



You Can Take the Fan Out of the Academic but Should You?: Musings on Methodology

Gwyn Symonds

These musings are the outcome of a question asked of me when recently presenting a paper to an audience of postgraduate students and staff at the Department of English, at Sydney University. My paper at the seminar was on fan response to the television show *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer*. The fact that I am a fan of the show, and of the character my paper was about, was obvious from my presentation. The question asked was along the lines of “how do I separate being a fan from my academic response?” My lighthearted answer was “with great difficulty!” However, the question has since provoked serious ongoing thought on my part about the methodology of my response to text, in the academic context, when I sit down to write on popular texts that I am engaged with as a fan.

The question raises the issue of 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 distanced or considered academic mode of analysis? It is true that when I post on an internet list as a fan I am not often writing as I would in an academic context. For one, I do not bother with specialised jargon, I am probably less concerned with conventions related to the academic disciplines I write in and, most importantly, I do not hold back the emotion embodied in my response to the text. The emotionalism of such a response is a kind of wanton abandon to the text, illicitly pleasurable to the academic in me because it is unyoked by scholarly conventions of stance, tone and writing style. In truth, in an



academic paper, I do not want to separate my fandom from my academic textual analysis and, to do so, to subdue the fan response and couch it in an academic response, devoid of that abandonment, takes vigilance. Whether I managed to maintain that vigilance in the paper mentioned above I will leave others to decide. However, does remaining vigilant limit what I can discover about my own response and the responses of others to the text? Ideally, as Turnbull so aptly puts it, on some level trying to be 'unmoved' is not the point of the research endeavour:

Indeed, acquiring skills in textual analysis may be precisely the way in which to understand how, why one's own reactions and relationship to the text. Extrapolating from this, once we know how we ourselves are moved, then maybe we can begin to understand how this might be true and in what ways one is 'moved', not necessarily so one can become 'unmoved', but in order to better understand for others, without projection or condescension.¹

However, being 'moved' and displaying it openly, whether one loses perspective or not, is not the same thing.

In the paper I presented, exploring how fans of the vampire character 'Spike' in *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer* engaged in a dialogue with the show's writers to reject their view of what was happening in that character's storyline, I consciously used the theoretical concept of audience reception to mute my fan response. Simply put, I wrote to sound less affectively engaged with the text in order to put my response in perspective. I adopted an academic 'role' to maintain a stance, a tone, a mode of discussion and some distance from the process of how I and others received the text. I tried to be less embroiled in



the dialogue I was analysing than I had been when engaged in the discussion on the fan lists from which I drew my research. However, the paper would never have been written by me if I had not been a participant in fan culture, which is a defining characteristic of fandom, as opposed to simply viewing and liking the show. Originally, I was contributing as a fan to internet discussion with no thought of researching the responses to the text. I was as upset as other fans about some of the writers' comments on the character and the implications it had for the storyline, as I was with some of the aspects of the storyline itself as the fate of the character unfolded. It was only as I read several thousand responses from a range of public discussion boards and 'Spike' fan lists that it dawned on the academic in me that the discussion was illustrative of an aspect of audience reception that I felt had been overlooked. I became interested in the way in which partisan empathy with a character acted as a filter for textual response. It was my experience as a fan, in a community of fans, that led me to try and step back and view all such responses, including my own, through the view of theory to gain insight into audience reception and textual meaning.

When asking for permission from fans to use their comments (this was necessary for posts written on private lists with reposting protocols and not public boards) the fans were generously forthcoming. There was one fan, however, who did say she was trusting me to not make fun of the fans. Her concerns legitimately remind us that there is still the notion of fandom as the Trekkie stereotype, put to rest by Henry Jenkin's work but still current, that there is something odd or lightweight about fan response - a view which is ignorant of "the results of this intensive commitment to popular fictions":



Would these same practices (close attention, careful re-reading, intense discussion... be read as extreme if they were applied to Shakespeare instead of Star Trek, Italian Opera instead of Japanese animation, or Balzac instead of Beauty and The Beast?"²

Post-modern theory has elevated the study of popular culture in the Academy but the view still lingers that the fan critical response is of a more general nature and, by implication, less weighty than an academic response. Thus the following publisher's sidebar to a paper published in *Metro*, a partially refereed media journal:

This paper was originally presented as a conference paper to an audience of fans and academics at the Buffyverse Symposium held at Melbourne University, November 12, 2002. It is therefore, addressed to a general readership.³

The sidebar seeks to pre-empt any unease with the academic depth or tone of the article. The implication of the phrase "general readership" is that analysis of the popular television show *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer* is qualitatively different when addressed to fan, as opposed to academic, audiences - even when written by an academic. The mix of fans with academics required a "general" approach, presumably less specialised language at the very least. It is hard to escape the implication, however, that there is something condescending about that view. The sense of distance between academic and fan analysis, however, works both ways. When presenting at conferences with an audience that consists of both it is not unusual for academic presenters to be asked by organisers to present in a more 'lively' and less reserved (dare we say dour?) manner. The fact that such conferences exist,

however, presumes that the interaction of both points of view is of mutual interest to both groups. (Fan-run conventions have also started to ask academics to present papers.) It is an acknowledged fact, for example, that academic books on *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer* are bought by fans, as well as by the academic audience for which they were written. (A fact that undercuts the assumption of the sidebar mentioned above). As Daspit, a contributor to a recent academic publication on Buffy, "*Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Philosophy: Fear and Trembling in Sunnydale*", opines:

I don't just look at 'Buffy' as a scholar; I'm a fan, too", he says.

"People are reading the book for different purposes and they watch the show for different purposes. Either way, it's a way of intelligently looking at life's transitions without applying a heavy academic hand.⁴

The existence of a public fan board, *All Things Philosophical About Buffy, the Vampire Slayer and Angel, the Series* (Masquerade, 2003), testifies to the mutuality of the philosophical interest. It is interesting that Daspit posits the opposite to the sidebar to Turnbull's article. He implies that an academic approach is "heavy", something he feels the philosophy book he contributes to avoids. It seems to me that both implications, that academic analysis of popular culture can be heavy and fan analysis more general or lightweight, can be true but often is not. In addition, it is not a very interesting or useful methodological insight. However, the discussion does highlight the fact that there are affective responses to the task of responding, as much as there are to the texts themselves, on both sides of the academic and fan divide.

Matt Hills in his meta-analysis of theories of fan culture places both fans and academics on a continuum of response to the text, using the designations of



“scholar-fans and fan-scholars”. Those designations posit fans and scholars as kindred souls for all the “moral dualisms” that may separate their view of one another. Reflecting on the way previous academic views of fandom have seen the Academy and fandom as “separate cultural identities” he calls for:

...impassioned thought rather than the parroting of academic discursive mantras. It is a call for an academic ‘affective reflexivity’ which admits its own neoreligiosities, its own fandoms, and its own ‘reflexive pre-reflexivities or self-absences. It is a call for academic commitment which is modeled on fan commitment. And it is a call which is unlikely to be heard as long as the situation I have described here persists, and where fan and academic imagined subjectivities mirror one another and contribute to the cultural reproduction of types of ‘good’ authority and ‘good’ rationality.⁵

If academics and fans are in some way kith and kin in their affective response then it raises the possibility of finding a mode of discussion where the two groups might intersect as one critical audience that share a desire to discuss popular texts without resort to stereotypical views. Surely what is potentially fascinating about sharing an intense interest in analysing a text that moves us, as fans or academics, is whether we can find a shared mode of dialogue that sharpens the perceptions of both groups to our mutual enjoyment. I mean something very different from some fans reading academic books or academics participating in joint conferences or lurking/posting on fan discussion lists. Should we be opening up journals like this to fan papers as some academic conferences on popular texts have tentatively begun to do? I have begun, for example, to cite online fan insights in my academic papers, in very much the same way I would any academic reference. My assumption for



doing so is that it is the value of the insight to my own exploration of a text, not whether it comes from an academic source, that decides whether I want to quote it, use it or cite it in my analysis. In my research on *Buffy*, I have invariably found that many fan discussions are just as insightful and stimulating to read as any academic writing on the show. Certainly, as a member of both fan and academic lists on-line, I enjoy the engagement with the text and discussions on the fan lists more, and invariably learn more about my own responses and the text itself there because of the depth and breadth of knowledge of the text held by participants. If one characteristic of inquiry in the Academy is the justification of the process of analysis then I see no reason to separate my response as a fan from my response as an academic in that context. Finding the words that speak to both groups, passionate **and** recondite (and which still allow me to get my thesis accepted) - now there is the real challenge! So... "If the apocalypse comes, beep me!"⁶



Notes

¹ Sue Turnbull, "Teaching *Buffy*: the curriculum and the text in Media Studies" *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 17 (2003): 11.

² Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television, Fans & Participatory Culture*. (New York and London: Routledge, 1992) p 53.

³ Sue Turnbull, "'Who Am I, Who Are You?' On the Narrative Imperative of Not Knowing Who You Are in *Buffy, The Vampire Slayer*," *Metro Magazine* 137 (2003): 66.

⁴ Gail Towns, "New book explores the lore, lure and love of 'Buffy,'" *WMU NEWS*, May 14, 2003. Accessed online 12 July 2003, <http://www.wmich.edu/wmu/news/2003/0305/0203-349.html>.

⁵ Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (London & New York: Routledge, 2002), p 184.

⁶ *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer*, "Never Kill a Boy on the First Date," 1.5.