just as I enjoy *Buffy* programs.

In short, I am not faced with the agonizing dilemma that Henry Jenkins encountered when he wished to be both an Academic and a Fan. As in the strictest sense I am neither, I have no dilemma. I can quite happily mesh my non-academic status with my non-fan status and enjoy both worlds. It matters not to me how inhabitants of either world regard me. To paraphrase the Sufis, I am *in* fandom but not *of* fandom; I am *in* academia but not *of* academia. I am free.

However, this freedom is not of great assistance when writing an essay on the dilemma of being both academic and fan. It may be that I could refer to myself as a fanaudience (pronounced fah-gnaw-dee-ence). That is I have qualities that fall somewhere between *fan* and *audience*. Fellow MA candidate Dan Shadwell capsulized my dilemma when he posted to this course's online forum “This assignment would be a lot easier if there were just a few things I loved rather than lots of stuff I like.”⁸ It is likely that true fans have more focus, and certainly more impassioned focus, than those of us in the fanaudience. However, my *viewing* vote does count, and people like me, when counted by the rating services, helped keep *Buffy* going through seven seasons.⁹

Buffy as case study

I have chosen *Buffy* as the centerpiece of this paper not because *Buffy* likely has greater merit than any other focus of fandom, be it television/film productions or personalities, authors, chefs, winemakers, celebrities, musicians, software and computer industry stars, business people, rich people, or any other fan-inspiring subjects. I have chosen *Buffy* simply because my appreciation of this television series is perhaps the closest I have come to fandom in my adult life, and it serves as a good example for my discussion.

Buffy has also proven popular with academics, and the founders of the online journal *Slayage* have noted that the various academic papers and monographs written about *Buffy* have been extensive, covering at a minimum more than 50 areas of academic study.¹⁰ As an example of the melding of academia and fandom that is possible, an interesting artifact has been created by *Buffy* fans. In *Checkpoint*, a fifth season episode, a team is sent out from Watcher Headquarters (Slayer HQ) in the UK to audit the Sunnydale team. One of the team members is rather awe-struck when she interviews Spike, the vampire who over the course of time reacquires his soul, and when Spike, pleased with her

8 D. Shadwell, "Teaching, learning and writing through popular culture," private forum, University of Brighton M.A. Creative Media program, 2010.

9 *Buffy's* peak season viewership was 1998-1999 when it averaged 5.3 million viewers per show. The highest watched episode (“Surprise”) was 8.2 million, and the series finale (“Chosen”) was 4.9 million.

10 R. Wilcox and D. Lavery (eds.), *Slayage: The Journal of the Whedon Studies Association*, at http://slayageonline.com/EBS/buffy_studies/buffy_studies_by_discipline.htm.

prior knowledge of him, says, “Oh, you know me?” she stammers and responds “I wrote my thesis on you.” That thesis, “*William the Bloody*,” a full 108 pages, has since been written. It now stands as a fan-produced document of a quality that would likely keep any exam board happy. Of course, in the spirit of the thesis, that exam board would have to also be fictional.¹¹

I might also note that Brunel University offers a Master of Arts degree in *Cult Film and TV*¹², dedicated to the “study of global traditions of cult media.” Students “assess the roles that fandom and cult consumption play on constructing meaning within text.”¹³ The program's “Cult Television” module includes case studies of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Dr. Who*, *The Prisoner*, and *The League of Gentlemen*.

My fannish past

Looking back on my life, I can see what might be latent fannishness, if we consider hobbies and interests to be subsets of fandom. For example, I avidly read each and every *Oz* book as a child and, when older, anxiously awaited each new edition of *The Hardy Boys* series. For some years I was a “rockhound,” collecting rocks and minerals and participating in frequent trips with other members of the local geology society. Still in my youth, I was an autograph collector, acquiring signatures ranging from Bob Hope to the Queen of Greece. There was even a brief period in my teens when I was a fan of the Stanford football team, attending every game and having key players sign my program at each game. In high school I purchased every *Kingston Trio* album and saw them live at several nightclubs. In college, I (and other students) were such fans of the comedic afternoon television soap opera *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman*, that my German seminar professor—our department head—changed the time of the weekly seminar. This was not just acquiescing to his students; he, too, was a fan of the series.

I should confess that I was not always a *Buffy* fan. I am now ashamed to admit that I initially missed more than five seasons because when I first heard about the premise of the show, I thought it was immature, childish and absurd. I may have even seen an episode, confirming my viewpoint. However, at some point, probably when it was first broadcast (November 6, 2001), I saw the musical episode *Once More with Feeling* (Episode #107), in which the characters sang rather than spoke throughout the entire episode.¹⁴ I was fascinated. I was charmed. I was hooked. I was now a fan...er...fanaudience.

Not being nor aspiring to be an academic, I did not suffer the particular agonies that Jenkins suffered. Yet I had my own, likely not unique, dilemma: how to retain my public and self-image as an intelligent, educated and rational human being; an enlightened inhabitant of the twenty-first century. How could I admit, and even brag, about my fascination with *Buffy* and the Scoobies, while retaining my desired image? I took my cue from baseball fans, recognizing that if *they* could justify their interest, anyone could. I went on the offensive. Far from being something I had to apologize for or justify, my fascination with the *Buffy* gang became an indication of my breadth of intelligence and depth of understanding. While I was, perhaps, not superior to non-*Buffy* fans, I was certainly a member of an elite audience that was finely tuned to the nuances of human behavior, of life, and of alternative

11 See thesis at www.screamingmonkeys.com/spikethesis.pdf, on 21 November 2010.

12 See course description at www.brunel.ac.uk/about/acad/sa/artcourse/postgraduate/cdata/Cult+Film+and+TV+MA, on 21 November 2010.

13 *ibid.*

14 A corresponding, and powerful, episode was “Hush” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hush_%28Buffy_the_Vampire_Slayer%29). During most of the episode, the characters were unable to speak, and were forced to express their thoughts and emotions through gestures only.

realities not accepted by, nor even visible to, the vast majority of humankind. In short, my highly sensitive appreciation of fine writing, obscure references, and dry humor set me apart from those of lesser talents. The Others were not to be blamed for their lacks; they were likely a result of the roll of genetic dice. Those of us—The Fortunate—were simply favored by the gods, endowed with the ability to appreciate this particular masterpiece of the muses. *C'est la vie. Noblesse oblige.*

I have both fan and academic tendencies

For argument's—and this paper's—sake, let us assume that I do have certain fannish qualities. For example, my family owns the entire series of *Buffy* DVDs. On the other hand, although I have watched every episode—very few of them more than once—I have never watched any of the Special Features on the discs nor listened to the Director's Comments. If I were a true academic, I would most likely be interested in that supplemental and expository information. If I were a true fan, I would want to watch everything on the disc, because that is what fans do—accumulate everything they can get their hands, or minds, on that is associated with their fan-subject. As for me, I have not been interested.

In truth I *am* in a Master of Arts program at a university, and I realize one could make a case that this makes me an academic. Other academic qualities that might be spotted are my occasional, but perhaps too frequent for others, use in conversation of rather esoteric and “high-falutin” words, and an occasional rather stilted, even awkward, sentence structure which, although impeccably and intentionally correct, is not the norm in the circles in which I travel.

Other clues abound, pointing to both academic and fan tendencies. As an undergraduate student, I majored in German. This in itself is suspect, as Germans tend to be rather worshipful of academia. However, one should also not forget the German tendency to be rather impassioned fans as well. Think Wagner; think *Nazionalsozialismus*; think Goethe, *Young Werther*, and “Werther Fever.”

Where is the conflict between academic and fan?

I would suggest that two primary factors concerning the academic/fan dilemma exist from the point of view of academia. The first is the belief that if one likes something, and participates in it, one should neither study nor write about it academically, because one would not possess the requisite detachment and objectivity about the subject. It would be an intellectual/academic conflict of interest. Continuing that line of thought, an academic who likes Shakespeare should not be a Shakespeare scholar, and an academic who likes music and, God forbid, *is* a musician as well, should not be a music scholar. This perception is patently absurd.

I would suggest that the second academic/fan problem is the perception that the study of fandom is simply the study of popular culture *writ small*. If, as some academics still believe, popular culture has no inherent value and is not deserving of scholarly study, then certainly the “fanatic” subset of popular culture that is fandom is even less deserving of study. Considering the slow acceptance by academia of popular culture as a subject worthy of study, it is not surprising that fandom has not been quickly welcomed into the hallowed halls of academia. However, academic acceptance of popular culture is not the subject of this paper.

Protecting the sensitivities of other academics is only half the solution. As Tom Phillips says: “In my attempt to tread the line between scholar and fan, I feel I run the risk of alienating myself from both groups.”¹⁵ Phillips continues:

15 T. Phillips, “Scholar-Fandom”, *Confessions of a Peeping Tom: Kevin Smith Fandom* (blog), 14 May 2010, at

An "us against them" attitude will always exist in fandom. This is not fan snobbery, but fan fear. Fans have created a unique community with valid forms of expression: fan art, fan fiction, filk music, and fan music videos. The possible results of academic studies of fandom include an influx of people who come to conventions in search of a world they've only read about. They really don't want to be a member of the fan community. They have no interest in the shows, nor the fans who enjoy them. Disinterested or uninvolved people may change the very nature of the community that Star Trek fans began to build over twenty years ago.¹⁶

The sense of community that Phillips refers to is captured by Karen Yost in *Academia Explores the Final Frontier*. She writes "One does not become a fan merely by watching a television show. As any true fan can tell you, fandom has become as much about the friends we make, the ties that we establish, than just about the shows we love."¹⁷

What do academics offer fans?

Just as fish are not necessarily experts on ocean water but rather on what *is in* the water, fans are not necessarily experts on fandom. There may be a place for the more detached, bigger picture, view from the ivory tower, keeping in mind that an oceanographer who never goes in, or even near the water, may be so detached that he likely has no real understanding of his subject. Academics offer the ability to place fandom in historical, socio-cultural, technological and educational context. In short, they are able to see a fan culture as not just an isolated grouping but as an entity which has relationships with other aspects of society, with the past, and possibly with the future.

Jenkins discusses Pierre Levy's book *Collective Intelligence* and says: "Levy gave us a way of thinking about fandom not in terms of resistance but as a prototype or dress rehearsal for the way culture might operate in the future," and that "Fandom is one of those spaces where people are learning how to live and collaborate within a knowledge community."¹⁸ Jenkins further writes that Levy's book "might best be read as a form of critical utopianism framing a vision for the future...offering an ethical yardstick for contemporary developments."¹⁹ Could academics focused on fandom be more than educators and indeed be seen as midwives of our future culture? Are online fan communities the prototype of tomorrow's geographic communities? The future is not yet known.

What do fans offer academics?

Academics need fans more than fans need academics. Fans can be fans (or, more precisely, *fen*) without the aid of academics. Academics require fans to study fandom. Fans offer insights which can come only from deep immersion in their culture, including knowledge over time, direct experiential knowledge, their own intellectual analytical observations, and anecdotal evidence. As Tara Brabazon says in the

<http://peepingtomresearch.com/2010/05/14/scholar-fandom/> on 16 November 2010.

16 *ibid*.

17 K. Yost, "Academia Explores the Final Frontier: A look at fandom theses and dissertations," Focus on Fandom, *Strange New Worlds*, Issue 14 - June/July 1994, at

<http://web.archive.org/web/20030721152631/strangenewworlds.com/issues/fandom-14.html> on 15 November 2010.

18 H. Jenkins, "Interactive audiences? The 'collective intelligence' of media fans", *Fans, bloggers, and gamers: exploring participatory culture* (2006), New York: New York University Press, p. 134.

19 *Ibid*, p. 136

description of her book *From Revolution to Revelation*:²⁰

The politics and passion of life are captured in the unforgettable song, the energy pumped out of an extraordinary nightclub, the exuberance of an unexpected goal in extra time, and the love of a film. For a fan, the joy and exhilaration is enough. For those writing on the coat tails of fashion, we need to understand why particular popular cultural forms survive through time and space.

Is the problem the word “fan”?

Henry Jenkins has stated that an Aca-Fan is a “hybrid creature which is part fan and part academic.”²¹ His use of the hyphen, or as others have suggested a slash or arrow, implies a separation, as if Fan and Academic were separate. Even Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde were one, or at least inhabited one body. True separation is impossible, so the term itself should be one, without separation: *AcaFan*. Jenkins has also written “One becomes a 'fan' not by being a regular viewer of a particular program but by translating that viewing into some kind of cultural activity, by sharing feelings and thoughts about the program content with friends, by joining a 'community' of other fans who share common interests.”²² I would obviously flunk Jenkins' fan test.

Joli Jensen has suggested use of the word *aficionado* instead of *fan* and writes:

Apparently, the real dividing line between *aficionado* and *fan* involves issues of status and class, as they inform vernacular cultural and social theory. Furthermore, the Joyce scholar and the Barry Manilow fan, the antique collector and the beer can collector, the opera buff and the Heavy Metal fan are differentiated not only on the basis of the status of their desired object, but also on the supposed nature of their attachment. The obsession of a fan is deemed emotional (low class, uneducated), and therefore dangerous, while the obsession of the *aficionado* is rational (high class, educated) and therefore benign, even worthy.²³

The hierarchical division between *aficionado* and *fan* observed by Jensen is not unlike that between *academic* and *fan*. She has also written:

“Fandom, it seems, is not readily conceptualized as a general or shared trait, as a form of loyalty or attachment... Fandom, instead is what they do; we, on the other hand, have tastes and preferences, and select worthy people, beliefs and activities for our admiration and esteem. Furthermore, what they do is deviant, and therefore dangerous, while what we do is normal, and therefore safe.”²⁴

Matt Hills coined the terms *fan-scholar* (a fan who does scholarly work) and *scholar-fan* (a scholar who considers himself a fan). Hills writes:

20 T. Brabazon, *From Revolution to Revelation: Generation X, popular memory and cultural studies* (2005), Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate, at <http://brabazon.net/rtr> on 17 November 2010.

21 H. Jenkins, “About Me”, *Confessions of an Aca-Fan: The official weblog of Henry Jenkins* (blog), at www.henryjenkins.org/aboutme.html on 12 November 2010.

22 H. Jenkins, “*Star Trek* rerun, reread, rewritten: Fan writing as textual poaching” in *Fans, bloggers, and gamers: exploring participatory culture* (2006), New York: New York University Press, p. 41.

23 J. Jensen, “Fandom as Pathology,” in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media* (1992), L. Lewis (Ed.), London: Routledge, p. 21

24 *Ibid.*, Jensen, p. 19

“neither fan-scholars nor scholar-fans can 'properly' belong to the other, secondary community unless they temporarily adopt its institutional norms of writing and practice. For example, I am able to work as an academic, despite (or rather, because of) having been a fan of cult TV and science fiction all my life only because I present an identity which conforms to institutional expectations. I give lectures which refer to academic books (most of the time), I offer arguments for and against theoretical positions, I use a specific academic language, and I possess the qualifications which are required of me professionally. My cultural practice, then, is shaped and delimited by institutional constraints, and my fandom can only emerge in the lecture theatre or seminar room if it is appropriately channeled through these norms of academic practice.”²⁵

In short, when in Rome do as the Romans do. With academics be primarily, and very clearly, an academic; with fans, be primarily and very clearly, a fan. Be one with your audience so that they can concentrate on what you say or write, not on their beliefs about your identity.

Conclusion

Because Henry Jenkins and many other academics who focus on the study of fandom concentrate on the extreme tip of the fandom pyramid, I would not be a subject of their studies. Nor would I be considered by their subjects to be a fellow member of the subjects' particular fan cultures. I recognize that fans who academically study and write about the fan culture in which they move can be seen as pretentious and detached by their fellow fans. I recognize also that academics can perceive other academy members as having lost their objectivity and sunk into the morass of the popular by actually participating in many of the “extreme” areas of fan culture: writing fan fiction, attending fan conventions, collecting fan memorabilia, or participating in online fan forums.

I, however, being neither full-fledged academic nor full-fledged fan, do not have this dilemma. I can sympathize with it, but I find it difficult to emphasize with it. Were I in that position, I would imagine that I would feel as does Gwyn Symonds, who has written: “What is to be done with my passionate, partisan engagement and pleasure in the text as a fan, if anything, when I want to respond in the recondite, composed and, perhaps, more distance or considered academic mode of analysis?”²⁶ For me, it is simple. When I write about *Buffy*, I write as an academic, although motivated by my fannish qualities. When I watch *Buffy*, I watch as a fan, as I assume that giggling and applauding is unbecoming of an academic. Both actions are enjoyable and rewarding.

As Joli Jensen writes:

The pejorative connotations of fans and fandom prevent me from employing those terms to describe and explore my attachments. While my particular affinities may be somewhat idiosyncratic, everyone I've ever met has comparable ones. Most of us seem to have deep, and personal, interests, and we enact our affinities by investing time, money and 'ourselves' in them. I have even been fortunate enough to make a living in relation to my interests. Does that mean I am truly 'obsessed' by them? Am I, perhaps, even more dysfunctional than most because I force others (like students) to listen, even temporarily to participate, in my

25 M. Hills, *Fan Cultures* (Sussex Studies in Culture and Communication) (2002), London: Routledge, p. 20.

26 G. Symonds, “You can take the fan out of the academic but should you?: Musings on methodology”, *Philament*, Issue One (2003) at http://sydney.edu.au/arts/publications/philament/issue1_pdf/GwynSymonds.pdf on 18 November 2010.

predilections? ²⁷

If Jensen is dysfunctional, we need more dysfunctional academics. Let the academic who is a fan of absolutely nothing cast the first disparaging comment. I will watch from the sidelines.

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27 J. Jensen, op. cit. (1992), p. 23

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