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Fascinated with Fandom: Cautiously Aware Viewers of *Xena* and *Buffy*

I think Xena has a cult following similar to those that develop for movies such as Rocky Horror or Labyrinth. The Internet provides a space for these subcultures of fans to meet. (Jenny)

[Buffy] is a show that appeals to a strange cross-section of people ... I think it picks up people who watch shows that have failed: you're picking up the kind of people who watch "convention" shows. Star Trek, Babylon 5 fans. The kind of people represented in Galaxy Quest. These are not "prime-time" people. They don't watch ER. And the people who watch ER don't watch these shows. Tere ((my emphasis))¹

"Prime-time" people. "Convention show" people. "Subcultures" of fans. The above descriptive quotes from Jenny and Tere tap collectively into themes dominant in this chapter, in which I explore the TV series *Xena: Warrior Princess* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. As I discussed in the introduction, these two programs were part of a historical moment, if you will – part of a transitional shift from the Internet being associated primarily with small cult audiences of small cult shows to viewers and professionals in the TV industry embracing the Internet more widely as an integral part of what we call television. In order to make the leap across this moment, then, from cult text and cult fandom to something "different" later, it is necessary to examine what "cult" means and what it looks like in relation to these two programs and their fans.

As both Jenny and Tere note (Jenny referencing "cult" directly), part of "cult" involves tele-participation – meeting online and going to

conventions, for example. “Cult” also seems to involve a recognizable social audience – an audience filled with “certain kinds of people.” One fascinating pattern in the responses of many of those who answered survey questions for me about these shows is that they often saw themselves as part of a social audience of *Xena* and/or *Buff*y viewers – while also working to distance themselves from other social audiences for the same series. In particular, these fans struggled with these shows’ cult status – or, more precisely, they struggled with the idea that they themselves were likely to be perceived as cult fans. There were, in short, many exceptions to the rule among this group, with respondents explaining that they were different in how they approached their relationship to these shows (compared to “others”). Many respondents expressed awareness of how fandom for these shows operated but were cautious about taking on the mantle of fandom themselves, finding the idea somewhat distasteful. Thus, a primary theme I explore in this chapter is the relationship between notions of taste and quality in terms of fandom/cult fandom, as well as in terms of the TV text proper.

In this chapter, I focus on the role that the Internet played in the enjoyment of *Xena* and *Buff*y for this group of respondents (whom I found primarily via the Internet), striving to unravel how the dynamics which emerged can be connected to understandings of cult TV, cult TV fandom, and tele-participation. How do these viewers, in their discussions of the shows and their relationships with them, reveal academically accepted understandings of cult – and how do they suggest something other than cult fandom as academics discuss this? How important are the concepts of taste and quality to discussions and understandings of cult TV and cult fandom and tele-participation – both academically and for viewers? Another corresponding theme evident in my respondents’ relationships with these programs is that of power: How does the Internet and the ways in which it opens up tele-participation factor into a viewer sense of ownership of the text – and a sense on the part of viewers that they have a right to be heard by creative and industry business professionals? Finally, how do the patterns I note with regards to these two series indicate what was on the horizon for ways in which different clusters of people involved with TV conceptualize television making and viewing? What changed and what remained?

I explore *Xena* and *Buff*y as both models of cult television and fandom and as foreshadowings of emergent forms of invitational

strategies to tele-participation that are influenced heavily by the Internet. I argue that these two programs reveal the need for scholarship about television creation and reception to incorporate considerations of interactivity – that *Xena* and *Buffy* and the ways in which viewers related to them through the filter of the Internet were part of a cadre of shows which began to set new standards for viewers and industry professionals alike as to what TV could be and what it could mean to “watch TV.”

“There’s something different going on here”: Tele-Participation and the Internet

For the uninitiated, I offer a brief examination of the significance of these two series to television studies and reception studies specifically. *Xena* and *Buffy* were contemporaries, with *Xena* emerging as a spin-off of the syndicated series *Hercules* in 1995, and *Buffy* emerging as an early WB mid-season replacement in 1997, after a movie in 1992. Industry analysts and television scholars have often credited both shows for starting a “Girl Power” trend on TV that included series such as *La Femme Nikita* (1997–2001), *Charmed* (1998–2005), and *Alias* (2001–5). *Xena* focused on the titular character seeking redemption for previous evil deeds she had committed as a warrior in areas surrounding Ancient Greece; the series was known for its high level of campy physicality, its reworkings of Greek, Roman, and Christian mythologies, and perhaps most famously for the sexually ambiguous relationship that existed between Xena and her traveling companion Gabrielle (a female bard). *Buffy* focused on the titular character coming to terms with her calling as a Slayer while still in high school (and later college) and the unique relationships formed in her life with friends, family, and enemies because of her responsibilities.² Both shows generically offered physical action, fantasy/supernatural features, humor blended with melodrama, and intense romantic and sexual storylines.

In the late 1990s, such themes and images were unusual in terms of the larger TV landscape. This rarity, combined with the fantastic nature of the programs and their placement as syndicated/small network shows, had much to do with their adoption as cult texts. Both of these programs can be placed within a lineage that includes the *Star Trek* franchise and *The X-Files* (1993–2002); like these series, official fan

magazines published by presses known for covering cult shows (Topps, Titan) coexisted with conventions promoted by established entertainment venues such as Creation Entertainment. However, *Xena's* and *Buffy's* lead female character base and consistent storyline focus on issues of gender distinguished these shows for many of their fans – and for scholars as well. *Buffy* in particular spawned an astonishing academic sub-industry of sorts, with literally thousands of books and articles emerging, as well as an annual academic and fan conference, international in scope.³ (*Xena's* academic response base was more contained – and existed more online than “in public.”)

An important element in the academic attention given to these series is that fans of the programs were aware of and contributed to the academic rhetoric that emerged so quickly. This “one-two punch” makes it unsurprising that mainstream entertainment news began covering the series as well – also relatively quickly. From *Entertainment Weekly* to *Entertainment Tonight*, to major national newspapers and smaller local ones, if people weren't watching it was difficult for the average TV viewer to have not at least heard something about these series, their heroines, and their fans. Still, in my analysis, the dynamic that solidified both series as unique in the grander scheme of things TV was the concurrence of these programs – and all their cult-like elements – with the rise of the Internet in homes across developed nations. In 1997, 18 percent of homes in the US had Internet connectivity; by 2001 this number had risen to 50 percent – with numbers higher among households with college students and/or with incomes of \$100,000 or more (Murphy 2006).

Xena was one of the first television shows to promote website use, advertising its website via Universal Pictures at the end of every episode; by the second season of the show, the first endorsed fan site emerged with Whoosh!/The International Association of *Xena* Studies (www.whoosh.org), featuring academic and fan-based articles, interviews, episode summaries and analyses, and artwork. When the show began airing in repeats on WE in 2001, viewers were encouraged to chat online while episodes aired – and a live chat ticker scrolled across the TV screen to reveal what viewers were saying while they were watching. Such synergy is resonant with the manner in which I described overt modes of invitation in the introduction to this book, wherein appeals to the viewer to engage in tele-participation are clear and direct (“visit our website”).

Buffy, alternatively, while having a substantial Internet presence, thrived online more through word of mouth and through self-initiation on the part of viewers as opposed to via direct appeals from the networks on which it aired. It was not until *Buffy* switched to UPN that consistent appeals to the viewer operated at a more overt level for tele-participation online – and this was primarily (and importantly) a move on the part of UPN to make viewers aware that the *network* understood that a highly developed online fan base for the show had developed during its five years on the WB.⁴ UPN developed a sophisticated web presence for the show, noting to fans who visited their new site that professionals at the network had designed it to “help familiarize *Buffy* neophytes with the show’s rich mythology, while also providing the show’s massive internet-based following with tantalizing never-before-seen photos and exclusive cast and producer interviews” (www.upn.com, 2001). This awareness that Internet fans existed demonstrates to a degree organic modes of invitation as I described this earlier, in which online tele-participation is assumed to be an already occurring part of how the viewer interacts with the text.

Organic strategies of invitation at times made appearances in the *content* of both programs also, as I alluded to briefly in the introduction to this book. *Xena* led the way in this regard as well, with several episodes offering storylines that focused on the existence of *Xena* fans. “A Day in the Life” in Season 2 obliquely paints a picture of both female and male fans of the star, for example, when Xena and Gabrielle come across a peasant man and woman who are both enchanted by Xena. The husband (Hower) is so entranced with Xena’s leather ensemble that he falls in “love” with her – prompting his wife Minya to replicate Xena’s outfit and demeanor in an attempt to woo him back. Online fans thrilled to the attention producers appeared to be paying to academic and popular critiques that had been circulating about Xena’s clothing – and thrilled even more to the attention producers appeared to be paying to fans’ online discussions of the lesbian tension building between Xena and Gabrielle. (The episode featured a shared nude bubble bath, as well as not-so-subtle dialogue about Gabrielle being a better mate for Xena than Hower.)

In the final season of the series, two episodes in particular used the fantastic and comedic framework of the show to acknowledge its modern-day fan base, and the attention that the media had begun paying to *Xena* fans. In “You Are There,” while Xena and Gabrielle are

attempting to deal with the disastrous results of the Greek Gods losing their powers, a television tabloid reporter inexplicably is present, following their every move. The reporter has an agenda: he wants to determine “for the millions of viewers who have been wondering” if Xena and Gabrielle are lovers. In the final moments of the episode, Xena and Gabrielle agree to an interview in a local tavern; unfortunately, as Xena begins describing the relationship, the battery pack for the camera dies and the feed is lost. Fans will never know if Xena and Gabrielle are, in fact, lovers.

Several episodes later, in “Send in the Clones,” a story emerges set in the new millennium. A former enemy of Xena’s, Alti, has survived as an immortal to become a cloning expert. Alti works with fans of the show *Xena* to clone Xena and Gabrielle. (Gabrielle’s writings have survived through academic research in archeology and history and become the basis for the TV series.) One woman is a fan of Gabrielle (played by the actress who portrayed Minya the jealous peasant wife in “A Day in the Life,” which, by the airing of this episode, had become a lesbian fan favorite); another woman is a fan of Xena (played by an actress who had previously “been” Xena in past season episodes – once as an actress auditioning to play Xena in a play written by Gabrielle).⁵ Both women are dressed like Gabrielle and Xena to some degree, with the Gabby fan clearly representing those who read Xena and Gabrielle as a couple. (She at one point wonders aloud if the clones should be shown old *Ellen* episodes.) The Xena fan reads Xena and Gabrielle as friends. A third male fan is unsurprisingly a fan of both Xena and Gabrielle – especially as lesbians to whom he can offer male “Twenty-First-Century lovin’.” The episode works to poke fun at the stereotypical categories of *Xena* fans while also acknowledging, through its very premise, that it is the fans who keep Xena and Gabrielle “alive” by watching the show actively: the fans provide the clones of Xena and Gabrielle with memories by downloading *Xena* episodes into their brains, arguing as they do so over which episodes best represent the women and the show.⁶

Buffy episodes with organic homages to fans were much more subtle than those offered by *Xena* – to the point where it is not easy to determine if, indeed, an homage was definitively present. However, fans online discussed several episodes after they aired within a framework of assuming that they were examples of how producers and writers were attending to fan fiction and chatroom trends. For example,

one multi-season story arc involves Buffy's best friend Willow becoming a lesbian while in college (Season 4). Two episodes in Season 3 ("The Wish" and "Doppelgangland") appear to hint at what is to come when Willow becomes a "kind of gay" vampire in an alternate universe (as Willow herself describes her Doppelgänger). Fans online who had been engaging in slash fan-fiction writing (when characters not typically aligned romantically within the show proper are written as involved sexually) saw these developments across episodes as evidence that Joss Whedon (the executive producer of *Buffy*) was responding directly to their stories – many of which involved Willow-on-Willow and Willow-on-another-woman romances.⁷

To those not familiar with the show's online fan base this may seem like viewer wishful thinking; however, from very early on in the series, Joss Whedon, other writers, and even stars of the show had made a habit of visiting the show's official fan chatroom – The Bronze – within the WB's forum for the show. While I will be discussing the unique dynamics and history of The Bronze (named after a club that the characters in the show frequented while in high school) later in this chapter, here I note that researchers focusing on the unique dynamics of this chatroom have noted the frequency with which the series' creative professionals visited the boards – at times interacting with fans online directly.⁸ Thus, the idea that the industry was writing the show "with" fans to some degree is not as far-fetched as this might seem. And as seasons progressed, references to media fandom began to emerge with a regularity rivaling the final season references of *Xena*.⁹

Perhaps the most famous nod to fandom was the Season 4 episode "Superstar," in which a minor character named Jonathan becomes the star of the show for one episode. Jonathan (played by actor Danny Strong) had by this point in the show's run become an Internet darling for *Buffy* viewers, operating as a cult icon of sorts within the originating text (including Danny Strong as an actor). For die-hard fans, Jonathan first appeared in the un-aired pilot of the series, speaking briefly with Buffy outside the teen club, The Bronze. Jonathan then appears sporadically throughout the first two seasons as a classmate of Buffy and her friends, emerging in Season 3 to help headline "Earshot," an episode about a potential school shooting in which he is contemplating suicide. This episode may have inadvertently cemented Jonathan's/Danny Strong's importance to the online community for the show; because the original airing was scheduled close on the heels

of the Columbine High School shooting in Colorado, the WB delayed the airing – setting off a massive Internet sharing campaign of the episode via Canadian fans (and not a few Los Angeles insiders).

Thus, by the time “Superstar” aired, Jonathan/Danny had become a cult figure. In this episode, it is Jonathan who is the hero of Buffy’s world; the opening credits of the episode even feature images of Jonathan engaged in actions that typically belong to the realm of Buffy. Now a lonely college student, Jonathan has figured out how to engage in some witchcraft and he casts a spell that makes everyone around him see the world through his eyes – and in his eyes, he is the hero. Buffy must come to Jonathan for assistance and decision-making, and everyone is enamored of Jonathan’s sexy Bond-like demeanor. He can sing (and has CDs to sell), he can write (and has books to sell), he starred in *The Matrix*, and (surprise, surprise) he is credited with having invented the Internet. In the end, however, Buffy regains her perspective and Jonathan is relegated back to the sidelines of the show (until he reemerges as part of a cult fan anti-hero team that works to take Buffy down in the sixth season).

As Justine Larbalestier (2002) discusses in “*Buffy’s* Mary Sue is Jonathan,” many Internet fans of the series read “Superstar” as what fan-fic writers call a “Mary Sue” story. Mary Sue stories – generally evaluated negatively by seasoned fan-fic writers who see these stories as evidence of novice writing – are ones in which the author writes himself or herself into the world of the show in such a way that the original star is dethroned. The fan-fic story, in short, “stars” a character – highly idealized and ridiculously heroic – assumed to be a manifestation of the author and of the author’s own fantasies:

You will never find an ugly Mary Sue, or a stupid one ... When she dies, the universe mourns. This is the wish fulfillment fantasy of the author, often to the extent that the character is named after them. It has been said in *Star Trek* terms that Mary Sue is smarter than Spock, braver than Kirk, more empathetic than Bones, and sleeps with all three. (Rust 2003)

As Linda Rust notes, this vision of fans is not complimentary – in a manner akin to the literal fans who help clone Xena and Gabrielle in “Send in the Clones.” Yet, for many fans who themselves critique Mary Sue stories, this episode is a nod to their own knowledge-base about fan-fic, as well as a nod to the very presence of Internet fan fiction (and therefore the existence of an Internet fan base).

Both programs, then, demonstrated a growing awareness across their runs of the role that the Internet was playing in how their core audience was watching. However, for most of both series' runs, the more dominant mode of invitation at work in the shows was of a kind with techniques of obscured invitation. In short, while *Xena's* promotion of its website was indeed an example of overt invitational strategies, and while *Buffy's* UPN website and both series' "fan homage" episodes make assumptions that fans are active online already (indicating a sense that organic modes of invitation could be effective with viewers), it was the messy and rich mythology of both shows that prompted many viewers to become so interactively involved with their shows. In fact, even within the episodes I discussed above, the "joke" works because viewers are watching their show's mythologies being turned upside down with new, "modern" interpretations.

This component of mythological complexity within the world of the series' story is what most scholars working on cult TV point to as the definitive narrative element prompting cult fandom.¹⁰ In particular, Matt Hills (2002) emphasizes the "endlessly deferred narrative" of cult texts leading to fans building communities and engaging in tertiary activities – or activities beyond the realm of the plots of the series proper.¹¹ The *episodes* I discussed above clearly offer visions of fans engaged in such activities (*Xena* fans gathering clips of the show, a fan of *Buffy*-the-character writing a new "story" with the help of a spell), lending more specificity to my argument that these series recognized the existence of fans – and specifically that the shows recognized the existence of *cult* fans. And my descriptions of actual online fan activities suggest that these visions are not misplaced.

Indeed, the complex storytelling at work in both series seems to demand unraveling and a "playing with" – and the Internet provides a convenient and pleasurable forum in which viewers can puzzle out the world of these programs. How are characters related to each other? What kinds of obscure references are at work? What clues may be appearing as to future plot points? As Philippe LeGuern (2004) argues, cult texts produce communities that maintain enthusiasm for endangered shows through rituals of performance rooted in demonstrating a mastery of a show's encyclopedic knowledge-base. The cult TV show's complex worlds sustain an "'encyclopedia' of the fictional world that forms ... the basis for interaction with the deterritorialized fiction itself" (Gwenllian-Jones 2004: 91). The massive amount of information

required to “get” the show becomes a source of further interaction – a source for reworking the original text, be that reworking through new creations (e.g., fan fiction) or reworking through discussion and elaboration.

Marianne Cantwell’s (2004) work with online *Buffy* fans in Australia in the show’s final season demonstrates how the pleasures of online fandom for this series revolved around fan knowledge. She also argues that the circulation of fan knowledge allows for a more intense experience with the series from the perspective of the fan, because fan knowledge is rewarded within the show and within fan communities. Cantwell’s emphasis on intensity is intriguing, given my respondents’ tendency to remove themselves from anything approaching intensity in terms of self-reporting. Such differences suggest the continued value of addressing variations potentially rooted in geography/nation as well as method (Cantwell’s lurking, my survey questioning). But perhaps more pertinent is the fact that Cantwell’s subjects all belonged to an established online community board, and one that she studied in 2003. It may be that Cantwell was seeing an indication of the shift that I argue began to occur with the dynamics of tele-participation as both *Xena* and *Buffy* ended (2001 and 2003, respectively): a stronger sense among viewers and industry professionals that extending the experience with a show was becoming more common and more accepted.

The fans I worked with for both series focused primarily on talk as the most pleasurable “tertiary activity” they engaged in, distancing themselves from the more dominant emphasis in cult scholarship on literal productivity via creative artwork or literal excess activity via convention-going or visiting locations associated with the show. This is not to paint a picture of these *Buffy* and *Xena* fans as unaware or dismissive of such activity; in fact, some of them engaged in such activities. Rather, it is to paint a picture of nuance: for these fans, it was going online to discuss the characters and the stories that sustained their interest and passion – a form of interacting with the text past its origin that truly requires the presence of a *group* (i.e., social audience). The complicated nature of these shows – especially the cult element of the endlessly deferred narrative and the more soap operatic element of complexly interweaving interpersonal relationships – prompted viewers to go online first to keep themselves aware and then to discuss such elements with those who would understand:

Buffy seems to provoke a fairly strong viewer response online ... If you watch it, you tend to be really, really into it, and this enthusiasm and investment can be shared easily with other fans on the Net. Because *Buffy*'s plots are fairly complex and drawn-out, *the program invites itself to be dissected at length*, and the Internet's a great tool for this. (Karen, my emphasis)

As the episodes have unfolded on *Buffy*, we've learned how the "Buffyverse" works. I think the mythology helps to make the show more complex and challenging for viewers (and I use "challenging" in a good way!) ... I like how in a given episode, we usually learn something about the main storyline of the season, a bit about some smaller storylines, and a few things just specific to that episode. It gives the show a continuity that makes me invested enough as a viewer to keep turning on my TV, week after week. (Hannah K.)

I think that most people have not taken the time to watch and appreciate the complexity of *Xena*. As each season went on, I think it became more difficult to follow for a casual viewer; it seemed that each episode built on previous ones. This would make it hard to enjoy if you didn't have the background *or take the time to go online and find it*. (Tina, my emphasis)

Thus, in line with scholarship on cult fandom, these viewers emphasize the complexity of these programs' structures and webs of information, highlighting as well that this results in viewers needing to work at unraveling their texts. Viewers must be devoted in order to understand their shows' universes, and this cultural competency grants them an insider status. Yet, these descriptions of the series and the work they require resonate also with scholarship on soap opera fandom – a genre traditionally not afforded the moniker of cult (or the moniker of "complex," for that matter).¹² As Mary Ellen Brown (1990, 1991) stresses in her work on soap opera fans, the paradigmatic structure of soap operas prompts viewers to seek out others with the same cultural competencies, often leading to the development of Annette Kuhn's social audience (1992) – a collective of viewers aware that they are, indeed, a collective centered on a TV text. Nancy Baym (2000) has noted the same tendency among soap fans online specifically. Thus, something "beyond cult" appears to be occurring. In the following section I will explore how these two programs and their fans figure in the world of cult even as they inspire activities and attitudes indicating that something beyond cult fandom is beginning to develop.

“There’s something (more) familiar going on here”: Cult TV, the Culture of TV, and Taste

Having chatrooms and posting boards where you can talk about Buffy makes watching the show more interesting. You have someone to talk to or you can get information. (Lillie, my emphasis)

The Internet makes everything easier, quicker, more readily available. If I had to write in by mail or wait for some sort of mailing regarding Xena, God knows I wouldn’t keep up on it! But the Internet makes everything so available – it’s easy to be a fan. (Angela, my emphasis)

Both Lillie and Angela demonstrate one of my key arguments about the importance of the Internet in relation to shifts that began to occur in the late 1990s with regards to how television could be watched and understood: the tele-participation that the Internet allows for *changes* the experience of watching the show and the experience of interacting with the show. The show becomes more pleasurable for Lillie and fandom becomes an option for Angela. The Internet provides an immediacy and sense of ease for viewers who go online, creating “something more” of something that is familiar – fandom.¹³

Kirsten Pullen (2000) emphasizes this point in her examination of *Xena* fans in the late 1990s, noting that the web in general allows for the spread of more material and information concerning cultural texts, as well as providing a larger community for fans to work with. This “more-ness” is the glimmering of an aesthetics of multiplicity. The TV text begins to extend more quickly and in a more complicated fashion than with earlier cult texts, potentially expanding the cult fan base for a show – and thus beginning to fracture the notion that cult fandom revolves around a small and loyal group of viewers.¹⁴

Many of my respondents from this stage of my research emphasized the convenience factor of the Internet, with the discovery of other fans being almost a surprise of sorts:

On the Internet, you can easily connect with other like-minded individuals whereas otherwise you might have limited access because of geography. I would never have known about the popularity of Xena without the Internet. (Tina, my emphasis)

As Janet Staiger (2000) notes, a significant element in extending a media text past its moment of reception is the sense of connection that can emerge through discussion of the text with others. Most of my respondents eventually discussed the enjoyment of finding a community of viewers; their responses to questions about their Internet involvement indicate that they “stumbled across” others with whom they could interact – sharing familiar opinions and perspectives in increasingly systematic and intense ways the longer they “played” online.

However, the very fact that most respondents assumed going into their online activities that there would *not* be many others out there “like them” indicates the sense that they themselves felt they were dealing with a cult text (as academics define this). The vast majority of my respondents in fact sought out the Internet because of the anonymity it could provide for them as viewers of programs with “low cultural status” (read: viewers of programs with cult status). In addition, adult fans of *Buffly* felt they were a special sub-audience by virtue of the show being marked as a teen show, while *Xena* viewers who read the Xena-Gabrielle bond as a lesbian one felt similarly. There was a relief evident among respondents that can be attributed to the Internet providing them with a safe forum for discussion:

I think that the net is such a popular place for “groupies” because there is a fairly small [*Buffly*] following, and people like to laugh about that. So, the ones who love the show but don’t know each other can get together and chat about what they like about the show without having people snickering about [them]. (Hannah M., runs a *Buffly* site)

We go to the Internet because we are afraid of what others think. (Tarmo, on *Xena*)

The lesbian overtones of the show [*Xena*] make it good to discuss on the Internet. The Internet gives lesbians a space to expand the X & G [Xena and Gabrielle] relationship in the directions they would like to see it go. (Pat)

I suspect part of the success of the Internet is because of the anonymity the net provides. There are a lot of closet *Buffly* watchers out there. (Belinda, fan and television critic)

This sense of being part of a select group of viewers resonates with academic discussions of cult fandom.¹⁵ As Philippe LeGuern (2004) argues, part of being a cult fan is being underappreciated – and the show being underappreciated as well. Along these lines, however, two

motivations for underappreciation emerge: (1) the text is rare and hard to find and/or (2) the text (and its fans) are seen as belonging to a low cultural taste group (9–10). For *Xena* and *Buffy* and their fans, in spite of the shows’ “residences” on smaller networks/syndication, it is LeGuern’s second motivation for underappreciation that appears to dominate. In fact, both *Xena* and *Buffy* viewers show evidence of being part of a social audience *because* they are teased about their status as fans. A distinct “us vs. them” rhetoric begins to emerge collectively when examining statements of viewers who first discuss being made fun of – and then discuss how this disparagement led them online. For some of my respondents, a sense of pride emerges in their fandom; the viewers who take time to appreciate the shows are special because they are able to overcome disparagement and continue watching. Yet for most it is the Internet and the safe space it provides that allows them to escape the disparagement and that then additionally provides them with proof of the wider worthiness of the series.

Thus, a central tension emerges among the *Xena* and *Buffy* fans I worked with. On the one hand, they demonstrate familiar understandings of cult TV and fandom via their sense of belonging to a small, loyal group of followers. On the other hand, they evidence opinions that their shows are worthy of mainstream acclaim. Both *Buffy* fans and *Xena* fans spent extensive energy explaining to me why more people were not watching; it was an issue of television viewers’ and at times critics’ misperceptions – as opposed to the shows being “built” for cult status and therefore for a small but loyal audience:

I have four housemates who think that [*Xena*] is awful and as a result force me to convince them of the merits of the show in order for me to get to use the TV ... I just basically tell them that while it may not be your mainstream drama, or your run-of-the-mill comedy, it is entertaining. Even if you’re not into myth, even if you’re not into the whole *Xena*/Gab relationship, and hell – even if you’ve never watched an episode before, most people can sit down and find at least one thing that they enjoy about an episode ... In the case of my housemate who’s joined me on the “dark side,” well, she simply “fell” for my line about how *the show tackles universal themes* – love, hate, redemption, etc. (Jenn, my emphasis)

People who have not watched *Buffy* assume unfairly that it’s stupid ... I tell people who won’t watch it that the subject matter is fascinating; *real life problems are explored* through a supernatural frame. I also tell them it’s

a really funny show with great drama, too. I would then go into the juicy details about Buffy and Spike and Buffy and Angel. (Lillie, my emphasis)

The people who watch *Xena* and *Buffy* love them. The people who don't watch generally don't know anything about [these shows]. It's like *The Last Temptation of Christ*. *A lot of people make an unfair judgment ...* without bothering to find out about the content. (Tere, my emphasis)

Obviously there is a small lesbian fan base for this show [*Xena*]. But also action-adventure fans, sci-fi fans, women and children ... Anyone who has a good sense of humor and wants to escape reality for one hour per week. (Tina)

The dynamic at work in these arguments is evidence of one of the more contradictory components of cult television and cult fandom: many viewers take pleasure in the fact that they are part of a specialized social audience while also working to defend their text as worthy of a broader social audience. This is amusingly evident with Tina, who begins with an argument that *Xena* is for a "small lesbian fan base" – but also a series of other social audiences that collectively merge into something "beyond cult" – and much larger. This is not to imply that these viewers are hypocritical or confused; rather, I mean to point out the difficulty of applying academic notions of cult TV and cult fandom wholesale. Indeed, most viewers I worked with seemed hyper-aware of the fact that they both enjoyed and were dissatisfied with being cult fans of cult texts: there was enjoyment in being part of a like-minded social audience and displeasure in having to secretly seek out this social audience online; there was enjoyment in being part of a social audience that "got it" – and frustration in being unable to get others to see things their way. As Mark Jancovich and Nathan Hunt (2004) stress, cult fans desire popularity and/or cultural recognition of the value of their text and their fandom – but ironically, true popularity poses a threat to "true" cult fandom.

Correlated to this tension of pleasure in being a member of a select group while desiring wider acceptance of the text the group admires, fans of *Xena* and *Buffy* simultaneously mark themselves as separate from the mainstream television industry's understanding of quality (they can see what the industry – including critics – cannot); and on the other hand they defend their shows in relation to accepted understandings of quality. As Jancovich and Hunt argue, "Cult texts are defined through a process in which shows are positioned in opposition

to the mainstream” (27). Yet, cult TV fans often position themselves paradoxically as having elevated or different tastes while also subscribing to standards of taste that are – if not mainstream – then at least “establishment”:

I think it [*Buffy*] is the most well-written show on television ... It’s such a different, original show. The show also seems to respect the viewer. What I mean by that is, when I watch a show like *Dawson’s Creek*, I am disgusted by how boring, plain, and predictable it is. With *Buffy*, they seem to know that we want something better than that. (Lillie)

The writing [on *Buffy*] is terrific, and the show presents a successful combination of interpersonal drama and supernatural action ... Whenever I catch glimpses of other “narrative” programs (*Everybody Loves Raymond*, *Alias*, *Law and Order*, *Ally McBeal*, etc.) I’m struck by how poor the writing and character development is ... I know that *Buffy* doesn’t fit the traditional formula for quality television, but even in the current not-great season, its standards are way above other shows I catch. (Karen)

In terms of quality, I do think *Xena* stood out from others. There were very few episodes which seemed like little thought was put into them. (Tina)

Writing “smartly” and in an “original” fashion has long been considered a marker of quality for critics in the television industry. In fact, when TV is disparaged more generally it is often because scholars see it as a “literate light” medium. Thus, when fans explain that their shows are quality because of the writing and originality, they are seeking at some level to align themselves with critics who traditionally value these traits. Still, one can see moments of distancing from critics – such as when Karen compares *Buffy* to other critically acclaimed programs, and finds the other programs lacking. And indeed, critics largely ignored both *Xena* and *Buffy* with rare exceptions when it came to publicly recognizing them with awards,¹⁶ leading to extreme defensiveness among viewers:

I think the show [*Buffy*] is overlooked by the traditional television industry because (1) There’s a general snobbery towards it and (2) I don’t think the industry knows how to categorize it. (Belinda, freelance TV critic)

I think critics ignored *Xena* because the show has had controversial subjects that it has handled in a “normal” fashion. I never saw any TV



promos highlighting “the lesbian kiss” (*Friends*, *Ally McBeal*) or interracial relationships. *Xena* did those and handled them with a maturity not often found in TV. It didn’t “sell out” for sensationalism, and critics do not know what to do with that. (Tina)

As for lack of awards, I see it as due to who makes up the organizations that give out the awards – namely older white men. They are not the sorts of people who tend to watch *Buff*y. They tend to watch all those damn cop and hospital shows that get nominated year after year ... I think those judges probably don’t understand at all what’s going on. (Hannah K.)

The show [*Xena*] has not been nominated because (like *Buff*y and *Hercules* and even *Sliders* and *Roswell*) it has not been taken up by a very well known station. Such as NBC, ABC, whatever. Critics do what the big networks want them to do. (Gabby)

Thus, the fans I worked with often spoke of their shows defensively, seeking to prove that these shows were “quality” and therefore worthy of critical and popular respect – even as they sought to discount critics’ and mainstream viewers’ perspectives. This double-edged defensiveness resonates with academic descriptions of cult fans’ attitudes towards critics. The prevailing argument that critics were missing the boat for unsubstantiated reasons indicates an agreement with Charlotte Brunson’s (1997) discussion of quality television, in which she argues that determining “quality” – even among professionals – is a subjective practice immersed in power relations (133). While Brunson focuses primarily on cultural power (industry professionals are accorded the “right” to determine what is quality), fans make very concrete claims as to bias and power – economic, racial, gendered, aged ... and beyond. Yet, even as the critiques of the critiquers fly, an agreement emerges in these responses as to what constitutes quality. In part, my respondents’ statements resonate with the criteria for quality that John Mepham lays out (as discussed by Brunson 1997: 134–7). A quality television show aims to provide diversity, to tell stories that are usable within the larger culture (a point of agreement with Walter Benjamin (1968) that I shall return to), and to tell the truth about some element of society or culture.

The question then becomes, of course, what is “useful” and what is “the truth?” This muddled area can, Brunson notes, lead to a great deal of variation among critics, with many dismissing specific genres wholesale – particularly those genres that do not feature realist



paradigms or traditional aesthetics. This is likely why many of my respondents felt it necessary to defend these series' use of the fantastic – while urging critics to look past this element. This tension is indicative of cult TV fandom as well: cult fandom is, as Matt Hills puts it, a performative cultural struggle in which viewers claim an identity run through with “cultural defensiveness” (2002: 12). To a significant degree, the cult social audience emerges out of defensiveness, creating a situation in which the viewer *cannot* escape the critical (and industrial and cultural) confines against which they struggle without this social audience dissolving.

As Brunson (1997) argues, however, this “Catch-22” occurs at a more generalized level with TV that can take us beyond a discussion of cult. Spectators always interact with “others”’ perceptions of them and their text and this relationship informs the way spectators watch. In short, there is no escaping what Brunson refers to as the “landscapes of taste” within which television is understood (148). S. Elizabeth Bird (2003), for example, describes online fans of *Doctor Quinn, Medicine Woman* as defensive about their series' quality because of mainstream perception of the show as light romantic silliness – with that defensiveness often taking on the mode of proving how the series met standard definitions of quality that critics were overlooking.

While cult scholars often emphasize landscapes of taste when they describe cult fans as reacting against the industry and mainstream critics and viewers, this can elide the fact that fans also react against their own potential cult status. For example, respondent Jenn states that “all ‘good shows’ have a solid and broad fan base. *Even The X-Files* was *just a cult show* for the first few seasons” (my emphasis). The most common generic reaction against cult classification involved the notion of “excess.” My respondents stressed the importance of “reining things in,” so to speak; for example, they discussed the generic blending within both series as useful for its ability to keep any one genre from excessively dominating the aesthetics of the text. One respondent who was an avid fan of both programs even offered the following caution:

These shows appeal to all ages. Anyone who likes to laugh at campy stuff. Sci-fi and fantasy readers, D & D [Dungeons and Dragons] players, convention goers ... I think if someone were looking for a lesbian relationship on *Xena* though, they might be disappointed. I suppose that's okay *as long as the fans are not the violent kind*. I think that's a real

danger. Is the fan in question the kind who takes this so seriously that he or she will start stalking? There are a lot of those out there on the Internet. (Tere, my emphasis)

While extreme in its assumptions – and rare for my respondents’ general concerns – this quote reveals the slippery slope that exists even among fan bases when it comes to assessing other fans. As easily as friends and family and critics disparage them for “just” watching, viewers themselves can turn cultural and social hierarchies back against their own social audience, seeking to draw boundaries between themselves and those with excessive tendencies.

Pierre Bourdieu (1984) (who ironically replicates this tendency in his dismissal of television) seeks to explain Western European cultures’ paradoxically excessive obsession *with* excess. Excess is associated with the uneducated and uncontrollable masses of the Industrial Age, during which classification and demography became paramount as means of controlling both population and rebellion. Bourdieu explains that classification became a part of European culture, contributing to a ladder of capital with economic capital at the top as capitalism spread, and relational capital (bonds between citizens) at the bottom. More importantly, however, the forms of capital within the ladder developed their own internal hierarchies; and regardless of the form of capital, the tendency towards hierarchies reveals a fear of those without power amassing power on their own – power enough to overthrow the hierarchy and thus the establishment.

Within culture and the arts, of course, television falls at the bottom of the cultural capital ladder. Within television, specific genres fall at the bottom – particularly those with cult status and/or those that inspire fandom. Within fandom, hierarchies emerge such that one can paint a face red and holler drunk at a football game, but noses will be turned up at those who follow a soap opera for generations. And even within focused social audiences for a particular program, activities considered “excessive” (i.e., “cultish”) are often pushed to the bottom of the fan ladder of capital – even when the program itself is considered to be cult. Among my respondents, then, “cult’s” muddled and tension-inducing status is somewhat familiar. Fans debated the propriety, for example, of purchasing items associated with their shows; DVDs and books are appropriate, but dolls and mugs might be *too* excessive. For some, purchasing any product is fine – but displaying products publicly (in an office, for example) is excessive.¹⁷

Importantly, what was once considered “cultish” or “excessive” (using the Internet to further interact with a TV text) is quickly becoming normative. In 1999, when I first began this research, respondents were hesitant about involvement with their shows online, often seeking to explain that what they did do online was not truly “active” or “participatory”:

I think that the Internet, and *Xena* sites, can contribute to an obsession – if that is a trait that the fan already struggles with. If I didn’t limit myself, I would spend hours surfing *Xena* sites. (Tina)

I am not active – but I’m a lurker online. (Belinda, *Buffy* fan)

I follow some of the discussions about *Buffy* that occur on the web, but I don’t really participate. I enjoy reading what other people have to say, though. I surf several *Buffy* sites. I follow a couple of message boards, read *Buffy* fan-fic, and swing by a few general sites for *Buffy* news ... I’m probably way too addicted to fan-fic ... I’ve also collected a lot of music used on the show from one website. *But again, I don’t really participate in Internet fandom.* (Hannah K., my emphasis)

I’m not really active. I check out the [*Xena*] websites to see about upcoming episodes but that’s about it. I do read some of the stories on various websites – it’s fun reading. *But no, not active.* (Angela, my emphasis)

Here the prevalent definition for being active online incorporates a subtle conceptualization of “lurking” (reading rather than posting) as an activity that is, somewhat intriguingly, not active. Regardless of the level of enjoyment, regardless of the thought processes involved in seeking out specific sites or even in the “act” of reading itself, there emerges a desire among my earlier respondents to root their fandom firmly in the originating text rather than in the extended text. In short, reception was not assessed as an active process; rather, active processes involved the creation of another product for reception – fan stories, sites themselves, etc.

Yet, these are the same fans who describe their reception of the TV text proper as “enjoyable *work*” – something that implies reception to be active in nature. This paradox suggests to me as a researcher a desire among some respondents to distance themselves from the “excess” of the Internet; tele-participation meant extending the TV text beyond the boundaries of acceptable reception. Importantly, my younger respondents were less likely to formulate their online activities as passive, and instead spoke avidly about the enjoyment of chatting

online and even the empowerment of a show prompting them to learn the skills necessary to create sites or learn about Instant Messaging. In following chapters I will further examine the importance of generation to an embrace of the Internet; however, even among older TV viewers, the respondents I interacted with just six years after this initial group were much more likely to discuss their online activities as, well, active.

One significant element in this dismissal of lurking in terms of active participation revolves again around the notion of hierarchies. A stellar example of how internal fan hierarchies can stifle fans' sense that they are contributing to the formation of a viable social audience emerged with the first official *Buffy* website, The Bronze. The Bronze was created via the WB website in 1998, and quickly became *the* site for fandom. As Andrea Zweerink and Sara Gatson (2004) describe in their ethnographic assessment of this site, The Bronze quickly developed its own rules of etiquette, set up by those members able to host literal Posting Board Parties when members would physically meet, often in the Los Angeles area. In particular, it appeared to many "outsiders" joining The Bronze that unless you lived in California or could afford to travel there for conventions (and therefore were able to attend private parties with people working *on Buffy*), you were not truly a fan. Battles emerged online over who "mattered" on this site, the criteria often favoring the ability to prove heightened intellect in discussions, as well as the ability to post often and immediately – thus appearing to favor those with jobs that allowed them to post during work hours.

Given that The Bronze was developing right alongside the spread of the World Wide Web in general, it is not surprising that those new to the Internet might be intimidated by the intricate rules of this site (which included how to read and respond to threaded posts, and understanding verbiage such as "shout-outs" and "emoticons"). Further, those establishing the rules insisted that contributors "worthy" of attending Posting Board Parties be willing to discuss more than the show, extending their fandom to include disclosure of personal activities and experiences not necessarily connected to the program. Such practices were seen as a means of "proving" a devotion not just to the series, but to the community of The Bronze. Thus, again, hesitations about "excessive" online involvement could have easily come into play for many exploring this site.

Complaints about the rules and exclusions of The Bronze mirror anxieties about excessive behavior in fandom more generally. To a significant degree, respondents expressing hesitations about fan

activities often spoke in terms that would sound familiar to Walter Benjamin (1968), stressing that creating sites and updating them immediately, or writing fan-fic, or attending parties (etc.) were not “useful” activities – and therefore were excessive. While those involved in such activities would certainly argue the point, the more relevant observation is that disagreement existed *among fans* as to what was “reasonable” activity and as to what activities constituted “true” fandom. Further, these disagreements align with academic differentiations of cult fandom and “regular” fandom (with “excess” aligning with “cult”) – even though the originating text is the same. Thus, on the one side there is “active” and “cult” and “insider” and on the other there is “lurking” and “regular” and “outsider” – this last descriptive most ironic, given cult fans’ own complaints about marginalization.

These variations also point to the complexity necessary when attempting to understand the social audience. One can see academically the need to accept the paradox of social audiences existing to a degree in the formation of concentric circles: there may be a social audience of *Buffy* or *Xena* fans, but within these initial social audiences, smaller, constantly shifting social audiences emerge – sometimes clashing and sometimes coalescing with each other – all the while remaining part of the broader social audience associated with the originating text. Among my own respondents, individual spectators could have widely varying interpretations of everything from a storyline’s meaning to an understanding of what activities amounted to active fandom; but when “push came to shove” the sense of being part of a social audience of *Buffy* or *Xena* viewers rose to the top. Thus, for example, individual *Xena* fans might have disagreed as to the nature of the relationship between Xena and Gabrielle – and argued vehemently about this – but if the issue of the show being cancelled arose, the allegiance in question became that of the broader social audience of *Xena* viewers. In short, to return to Benjamin, when the primary storytelling was threatened quite literally, members of the social audience could put aside their differences in order to pursue “something useful.” Namely, the continuation of the story.

“There’s something useful going on here”: The Pleasures and Politics of Ownership

As I’ve mentioned to many of you, a town meeting is being planned to gather all interested parties to meet and discuss a plan

of action to see our fav UPN shows in the fall ... I think it's becoming clear that in order to make sure something meaningful happens ... this group is going to have to take matters into its own hands. (Belinda, author of the Austin Chronicle's "TVEye" column, personal email)

I would argue that one of the primary things the online popularity of *Xena* and *Buffy* reveals is that a dimension of cult TV and cult fandom exists that most of academia has not considered – but that the industry has begun to. This is that the tele-participation so often linked to cult TV texts is the primary point of pleasure for viewers; and in a media world that includes the Internet, this pleasure can continue (indeed, it can thrive) “in spite of” popularity. It is this tele-participation – conversing and debating and sharing perspectives with other members of the social audience – that can bring disparate viewers together when the originating text is threatened in some way. *Buffy*'s Internet history with its parent company of Twentieth Century Fox provided an initial clue as to the impact of the Internet on understandings of television in relation to interactivity when Twentieth Century Fox began shutting down fan-created websites for the show. In 1999, FOX began targeting fan sites for many of their programs (the company had also targeted *X-Files* sites in 1996), but the quickly growing and fervent Internet fan base for *Buffy* was what captured headlines and galvanized viewers the most.

Those creating and visiting sites were dismayed at the attack, while fully comprehending the legal issues involving copyright. Internet fans argued that most fan sites do not make money off of their content and that they in fact provide a public relations service by promoting viewer involvement with the text. As Sara Gwenllian-Jones describes it: “For fans, the ubiquity and public character of popular culture makes it in some respects unownable. By this rationale, once a popular cultural text enters the public domain, it becomes, to an extent, public property” (2003: 170). In short, fans feel that once the storyteller has put the story “out there,” they, as listeners/readers, are free to continue the storytelling as they see fit. In the case of the Internet, this includes the right to create and maintain websites discussing the show and to produce tertiary texts (such as fan-fic). However, whereas Gwenllian-Jones describes viewers as perceiving the text as ultimately “unownable,” I would argue that there is instead a sense among viewers that the text is *shared* property. I would argue further that the Internet has

contributed significantly to this sense of shared ownership, and that it is this sense of shared ownership that can prompt fans to lay claim to their status *as* fans – including those who otherwise might dismiss such public claims as excessive.

This was particularly evident to me in the spring of 2001, when I was in the midst of wrapping up my initial research on *Xena* and *Buff* fans. At this time I was living in Austin, Texas, where *Buff* aired on the local WB affiliate station. An unexpected bidding war arose over the series between WB and UPN when WB announced that they felt the asking price for the series' renewal was too steep; UPN met the asking price and overnight viewers found out that this program would be on a new network the following fall season. Fears first arose due to comments from star Sarah Michelle Gellar that she would leave the show if WB did not renew, as well as angry comments from executive producer Josh Whedon about the WB's abandonment of the series. A larger issue, however, quickly became apparent in Austin (among other cities): in this town, there was no UPN affiliate station. No UPN meant no *Buff* (or *Roswell*, another show that had moved networks, and also *Star Trek: Enterprise*).

Over half of my respondents did not have access to UPN where they lived, or, if they had it, it was with poor visual reception. I had been working in my research as well with Belinda Acosta, a local TV critic and *Buff* fan; when word of the deal spread, fans of the threatened series began contacting Belinda via her column, asking for information and ideas about what could be done. A series of initiatives began as fans, including myself, took matters into their own hands to ensure that something meaningful (something useful?) would happen. Different social audiences – people who watched different programs, people who kept their fandom offline, and those who were active online – came together via Belinda's column and subsequent email list. We worked to gather information about the closest UPN affiliate, the local cable company's policies involving serving the public interest, state and federal must-carry laws – and more. Viewers coupled research with tele-activism, as little information was forthcoming from official channels; Belinda approached a local independent cinema house (The Alamo) that agreed to look into broadcasting satellite feeds of UPN at their theater, and members of the email group began strategizing with some of my respondents in better situations elsewhere to exchange tapes and online downloads. One diligent participant even unearthed

topographical maps of the city to unravel issues of picking up signals from nearby cities.

In less than two months, people who had for years never told close friends and family members that they were fans of *Buffy* (or *Roswell* or *Enterprise*) or who had only ever “lurked” online had begun to meet in public settings, started letter-writing campaigns, and found the Internet to be their new best friend as they researched legal and industrial policies and set up a website for the exchange of information. Then, Time Warner Cable in Austin announced in the city’s larger newspaper (*Austin American Statesman*):

Ultimately, the return of UPN came about because of pressure from the public, a long-awaited retransmission agreement between KBEJ’s owners and Time Warner, and a contract between Time Warner and Belo to give the cable company a share of the ad revenue. (Holloway: 2001)

Or, as members of what had become tagged the “UPN to Austin” group interpreted it:

ALL of us who wrote letters, made phone calls, designed websites ... and basically showed we were out here and cared – we should pat ourselves on the back. WE did it. (Belinda, personal email)

Well, I feel like we should have a party. Or at least a drink. I’ve really appreciated all the work that we did and the constant updates online ... It’s comforting to know that we won’t be missing any *Buffy* episodes (or *Roswell*, or *Enterprise*, or heck, even *Smackdown* if that’s your thing!). Bottom line: we’re going to see the programs we want *because we went out and did something useful* – and that’s good news. (PC, my emphasis, personal email)

The “UPN to Austin” group exemplifies the role of the Internet in maintaining a social audience and allowing communication within that social audience. Because different shows were involved, one can also see how social audiences shift and reorganize, merge and diverge, when reasons to do so occur. As Belinda described the situation in a later article, “there was something to get worked up about, and it involve[d] the fundamental question of who owns the airwaves” – something prompting disparate social audiences to coalesce (Acosta 2002: 42). Further, as PC notes, this social audience “did something useful”; and while this may not be what Benjamin (1968) envisioned when he

discussed storytelling offering something useful to its listeners, I believe that for these listeners that is beside the point.

Indeed, Belinda made the connection between tele-activism and Benjamin's storytelling explicit in the conclusion of her article on television fandom (which discussed the actions of this group):

I listened to each fan's explanation as to why he or she follows *Buff*, *Star Trek*, or *Roswell*. Some admitted to having a crush on this character or that actor. But more than that, I heard the excitement in their voices when a favorite episode turned out to be the favorite episode of another, formerly faceless fan. I observed the delight in finding a like-minded soul, and *the pleasure of retelling morsels of the tale*, and the warm generosity of bringing newcomers up to speed. Could it be that with all our computers, beepers, wireless messaging, email, voice mail, faxes, and cell phones, all created to bring information to us as fast and furiously as possible, that the need to admire the embroidery of a well-crafted story is stronger than ever? (Acosta 2002: 42; my emphasis)

As is evident in Belinda's argument above, it is, after all, the originating text that prompted viewers to come together; and any and all talk that led to the actions of saving the show(s) was inextricable from the story of the texts themselves. Part of the pleasure of these programs for these viewers was the ability to "retell morsels of the tale," and the Internet then and today provides a forum for this. And while Belinda hypothesizes that the very tools of technology that *allow* for tele-participation may be what drives the *need* for the same, the fact remains that these tools (the Internet, text messaging, etc.) were central to this group's ability to, well, keep their stories continuing – for the "pleasures of retelling" to continue.

Benjamin argues that storytelling has been dead for some time in most cultures because of these very technologies. Our new technologies (beginning with film and extending to TV and the Internet) have disrupted the benefits of oral culture, in which storytelling was a "live" art; the bard would reveal a story to listeners who could respond immediately, incorporating the local culture and its needs into the story. As Benjamin (1968) puts it, "storytelling is always the art of repeating stories" (91) – and through this "retelling of morsels" (as Belinda put it), the "ability to exchange perspectives" is engendered (83). This, then, is the "something useful" Benjamin stresses: through the exchange of perspectives, listeners can reinterpret the stories that come

their way, *participating* in the process of storytelling as they listen and then retell.

Certainly this description resonates with the concept of shared ownership; a true story belongs to both the author and the readers, including the right for the readers to retell the story as suits their community's needs. And as John Fiske (1987) would point out, stories that are producerly – stories that engender among viewers a sense that they can contribute to their meanings and trajectories – inspire a loyalty that many cultures tend to dismiss as excessive. In the examination of cult television programs offered to this point, scholars have described cult texts as “naturally” inviting producerly viewer involvement because of cult TV shows' complexities. Yet Fiske chooses the soap opera as his model for producerly shows – significantly pointing out that what this genre offers is a metatext of sorts through what he labels the “vertical intertextuality” of publicity and commentary on items as varied as star contracts, writers' plans, and the like (117). The non-cult soap opera has long offered tele-participation through soap magazines and conventions. Yet, Benjamin would not endorse this form of storytelling as true storytelling. In line with my earlier discussion of Western culture's fears of excess, Benjamin's model for modern storytelling is Brechtian theater, which prompts retelling through rational discussion that leaves little room for the concurrence of intense emotional investment that accompanies fandom.¹⁸

Cult television programs and the non-cult soap opera clearly do not fit within this non-emotive rubric of reception. Yet, the majority of my *Xena* and *Buffy* respondents expressed pleasure in both Brechtian analyses and more affectively oriented analyses – and it was this *combination* of aesthetic pleasures that cemented their commitment to the program:

We tend to discuss the good and bad points of particular plot lines and character trajectories, and we talk about our hopes for what the writers will do. Also, we talk about the extra-show stuff, like the writing style and the professional activities of the actors, insofar as they impact the story. Conversations tend to run like this: “God, I wish ‘blank’ would happen! Can you believe last night's episode when so-and-so did that? I'm not sure what the writers are thinking – I wonder if so-and-so is leaving the show? Do you think they used that song to make a point? Why was there no music in that scene? ...” (Karen)

Here, Karen exemplifies one element of what I mean when I argue that television today is operating via an aesthetics of multiplicity. From

production factors to aesthetic choices to character and narrative developments, all infused equally with emotion, the complexity of these programs offers much to discuss. Importantly, much of the discussion relies on information increasingly found online. And much of the discussion *itself* occurs online, further extending the aesthetic components to include (*à la* Benjamin) the world of the listener and the world of retelling, such that new perspectives can be incorporated in order to provide something useful:

At first when I watched *Xena*, I thought I would never be able to get past the warping of history and myth. But the more I read online and talked with other fans, the more I came to enjoy this ... What is history, anyhow? Just a story we tell. Are the stories in *Xena* so ridiculous? Columbus discovered America. Black men want to rape White women. Richard the Lionheart was gay while his mother was a nymphomaniac. Our understanding of "history" is as reductive and inflected with anachronism as anything Sam Raimi or Rob Tapert comes up with ... But in this show, it's a way of remaking the world and negating the power of those dominant historical narratives taught in school. (Jenny)

Evidenced here is Benjamin's insistence that a true story offers "less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is just unfolding" (1968: 86). For Jenny, the story of *Xena* continued in a different direction after she expanded her experience of the narrative online – and found her interpretation mingling with other viewers'. Cult texts in and of themselves tend to offer this experience of multiplicity through their continuing serial structures and ever-expanding mythologies. Yet, as John Ellis (2000) argues, television itself offers a "constant process of making and remaking meanings, and of exploring possibilities" via the narrative's daily/nightly/weekly return (79). And when factoring in the narrative returns and continuations that can occur through Internet retellings, we appear to be facing something amenable in spirit to Benjamin's useful storytelling.

Conclusion

Fandom is ... a spectrum of practices engaged in to develop a sense of personal control or influence over the object of fandom in response to subordinated social status. (Harris (1998: 42; my emphasis))

Or, as [a] newsgroup poster put it: “We are the people – We have the Internet – We have the power – Any questions?” (Wen (1999))

Matt Hills (2002) argues that cult fandom is marked by a “common affective tie” among fans, and that online forums have been allowing for an intensification and validation of emotional bonding centered on a television program (180). While Hills does not specify as to whether or not such bonding over a story is useful, other scholars working in areas of popular culture fandom not considered cult have proffered that such bonding is useful for disenfranchised groups in particular. Janice Radway’s (1984) work on female romance readers and countless works by feminists studying soap opera fandom, for example, have stressed the importance of women using their fandom of belittled texts to forge a space for themselves in which to discuss their concerns as women, or even “just” the value of having an activity that centered on themselves rather than others (i.e., husbands and children). I myself offered this assessment in my work on *Xena* and *Buffy* fans, positing that a primary appeal of the shows and the fandom surrounding them involved viewers finding a space for the discussion of stories about feminist and queer desires (Ross 2002).

I do not wish to discount this line of arguing, yet I am mindful of the slippery slope that exists between empowerment and a *sense* of empowerment that can distract one from the need for actual empowerment. In other words, if women reading romance novels or watching soaps receive *momentary respite* from any gendered disenfranchisement, but never seek to alter the conditions of their status in society, one can hardly argue that that “break” from sexism is of any real value. However, recognizing this important distinction between a momentary *sense* of empowerment and empowerment that leads to actual action does not mean that debate and discussion of issues important to culture and society do not occur, or that debate and discussion never lead to anything concretely useful.

Further, I think it is important to consider the value of any kind of debate and discussion – even about things that may seem mundane:

I’ve also made some cool friends through the Internet via the forums for the show *Farscape*. It was nice to talk about the show to folks who enjoyed the show and as an added bonus, I got to make some new friends. It was also interesting to listen to how different folks interpreted

what they saw and also to have things pointed out that I might have missed or not considered. (Kirbosi)

Kirbosi's pleasure in finding other perspectives – other continuations of the story – is the type of tele-participation that many choose to overlook because it does not indicate anything overtly political. Yet, the “UPN to Austin” group emerged from just such beginnings. While such activity will not occur all the time (or even when needed), it may be that such “mundane” socializing is a precondition for more clearly political action.

Or it may be that fandom is simply useful because of the socializing it prompts. One thing that has remained central among respondents across my research is pleasure in discussion (as well as, of course, the displeasures of debates shut down). This suggests that a primary appeal of the Internet especially is its ability to provide space for what Radway (1984) refers to as an “interpretive community” – a site at which members of a social audience can ponder meaning, be it aesthetic, philosophical, or metaphorical (8).

The messiness of understanding what, precisely, constitutes cult television and cult fandom is inextricable from the messiness of comprehending fandom and even TV viewing in general. As much as there are shifting social audiences, there are clusters of fear surrounding those social audiences; as much as Western cultures prize the collective, we also fear the power collectives can amass when we are not a part of that “in-group.” And as much as scholars and fans may argue that fandom (of any kind) is a legitimate cultural activity, we feel compelled to qualify that with a focus on “usefulness” and “value” that can only ever be about revolution or disrupting the status quo. Perhaps, when it comes to “cult” and “fandom,” we should heed the advice of scholar Philippe LeGuern: “The question is less one of knowing what ‘cult’ [or ‘fandom’] is ... than one of bringing to light the uses that are made of it” (2004: 19–20).

For my initial group of respondents, “cult” raised worries about excessive fan behavior; for my later group of respondents, the distinction between “fan” and “cult fan” and “hit” and “cult hit” was much more wide-ranging and less infused with worries about excess.¹⁹ While there still seems to be a general agreement that there are degrees of fandom, the idea of cult shows being inextricable from a “small but loyal social audience” rooted in defensiveness seems to be significantly shifting among fans themselves:



You can be a “cult” fan of a popular show – it is all about the attention you give it. I think a “cult” fan tends to be the “uber-fan;” you know, the obsessive completist who has to know everything and own everything. (PanPan)

What makes a show a “cult show” is a good question. For me, it’s one that continues to have fans well past its cancellation. Or it’s a show that has an avid fan base – a passionate fan base – no matter how big that fan base may be. (Fehrscaper)

I don’t know if anything currently on TV would be called “cult.” I would guess *Lost* is achieving cult status. Perhaps *Desperate Housewives* or the *CSI* shows. But “cult” usually attaches itself to “genre” TV – sci-fi and fantasy like my favorite show *Roswell*, or *Xena Warrior Princess* or *X-Files*, or the grand daddy of them all, *Star Trek*. (Loretta)

The respondents I worked with for my more recent research were fans of a broader range of shows, and while many of their programs would likely be labeled cult by scholars, this group of fans on the whole were less likely to categorize fans according to criteria of what was excessive in terms of activity. The Internet seems to be playing a role to some degree in this embrace of what would have been seen as excessive fandom less than a decade ago:

Storytelling has not been killed by TV, but in fact has inspired lots of amateur fiction, which you could say is storytelling “of the people.” In the 1960s it was a struggle to get fan stories to other fans. But with the advance of the Internet, storytelling is at an all time high. (Loretta)

Of course, if “the people” are committed to *shared* ownership of their texts, this means the industry gets to play with fans as much as (and likely more than) this means that fans get to play with the industry. While changes among viewers involving attitudes towards fandom and fan activities are significant, it is also important to consider in what ways the *industry’s* changing attitudes have impacted the uses made of cult, fan, fandom, etc. – especially in the domains of creative production, conceptual ownership, and marketing.

I would like to end this chapter by pointing out an element of Lauren’s quote above that has played a key role in how the industry has begun to shift in its orientation towards fandom: the pleasures of having a “voice” – whether that be a voice heard by fellow fans, a voice heard by detractors, or a voice heard by producers and writers and



marketers. Regardless of what motivates any person's desire to be heard, the pleasures of speaking and being heard are near universal across my audience reception research. The Internet appears to be correlated with an increasing sense among viewers that they *can*, in fact, be heard – and the history of *Buffy's* executive producer Joss Whedon attesting that he was listening online has become the stuff of legend among later TV fans.

Debates exist among my respondents and among industry professionals as to whether or not viewers being heard and heeded is a right, but the *pleasures* of being heard are not up for question. After *Buffy* and *Xena* and other cult shows of their era, the pleasures involved have been noted by more than Joss Whedon – witness programs such as the decidedly non-cult *American Idol* or *The O.C.* As Cheryl Harris (1998) notes, higher involvement in a TV show correlates with a higher enjoyment of the TV text and of TV more generally; in short, a sense of tele-participation can translate to the kind of attention that producers of most any television program in the US desire strongly, given that paying attention bodes well for the desires of advertisers. In the following chapter I will explore these notions of “paying attention” and “being heard” and what this means for viewers, producers, network executives, and marketers in the age of the Internet.

Notes

- 1 Unless noted otherwise, the viewer quotes in this chapter come from my work on fans of *Xena* and *Buffy* and the answers they provided to survey questions about these shows; the surveys were distributed and collected from 1999 to 2001.
- 2 The show became additionally famous in its fourth season for portraying an open lesbian relationship between lead characters Willow and Tara, both witches.
- 3 The books and articles in print are too numerous to lay out here; the best-known conference is called Slayage Conference, and began in 2004.
- 4 After five successful years on the WB, *Buffy* was optioned for renewal by UPN and UPN won the bid. The reaction of fans to this change will be discussed further later in this chapter.
- 5 Polly Baigent also was a body double for Lucy Lawless, the actress who plays *Xena*, in two episodes.

- 6 It was also during the final season that producers of the show asked an online fanfic writer, Melissa Good, to write two episodes. “Coming Home” was the actual season premiere, and “Legacy” was the middle episode in a trilogy featuring Gabrielle – an episode that famously opens with a nude bath. (The bath featured partial on-screen nudity in initial airings of the episode in some areas of the country; the scene was edited by the time other stations offering the show in later time slots aired.)
- 7 A similar reaction occurred with a Season 4 episode in which Buffy and Spike – an enemy vampire – decide to get married while under a spell unwittingly cast by Willow (by then a Wicca); much online slash fiction involved exactly this sexual pairing. Marianne Cantwell (2004) also argues that Season 7’s “Storyteller,” in which a minor character is used to self-consciously mock Buffy, could be correlated to an increase of online fan criticism of her character throughout that season; however, given the show’s production schedule, it is not likely that writers would have been aware of such criticism in time to work it into a script to such a degree.
- 8 See Zweerink and Gatson (2004), also Larbalestier (2002).
- 9 For example, in the sixth season of the show, Buffy’s “Big Bad” (the evil force of the season) is actually a trio of humans – Warren, Andrew, and Jonathan – who are mutually bonded via their shared love of cult media texts (specifically, science-fiction/fantasy comic books and films).
- 10 See Gwenllian-Jones (2003, 2004); Hills (2002); Jenkins (1992); Lancaster (2001); LeGuern (2004).
- 11 See also Gwenllian-Jones and Pearson (2004).
- 12 See, for example, Allen (1992); Brown (1990, 1991); Brunson (1981).
- 13 Indeed, as I alluded to earlier, *Buffy* in particular became academically respected as a series by the end of its run; in no small part this is due to the fact that the Internet began to make *researching* the show and its fans easier.
- 14 Pullen sees *Xena*’s online fan base as more representative of the typical TV viewer in the late 1990s and early twenty-first century than I do, arguing that by early 2000 “the web had mainstreamed fandom” (56). Interestingly, she also paints a picture of *Xena* fandom similar to my own, suggesting that she sees the dynamics of tele-participation at work with this fan base as normative (she in fact makes comparisons to the fan base for the Top Ten show *E.R.*) and to a degree predictive. The fact that we describe similar dynamics among *Xena* fans, yet I see these dynamics as less continuous with the later shows I examine in this book (particularly those that are non-fantastic in origin), indicates the importance of historicization in such studies. Doubtless by the time this book is published, another scholar will see what I have and be able to provide a different perspective on this!

- 15 See Hills (2002); Jancovich and Hunt (2004); LeGuern (2004); Zweerink and Gatson (2004).
- 16 Both shows have been nominated for some awards. *Xena* was nominated for an Emmy in musical composition in both 2001 and 2002; *Buffy* was nominated for writing in 2000, musical direction in 2002, and several years for makeup. Sarah Michelle Gellar of *Buffy* was nominated for best actress by the Golden Globe committee in 2000 and the show was nominated for best drama by the American Film Institute in 2001. With *Buffy* especially, fans became convinced that the “industry” was determined not to snub the show, particularly in 2002 when the episode “Once More, With Feeling” was left off the Emmy ballot accidentally.
- 17 For an excellent discussion of similar boundary-setting among female fans of the sometimes-labeled cult *The X-Files*, see Bury (2005).
- 18 See Benjamin (1968).
- 19 The remainder of the book references quotes from this later round of research; respondents replied to a survey about TV watching and the Internet (as well as follow-up queries) from 2005 to 2006.

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