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Scholar/'shippers and Spikeaholics

Academic and fan identities at the Slayage Conference on Buffy the Vampire Slayer

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ABSTRACT Matt Hills argues that cultural theorists have been unable or unwilling to transcend a dichotomy that places academic discourse and identities in the realm of the rational or passionless, and fan identities in the realm of the immersed or open. As a result, the scholar-fan and the fan-scholar have become liminal and transgressive persona. This article draws on the author's own experience, and that of 13 other delegates who participated in the Slayage Conference on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* held in Tennessee in May 2004, as a basis for exploring the way in which the issues of the fan-scholar identity are lived out. Questions addressed include the way in which tensions between fan and academic identities were manifested, and the ways in which individuals managed their fan and academic identities.

KEYWORDS *Buffy, fan, identity, psychology, queer, scholar, transgression*

Being an academic who writes about popular culture presents some particularly interesting issues and problems that have received a good deal of attention in recent times. Particularly intractable questions appear to be how to write about fan subcultures without inevitably casting the fan as inferior to the academic and, even more challenging, how the academic who is also a fan can recognize and value the fan within.

Hills (2002) argues that cultural theorists have been unable or unwilling to transcend a dichotomy which places academic discourse and identities in the realm of the rational/passionless and fan discourse and identities in the realm of the immersed/open (the opposite term in each case depending on the side of the dichotomy to which the writer is attaching positive value). He argues that attempts at 'hybridization' (notably from Doty, 1993 and Burt, 1998) fail in various ways and points to the tension and conflict implicit in the relationship between academic



and fan identities, and the defensiveness and anxiety associated with trying to have a foot in both camps. The scholar-fan and fan-scholar thus become liminal and transgressive identities.

But Hills also points out that fan identities (and, we can assume, academic identities) are not just objects to be analysed and described. They are also always performative; they are things that we *do*. In this article, these identities are examined as they were performed and experienced at the Slayage Conference on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (SCBtVS), an event which, arguably, offered a rare opportunity for fan and academic identities to be held simultaneously by individuals and where hybrid identities might be validated. As someone who is both a fan (with a particular penchant for Spike) and an academic who writes about *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (BtVS), I was interested in drawing upon my own experience of the conference, as well as that of others who attended, to use SCBtVS as a case study of how the issues identified by Hills are lived out. How were the tensions between fan and academic identities manifested? How were their academic and fan identities managed by individuals and how did these attempts at 'hybridization' work?

SCBtVS was a multidisciplinary conference organized by David Lavery and Rhonda Wilcox and hosted by the University of Middle Tennessee in Nashville, TN in May 2004. It was the third international conference to focus specifically upon the TV shows *Buffy* and *Angel*. The first, and much smaller, 'Blood, Text and Fears' was held at the University of East Anglia, UK in October 2002 and this was followed in July 2003 by 'Staking a Claim' in Adelaide, Australia. I had attended the University of East Anglia conference, where the tensions involved in being both a fan and an academic were thrown into sharp relief for me for the first time. As a psychologist by discipline, never had conference attendance confronted me before with such issues and SCBtVS was an opportunity to explore and reflect upon these. As I began to write up my field notes after the conference, I felt that I wanted to find out whether other delegates had had experiences that were similar or different to mine. David Lavery kindly agreed to circulate my enquiry to the SCBtVS delegate list, and within just a few hours responses were coming in. Thirteen people sent me their views, which were expressed with an impressive depth and honesty, and most said they attended the conference as both an academic and a fan. My account of the conference below is, therefore, a combination of my own observations and those of my respondents (whose names I have changed for anonymity).

Scholar-fans at SCBtVS, or academics do the 'big group sing'

SCBtVS quite clearly identified itself as an academic conference. It was advertised as such, and its format and structure endorsed this. Keynote speakers began each day, and 30-minute papers were organized into



themed, parallel sessions (including two devoted exclusively to Spike). It all looked reassuringly, academically familiar. It is not surprising, therefore, that it was almost exclusively the more fannish aspects of our activities that sometimes felt problematic. One of the keynote speakers was Nancy Holder, a well-known writer of *Buffy* fiction, and the opening keynote was given by David Bianculli, a television critic. These presentations were witty, engaging and entertainingly devoid of dense, academic argument. I might have been at home in my living room, watching a chat show. But I was being paid by my institution to attend a conference. I felt the stirrings of the unease I had experienced two years earlier at 'Blood, Text and Fears', where the tension between the use of video clips for the purposes of academic argument versus enjoyment was experienced by some as problematic, and the conference memorabilia on sale would have been unremarkable at any *Buffy* convention. We were told that at one point in planning for the conference it was thought that a member of *BtVS*'s cast might be invited to attend; a thrilled gasp was audible. I would have loved to meet him, but another delegate whispered to me, 'I don't think that would be appropriate', echoing my own disquiet.

The fact that very many of the academics ('Buffyologists') are also fans was highlighted by the announcement that the conference would operate a 'spoiler policy' in recognition of the fact that the final episodes of *Angel* had not yet been broadcast in some countries. As Cantwell (2004) notes, whether one is 'spoiler-free' or a 'spoiler whore', this is an important issue for fans, and personally I was relieved to hear that I would not be reduced to scrambling out of a session with my hands clamped over my ears. Bookstands are a familiar presence at any academic conference and *SCBtVS* was well stocked, with opportunities to purchase both older and more recent academic books on *BtVS*. However, they jockeyed for position with more 'fannish' publications, including copies of *Buffy* magazine, which appeared incongruous to me even though I have a subscription to the magazine. Yet, along with others, I queued to snap up the conference 'merchandise': *Slayage* tote bags, T-shirts and posters.

Nearly all of those who responded to my email request wrote of the tension between their academic and fan identities, even referring to this as a 'split personality'. Kathleen wrote:

[M]y experience at the *Slayage* conference was much like my experience of being a scholar who does research in fandom generally – a sense of standing (often uneasily) in two different worlds at the same time.

Many delegates felt that fandom interfered with academic rigour on occasion. For example, Holly said, 'I believe there was significant resistance in the audience to a reading of *Buffy* that was not laudatory' – a criticism of *Buffy* scholarship that has found its fullest expression in Levine and Schnieder (2003: 299) who 'love *BtVS*' and are therefore

‘unreflective and narrow’ (p. 301) in their critical engagement with the show. Alan remarked that, at the end of a panel presentation, one question was

something along the lines of ‘What did you think about the ending of *Angel*?’ Not only did this have nothing to do with the immediate topic we were discussing, but the tone of the question and the ensuing discussion was more on a level of people’s personal opinions and tastes about this character or another or about a plot point (‘Spike would *never* do that!’).

Both Alan and Gemma felt that such matters should be reserved for non-academic fora, such as discussion lists or the conference bar. I was reminded of a heated discussion concerning the authenticity of James Marsters’ rendering of a British accent at the end of the session at which I presented a paper. Again this issue seems to fall outside the scope of academic discourse.

Interestingly, a number of people commented that, more than any other aspect of the show, it was Spike who seemed to bring out this problem. For example, Meg overheard a conversation where:

if anyone was planning to criticise Spike in a paper (i.e. suggest that he isn’t the greatest thing in the show) that person would be roundly attacked for daring to attempt such a thing. This seemed to me the worst kind of ‘fannishness’ and *not* something that would help give ‘*Buffy* studies’ any sort of credibility. I compared notes with others at the conference and they agreed that they had only met this kind of attitude in connection with Spike!

While ‘fannishness’ is always a potential threat to academic identity, it seems that the ‘passion’ (in the fannish sense) evoked by Spike is particularly powerful, and something it is hoped that will receive further attention.¹

The need for a ‘critical distance’ in academic matters and the ‘passion’ of the fan appear as the familiar dichotomy here. However, many of my respondents wrote with great feeling about the need for emotional investment in their academic interests, and of the ultimate impossibility of distinguishing between the passion of the fan and that of the academic. For example, as Gemma put it: ‘An obsessive personality has to be something academics and fans share.’ John queried: ‘I get every book I can about Richard Wagner, Virgil and *Buffy*. So am I a student or a fan?’ And, as Caroline commented:

Academics are professional fans who get paid to document, discuss, explore and celebrate their passions. By paying close attention to the things they love, professors preserve them and pass them on. My enthusiasm for *BtVS* is not unlike my enthusiasm for logic, 17th-century mathematics, evolutionary theory, science fiction and metaphysics.



Ben also recognized this, but argued for an emotional engagement disciplined by academic rigour:

I know that my engagement with the show is a peculiar combination of scholarly curiosity, appreciation, and deep emotional attachment . . . The best and most responsible critiques, I think, emerge from profound emotional engagements – but that emotional engagement needs to be invested with criticism and political interest, not simply taken up as an uncritical celebration.

This position was endorsed by Alan:

I feel that fandom can certainly inform a scholar's work and adds to the playfulness that can make scholarly papers interesting. But a scholar needs to balance that with a more measured approach. I refrain from using the term 'objectivity', since that notion is as mythical as vampires are. But an academic writing on these topics needs to learn to coax his or her fandom into the service of scholarly inquiry.

For me, the event where the tension between fan and academic identities was both experienced most intensely and transgressed most effectively was the conference banquet. At the top of the room sat the conference organizers and keynote speakers, mirroring the hierarchy of the traditional academic conference. The rest of us scrambled for seats next to the friends we had made during the conference, swapping email addresses and requests for copies of our papers. When the last morsel of Jack Daniels Pecan Pie had been savoured, it was time for the serious business of being fans and the not-so-serious business of recognizing academic excellence. The conference recognized the presenters of its most acclaimed papers with a 'Mr Pointy' award, a reference to a particular weapon favoured by Kendra, the 'other' vampire slayer who appears in *BtVS* Season 2. The Mr Pointy award turns out to be a wooden stake rising suggestively from its base. Hilarity ensued, mounting to near hysteria as David Lavery announces that he has dubbed Rhonda Wilcox 'Mrs Pointy'. But the climax of the evening was without doubt the 'big group sing', as a 300-strong chorus of academics sang its way through the entire score of the Season 6 musical episode 'Once More With Feeling' (6:7). Many did not need the help of the songsheets, printed for the benefit of those who had not listened to the soundtrack so often that the lyrics were as familiar as nursery rhymes.

The nature of the tension between scholarship and fandom that was played out here depends on how this occasion was 'read' by participants. I realized that I had located it within the realm of the academic, thus experiencing its fannish aspects as 'pulling' in another direction, when I read that, for Kathleen



it seemed during the banquet that we were *reaching* for the kind of 'communitas' I associate with exceptional experiences of worship or exceptionally good fan convention experiences, yet constantly being *pulled back* by reassertions of the hierarchy and competition of academia. That left me feeling frustrated, personally, since my banquet attendance was very much due to my fannish interests and not at all to my academic aspirations. (emphasis in original)

SCBtVS: a queer conference?

The issues identified by Hills (2002) are not dissimilar from those raised in psychology, particularly by feminist writers, concerning the power and politics of academic discourse and practice. In non-mainstream psychology this has manifested itself in a turn towards qualitative methods (such as depth interviews) and a concern to value and give voice to perspectives other than those of the privileged researcher. It has led also to a rejection (by those 'critical' psychologists) of the concept of objectivity in research that is fundamental to the mainstream scientific paradigm. This reverses the usual thinking that one must put aside one's own investment in a topic in order to investigate it dispassionately as a social scientist (in the same way, one imagines, as the cultural studies academic feels required to put aside their fandom). Instead, critical psychologists recommend reflexively working with and using one's own personal experience, acknowledging its importance as a motivator and context for the research and fully analysing one's own location within the research. Of course, the degree to which this is successful can be debated. As an approach which challenges accepted theory and practice it is inevitably problematic, a point to which we will return later.

In addition, subjects traditionally held to be unimportant or not 'proper' psychology (within what has been dubbed 'malestream' psychology), including a variety of issues of concern to women, have found some legitimization as research topics. There was ample evidence at SCBtVS that, as in psychology, academics are aware that *BtVS* (and pop culture generally) is not necessarily regarded as their legitimate concern; many would identify with Sue Turnbull, who opened her keynote address describing her defensiveness, in the presence of her peers, in revealing that she was writing a paper about *BtVS* (subsequently published in *Slayage*; Turnbull, 2004). But, in principle, the arguments of feminist and critical psychologists should be just as relevant to cultural theorists when it comes to legitimating marginalized or devalued topics and identities. Furthermore, the relevance of feminist theory is even more apparent when one considers that the academic/fan binary is inevitably one which is fundamentally gendered; the opposition of reason (academic) and passion (fan) is one that is at the heart of our notions of masculinity and femininity.



However, a feminist agenda ultimately aims to transcend such binary oppositions, not simply to raise each term to equal value; when we use categories such as ‘fan’, even to endorse and legitimate the fan identity, this inevitably affirms the binary. Queer theory, which is ‘a theoretical sensibility that pivots on transgression or permanent rebellion’ (Seidman, 1996: 11) has emerged more recently to challenge explicitly knowledges that sustain binary categories. Although of course its primary focus is heterosexual and homosexual identities, it is appropriate here in highlighting how categories (such as ‘academic’ and ‘fan’) frame what we ‘know’ and shape moral and political issues. Indeed, Doty contends that queerness pervades all cultural productions, and is a position that enables us to ‘refuse, confuse and redefine the terms by which mass culture is understood by the public and in the academy’ (1993: 102). It is noteworthy in this context that in her reply to me, Adele asks: ‘Is passion and obsession for one’s subject the scholarly love that dare not speak its name?’ In her conference paper, Lynne Edwards spoke of ‘coming out’ as a *BtVS* fan, as did Bloustien’s (2004) interviewees, who talked of admitting that one was like others of ‘the same persuasion’.

Seidman argues that ‘sexual categories operate in a wide range of social institutions and cultural forms that are not explicitly sexual . . . the categories of hetero/homosexuality shape the broader culture and institutional order of societies’ (1996: 17). Thus academia becomes one of the many sites where gender and sexual categories are fundamental to our thinking and may be ‘queered’. Furthermore, drawing on Derrida’s notion of the ‘supplement’, Namaste (1996: 196) suggests that ‘meanings are organized through difference, in a dynamic play of presence and absence’. ‘Academic’ and ‘fan’ categories, like ‘homosexual’ and ‘heterosexual’, can be defined only in relation to each other. Derrida’s logic of ‘both/and’ (rather than either/or) therefore underpins attempts to queer such binary oppositions.

But in order to construct and perform a thoroughly queer fan/academic identity it is necessary to find spaces where such an identity can be legitimated. Writing on the importance of physical spaces in the maintenance of one *BtVS* fan subculture, Bloustien (2004: 154) says: ‘[P]articular “spaces to play” become more than just a place to hang out with one’s friends, because they can enable and legitimate the expression of individual and shared cultural identity.’ Arguably, conferences such as *SCBtVS* can potentially provide such a space. As a conference where most of the delegates simultaneously identify themselves as both academics and fans, this is, unusually, a space where a queer fan/academic identity may be ‘normal’ rather than marginal; indeed, Meg saw *SCBtVS* as ‘a real chance to try to blend the two identities in a productive fashion’.

Conclusion

Hills (2002) documents the many difficulties and failures in attempts to transcend the fan/academic binary. But no one said change was easy. When it comes to challenging some of the most deep-seated categories in western thinking, categories in which power relations are implicit, it is inevitable that we will encounter resistance, even from ourselves. Getting what (you think) you want often means giving up something you did not realize you had, and Hills (quoting Burt, 1998) argues that fan and academic can never be combined while academics reserve the right to determine political significance. It seems to me that the tensions that I and others experienced at *SCBtVS* are inevitable as we struggle towards an identity that is something other than academic *or* fan, and that sites such as this are important places for experiments in transgression. Like others, my *BtVS* scholarship has arisen from and depends upon a passionate engagement with the show, and this requires no defence. It seems fitting to end with a reference to Spike, that most passionate of beings, from Kathleen, who says:

In conclusion, my experience at the Slayage Conference was much like my experience of being a scholar who does research in fandom generally – a sense of standing (often uneasily) in two different worlds at the same time. In that way, as in so many others, I identify with Spike, both pre-soul and ensouled. Spike's 'I can't be a man and I can't be a monster' dilemma – as well as the paradox of his whole existence, as a soulless vampire capable of enduring love, the walking dead in love with life, the damned soul who keeps saving the world, etc. – is one major reason why (I think) his appeal is so wide-ranging. Particularly as a fan-scholar, I think I covet the resilience and near-indestructibility of Spike, since it sometimes seems that *that* is the kind of endurance required to consistently live in two worlds, with two selves.

Note

1. Editors' note: we hope this issue has gone some way towards critically addressing Spike's interest for an academic community.

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