"Oh, hello there gentle viewers": The fan community and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

Watcher Junior Issue 1, July 2005

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> "[Popular TV drama is]…not escapist, but mythic…it enables and encourages the reader to make a particular kind of sense of existence. The reader and the text are both active and the text becomes popular only when the activities are mutually supportive…" (John Fiske qtd. In Tulloch 77)

[1] In today's society, the success of a television show can rely on many different aspects in order to succeed. For shows such as *The Sopranos* and *Everybody Loves Raymond*, it may be the fact that they often clean up at the Emmy and Golden Globe awards. Shows such as *Law and Order* often garner rave reviews. But what is it that makes Joss Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* such a success? The show was often ignored at the big award ceremonies and viewers have often been ridiculed for enjoying the show. The title alone made people think that the show could never amount to anything worthwhile. Before its premiere on March 10, 1997, the *WB* network tried hard to get Whedon to change the title, while Sarah Michelle Gellar herself said "You try being on a midseason replacement show on the WB called *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and see how much respect you get." (Havens 36) However, this is a show that "requires and gets from its audience sophisticated, multi-layered responses that can only enrich the television medium itself" (McDonald 67) and after completing seven seasons, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* has fans all around the world, numerous articles and essays dedicated to interpreting the show, especially in the online international journal *Slayage*, a spin-off series in *Angel*, numerous books, video games, magazines, soundtracks, figurines and DVDs, and, most importantly, at least one million websites dedicated to the show and its actors and created by the fans. These fans have played an important part in the success of *Buffy*, transforming the show into a worldwide phenomenon with 'cult' status, while creating an "alternative social community" (Jenkins <u>Textual Poachers</u> 280) where fans feel free to express their opinions. As Whedon has pointed out, he always "intended for *Buffy* to be a cultural phenomenon" (Havens 1) and it is the fans that play an important part in this development. As the Fiske epigraph above suggests, a show such as *Buffy* needs its viewers just as much as it needs its writers, directors and actors and without this support, *Buffy* may well have been just another short-term, fill-in show.

What is a Fan?

> "Most fans take their first steps along the road to fandom before they have ever heard of the word or the community it represents." (Bacon-Smith 7)

> "Media fans are consumers, who also produce, readers who also write, spectators who also participate." (Jenkins, "Strangers" 208)

[2] As Henry Jenkins has pointed out, cultural scholars over the last decade "have come to recognise that fandom functions as an important basis for media activism and grass-roots cultural production and distribution." (Lancaster xvii) Jenkins explains that the fans are often the first ones to discover the possibility of becoming a participant through new technologies and, after being disillusioned with what the television networks had to offer, decided to use this technology in order to give themselves a more active role in the creation of their favourite product. (Lancaster xvii) To the fans, the existing product is not there to be destroyed but to be explored and interpreted by "reworking borrowed materials to fit them into the context of lived experience." (Jenkins Textual 51) It is there as a starting point for the fans to make connections to the show through their own work and their own form of participation.

[3] In "Rewriting Popularity: The Cult Files," three types of fans are discussed – the casual viewer, the devoted viewer and the avid fan. (Reeves, Rodgers, and Epstein 26) When presented with a show like *Buffy* and its many viewers, it can be said that the 'cult' status and popularity of the series could be due in part to the role of the avid fan. According to the authors, an avid fan will "not only take special pains to watch every episode of the show but, today, will tape the episodes so that they can review them or even archive them." (Reeves, Rodgers, and Epstein 26) Avid fans also "enthusiastically purchase or consume ancillary texts related to the program and join interpretive communities that have formed around the show, such as fan clubs [and] online discussion groups" (Reeves, Rodgers, and Epstein 26) To such fans, the show is not only a source of enjoyment but can also be seen as a "major source of self-definition." (Reeves, Rodgers, and Epstein 26)

[4] When it comes to watching a show like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, a fan, as Sue Turnbull suggests, does not watch Buffy "as part of television's flow of images or segments, nor do they simply glance at the screen." (Turnbull 8) Instead, she suggests that it is possible that "they watch Buffy on a big screen TV (if they can afford one) in the dark, either in silence or with trusted viewing companions who might be in the room or on-line in a participatory viewing experience which is all about intense engagement with the text." (Turnbull 8) With the increase of technology in the past decade, fans now have a forum where they can express their love for *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* without fear of ridicule – the Internet. It is a place where fans can come together and discuss the show; a place where fans can "interrogate the text and

each other, rehearsing not only close forms of textual analysis and commentary, but a knowledge of authorship, genre and style as well as the conditions of production which impinge both on the creation and the delivery of the televisual product." (Turnbull 8-9)

The Power of the Internet

"It was the Internet that really kicked us off, because that's where this loyal fan base could get together and spread the word." (Sarah Michelle Gellar qtd in Haven 45)

[5] The Internet, in the case of *Buffy*, has "provided a powerful medium for the creation of virtual communities." (Diaz 1) It has provided a place where strangers all over the world can converse in a welcoming space, also known as a "virtcom." (Diaz 1) In such communities, fans can feel free to question why certain things happen on the show and not others. Simply type "*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*" into the Google search engine and over 1,800,000 entries come up, many of which consist of fan sites that are not created for profit, while typing in "*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and FanFiction" into Google brings up an additional 95,000+ entires. Popular websites that can be found include sites that are dedicated to the major characters, their love relationships (called 'ships') and their 'unconventional' relationships, or to specific episodes. (Diaz 11)

[6] Fanfiction (also known as 'fanfic') is a popular inclusion on many websites. These stories, which range from G-rated to R18+, help the fans to "feel connected to the characters and the brand in the same way that board discussions do." (Stengel 6) Particularly popular is 'slash' fiction where often the 'unconventional' relationships that could not be shown on the series are given a chance to be explored and 'hurt-comfort' stories where a darker side to the television show is examined. Examples of such stories can be found on numerous websites, including *The Inner Geekdom* where examples of fanfic include "The Fifth Dimension" where troubled slayer Faith heads out "for a night of dancing and sex to mask something deeper" ("Fifth Dimension") and ends up partaking in BDSM rituals, and "Tis The Season" where Willow's werewolf ex-boyfriend Oz and Buffy's ex-watcher Wesley, after getting drunk together, end up having sex on Christmas Eve and "Oz makes Wesley's Christmas a little brighter." ("Tis the Season") Such fanfiction "allows its authors and readers to play with pairings and explore fantasies that the show hints at" (Rust 5) while Whedon himself has said about fanfiction: "I think that it's part of the attraction to the Buffyverse. It lends itself to polymorphously perverse subtext." (qtd. in Rust 5) Amateur press magazines *Strange Bedfellows* and *The Terra Nostra Underground* have gone to the fans to question the popularity of slash. K. Bannister has said that "part of what makes slash so alluring is not so much that it's taboo…but that we create it, our community, unhindered by all the rules…we create the fiction we want to read and, more importantly, we allow ourselves to react to it…we have the

power and that's a very strong siren," (qtd. in Green, C.Jenkins, and H.Jenkins 35) while A. Morgan believes that slash scenarios "confront and transgress our nicely constructed ideas of the 'norm' [and that] in a world that creates the individual's identity in term's of sexuality, we respond by challenging, rearranging, that sexuality, that identity." (qtd. in Green, C.Jenkins, and H.Jenkins 36) It could be suggested, in fact, that within such a fan community like the *Buffy* world, it is such fanfiction that creates the community. (Bacon-Smith 57)

[7] The ability for such a show to have this power on the Internet can be seen as playing a part in Buffy's success. Fans are allowed to play around with the characters, pair them up with unusual partners, place them in another world or even another television show (one such example is "Bar Hopping" which brings together Faith and *Smallville*'s Lex Luthor) ("Bar Hopping") – Whedon even expects it of them. When asked by *Science Fiction Weekly* about the cultural impact it has created via fan-fiction, comics etc, Whedon replied:

> [...] the show was designed to be the kind of show that people would build myths on, read comics about, that would keep growing. So naturally, I'm wicked pleased that it's entering people's consciousness. I obviously can't read [fan fiction], but the fact is there seems to be a great deal of it, and that's terrific. I wished I'd had that outlet as a youngster, or had the time to do it now. (qtd. in Lee)

Through this involvement on the Internet, fans are also given the chance to play a part in the creation of *Buffy* wherein Whedon and his team of writers often present us with episodes that look at the possibilities of 'unconventional' pairings and alternate universes.

The Creation of *Buffy* – For the Fans and by the Fans

> "Fan texts have to be 'producerly' in that they have to be open, to contain gaps, irresolutions, contradictions, which both allow and invite fan productivity. They are insufficient texts…until they are worked upon and activated by their fans." (John Fiske "Cultural" 42))

> "Essential to textual pleasure is an awareness, to whatever extent, of its textuality."
> (John Fiske "Moments" 57)

[8] As these Fiske quotes suggest, for shows to succeed and gain a 'cult' status, they must allow the fans to take control of the texts and make their own sense of the text. With a show such as *Buffy*, viewers want to feel like they are a part of the show in some sense and gain the knowledge that comes with being such a fan. They want to be able to pick up on the hidden jokes and continuing storylines, however small and unclear they may be, especially to a non-viewer and, at the same time, feel like the show is writing storylines just for them. Throughout its seven seasons, the writers of *Buffy* always made sure that the

fans knew they were appreciated for their loyalty and devotion towards the show. In an online interview, when asked about how the fans influence the show via the Internet, Whedon replied:

> "I think it's really neat. I haven't had as much time as I used to check in and see what people are talking about. [But] sure, I'll read the posting board. I'm always interested to see what people are responding to, and what they're not. To an extent it does [affect me]. For example, when I saw that people were rejecting the Oz character when he was first introduced, I realized how carefully I had to place him. I wrote scenes where Willow falls in love with him in a way where fans would fall in love with him too. You learn that people don't take things at face value; you have to earn them". (qtd. in Lee)

Loyal fans were shown that their views were important to the creation of the show through episodes such as *The Wish* (3009), *Something Blue* (4009), *Superstar* (4017), *Tabula Rasa* (6008) and *Dopplegangland* (3016). In these episodes, 'unusual' relationships that had been hinted at in fanfiction were bought to reality (e.g., Buffy and Spike getting married in *Something Blue*; Giles and Anya believing they were married in *Tabula Rasa*), while alternate universes allowed fans to see new sides to characters (e.g., nerdy Jonathan's spell making him loved by everyone in *Superstar*), question 'what if?' (e.g., a Sunnydale where vampires rule and the Master never died, Xander and Willow are vampires and Buffy has never moved to town in *The Wish*); and to see hints of future storylines (e.g., Willow's vampire 'twin' expressing interest in the real Willow, leading Willow to exclaim "I'm so evil and... skanky. And I think I'm kinda gay" in *Dopplegangland*). The writers, by giving the fans what they least expect, are "ironically giving them what they want." (Porter)

[9] Because fans feel attached to the show, they also have the most frustration with the show. As Susan J. Clerc points out, "unresolved endings and hanging threads are both a source of pleasure and a source of frustration for fans" (38) which, while frustrating, as desired answers are not given, gives "rise to speculation and analysis of the gaps in the narrative." (38) In an interview with James Marsters, he explains that leaving these 'gaps' is a specific move by Whedon and that "it's a case of what is the most interesting thing and he's kept his options open at the end of the scene [...] as a storyteller, he leaves himself the option of going exactly the opposite direction without having to compromise integrity at all." (qtd. in Topel) This can be seen in the episodes *Restless* (4022) and *Graduation Day Part 2* (3022) where both episodes were subject to great speculation by fans. In *Graduation Day Part 2*, a dream sequence where Buffy and Faith invade each other's dream involved Faith's mysterious utterances including "counting down from seven-three-oh." Also referred to in *Restless*, some fans have suggested "it pertains to the fact that in two years (730 days), Buffy will die in *The Gift* (5022). (Tracy 212) As for *Restless*, Havens explains that "every scene is soaked with subtle meanings, references and

foreshadowing" (Havens 73) and the episode stumbled even the keenest fan, especially by the appearance of the cheese man. While Whedon often stated that the cheese man "is the only thing in the show that means nothing. I needed something like that, something that couldn't be explained," (qtd. in Tracey 250) fans still sought to make their own meaning of it. On the *Beautiful Monsters* website, the writer analyses the purpose of the cheese man and what he represents by looking at nursery rhymes and how what the cheese man says is an explanation for Buffy's relationships with Willow, Xander and Giles. The author also looks at all the other cheese references throughout the series and comes to the conclusion that Buffy is the cheese. ("An Analysis of Cheese") While this is only one fan's explanation, it shows how *Buffy*, as a show, makes the audience look beyond the square and question what they have been presented with – the show is a text open to many, many meanings.

[10] The use of continuity in the show also could be seen as playing an important part in *Buffy*'s success. Whedon, knowing what he knows of his dedicated fans, assumes that the viewers are up to date on what has happened in past episodes and need no explanation. In order to reward his fans, Whedon's use of continuity throughout the series "rewarded his fans and increased their loyalty" (Havens 41) by taking extreme note of every detail in the show and self-referencing constantly throughout the series. (Burr 7) In the final episode of the series, *Chosen* (7022), Giles' comment that "the earth is doomed" as Buffy, Xander and Willow walk off is reminiscent of the end of the second episode of Season One's *The Harvest* (1002), where Giles utters the exact same phrase as the three teenagers wander off joking about a way to get kicked out of school. Meanwhile, in *Restless*, Willow's dream sequence shows her in the same outfit as she wore in the first ever episode *Welcome to the Hellmouth* (1001) when Cordelia told her "it's good to see you've seen the softer side of Sears." These are just two examples of continuity throughout the show which reward fans for being keen viewers from the start. As Whedon points out about using viewer ideas:

> "When we go to websites we're looking for a general feeling of what's not playing, what are people really passionate about and what are they debating and where are we getting it right and where are we getting it wrong? If you see something four weeks after it comes out on your website, that means we've been working on it about eight weeks before that, at least." (Whedon qtd. in Sanderson)

Conclusion

> "Analysis, interpretation, and speculation, building a community through shared texts and playfully appropriating them for their own ends – these are the defining features of fandom both online and off. Fans are fans because they engage in these practices." (Clerc 51)

[11] As Marianne Cantwell has pointed out, *Buffy* fans "display a positive response when the show 'winks' to a greater fan knowledge, to a more intimate awareness of the show, creating a 'world' with and for the fans." (Cantwell 5) Fandom allows us, as an audience, to "express our collective participation and to acknowledge each other's relationship to the show and its characters," (Kumbier) and it is the *Buffy* fan community, both online and off, that have helped the show to become such a success. This is a show that appreciates its fans and rewards them often for their devotion – according to Whedon, "the show's designed to foster slavish devotion; it has it from me, and I entirely respect it in others." (Havens 44) While there are many other contributing factors to the show's success – these can include the appeal of its stars, its clever writing and its ability to use otherworldly situations in order to tell stories of everyday life – it is the fans of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* who have helped make the show the way it is. Reacting to what the fans think and feel by monitoring "how the core audience reacts," (Sanderson) we can see that this behaviour by the writers and directors is partly "a testament to how the Internet makes the core audience of a show and their opinions more visible" (Sanderson) and in turn, is a big 'thank you' to the fans for their loyalty.

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Watcher Junior Issue 1, July 2005