TEXTUAL POACHERS

TELEVISION FANS & PARTICIPATORY CULTURE

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How Texts become Real

> "What are the requirements for transforming a book or a movie into a cult object? The work must be loved, obviously, but this is not enough. It must provide a completely furnished world so that its fans can quote characters and episodes as if they were aspects of the fan's private sectarian world…. I think that in order to transform a work into a cult object one must be able to break, dislocate, unhinge it so that one can remember only parts of it, irrespective of their original relationship with the whole." (Umberto Eco 1986, 197–198)

In an oft-quoted passage from a classic children's story, the old Skin Horse offers the Velveteen Rabbit a Christmas Eve lecture on the practice of textual poaching. The value of a new toy lies not in its material qualities (not "having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle"), the Skin Horse explains, but rather in how the toy is used, how it is integrated into the child's imaginative experience: "Real isn't how you are made. It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become real" (Bianco 1983, 4). The Rabbit is fearful of this process, recognizing that consumer goods do not become "real" without being actively reworked: "Does it hurt?…Does it happen all at once, like being wound up or bit by bit?" (Bianco, 1983, 4–5) Reassuring him, the Skin Horse emphasizes not the deterioration of the original but rather the new meanings that get attached to it and the relationship into which it is inserted:

> It doesn't happen all at once. You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't often happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real, you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand. (Bianco 1983, 5–6)

The boy's investment in the toy will give it a meaning that was unanticipated by the toymaker, a meaning that comes not from its intrinsic merits or economic value but rather from the significance the child bestows upon the commodity through its use. The boy in Margery Williams Bianco's beloved story did not manufacture the Velveteen Rabbit nor did he choose it as a gift; yet, only the boy has the power to bring the toy to life and only the boy grieves its loss. Only the boy can make it "Real." Bianco's story predates Michel de Certeau, yet "The Velveteen Rabbit" seemingly reduces his complex formulations into a simple (if sentimental) fable about popular consumption.

Seen from the perspective of the toymaker, who has an interest in preserving the stuffed animal just as it was made, the Velveteen Rabbit's loose joints and missing eyes represent vandalism, the signs of misuse and rough treatment; yet for the boy, they are traces of fondly remembered experiences, evidence of his having held the toy too close and pet it too often, in short, marks of its loving use. Theodore Adorno (1978) takes the toymaker's perspective when he describes how prized cultural texts are "disintegrated" through overconsumption as they are transformed from sacred artifacts into "cultural goods": "irrelevant consumption destroys them. Not merely do the few things played again and again wear out, like the Sistine Madonna in the bedroom, but reification affects their internal structure…. The romanticizing of particulars eats away the body of the whole" (281). Adorno suggests that musical texts become mere "background," lose their fascination and coherence, when they are played too often or in inappropriate contexts, while popular texts are made simply to disintegrate upon first use and therefore have little intrinsic worth. What Adorno's account of repeated consumption misses is the degree to which songs, like other texts,

assume increased significance as they are fragmented and reworked to accommodate the particular interests of the individual listener.

Recent work in cultural studies directs attention to the meanings texts accumulate through their use. The reader's activity is no longer seen simply as the task of recovering the author's meanings but also as reworking borrowed materials to fit them into the context of lived experience. As Michel de Certeau (1984) writes, "Every reading modifies its object…. The reader takes neither the position of the author nor an author's position. He invents in the text something different from what they intended. He detaches them from their (lost or accessory) origin. He combines their fragments and creates something unknown" (169). This modification need not be understood as textual "disintegration" but rather as home improvements that refit prefabricated materials to consumer desires. The text becomes something more than what it was before, not something less.

Long-time science fiction fan P.L.Caruthers-Montgomery (1987) captures many aspects of this process in describing her initiation as an adolescent into *Star Trek* fandom:

> I met one girl who liked some of the TV shows I liked…. But I was otherwise a bookworm, no friends, working in the school library. Then my friend and I met some other girls a grade ahead of us but ga-ga over *ST*. From the beginning, we met each Friday night at one of the two homes that had a color TV to watch *Star Trek* together. I had a reel-to-reel tape recorder. Silence was mandatory except during commercials, and, afterwards, we "discussed" each episode. We re-wrote each story and corrected the wrongs done to "Our Guys" by the writers. We memorized bits of dialog. We even started to write our own adventures. One of us liked Spock, one liked Kirk, one liked Scotty, and two of us were enamored of McCoy (Yes, I was a McCoy fan). To this day, I can identify each episode by name within the first few seconds of the teaser. I amaze my husband by reciting lines along with the characters. (I had listened to those tapes again and again, visualizing the episodes.) (8)

Such intense interaction eventually leads many fans toward the creation of new texts, the writing of original stories. Viewing the program became a springboard for conversation and debate as the

fans evaluated the episodes and "rewrote" them. Much like the Velveteen Rabbit, *Star Trek* was transformed by these young women's interaction with it. Perhaps, the newness of the individual stories were worn away, the aura of the unique text was eroded, yet, the program gained resonance, accrued significance, through their social interactions and their creative reworkings.

Understanding this process seems central to understanding the often complex reconstructions of program materials I will discuss in later chapters. Here, I focus on three central aspects of fans' characteristic mode of reception: ways fans draw texts close to the realm of their lived experience; the role played by rereading within fan culture; and the process by which program information gets inserted into ongoing social interactions.

Two sets of objections are likely to be raised by this discussion. First, some readers may feel that the behaviors described in this chapter are excessive or trivial, that they can be understood within the stereotypes I have previously dismissed. Such a response isolates the moment of reception from its larger context within fan culture. While some of these activities are not necessarily "important" in themselves, they are the enabling conditions for fan cultural productions and for the construction of fandom as a social community. The "Trekkie" stereotype misassigns meanings to these activities, focusing on means as if they were ends and ignoring the results of this intensive commitment to popular fictions. Fannish reading will be understood in this book as a process, a movement from the initial reception of a broadcast toward the gradual elaboration of the episodes and their remaking in alternative terms. These reception practices are so intrinsic to this process that they must be carefully understood before moving to more material forms of fan productivity, even if doing so risks seeing them reinscribed into the circulating stereotypes about fannish obsession.

As for the "excessiveness" of these behaviors, much of this "scandal" stems from the perceived merits and cultural status of these particular works rather than anything intrinsic to the fans' behavior. Would these same practices (close attention, careful rereading, intense discussion, even the decipherment of texts in foreign or archaic languages) 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*? In other times and places, Shakespeare, opera, and Balzac, after

all, have been part of popular rather than elite culture and were appreciated by a mass audience rather than institutionally sanctioned and professionally trained critics. I am not necessarily proposing all of these television programs for inclusion in the high art canon. Fans would be the first to acknowledge their flaws and shortcomings, though fans would respond by reworking promising works rather than categorically dismissing them. I would, however, argue that there is value to these cultural experiences apart from the specific merits of the chosen texts. In truth, it may be the limitations of these individual works that encourage collective forms of creativity less often found in response to works that seem more complete and satisfying in their own terms.

A second likely objection seemingly contradicts but often accompanies the first sets of reservations. Some readers may charge that my descriptions of fannish reception practices would apply equally well to other classes of media consumers. This is at least partially true. There is no sharp division between fans and other readers. Rather, I would insist upon continuities between fan readers and a more general audience. In fact, a major concern of this chapter is to use these fan practices to question how television spectatorship has been conceptualized within contemporary media studies. Yet at the same time, I would stress the degree to which these practices have been institutionalized within fandom and provide a basis for other activities. My goal, then, is neither to see fans as totally outside the mainstream nor as emblematic of all popular reading. I want to document the particularity of fan reception as a specific (though not entirely unique) response to popular works.

FROM BYSTANDERS TO FANS

Recent theories of television spectatorship insist on a sharp contrast between the scopophilic experience of watching a film in a darkened movie theatre and the more causal experience of watching a television program in a cluttered living room. John Ellis (1982), for example, asserts that broadcasting constructs a spectator seeking only to absorb television's "continuous variety" without being fully absorbed into the narrative, a "bystander." He writes, "The viewer is cast as someone who has the TV switched on, but is giving it very little attention: a casual viewer relaxing in the midst of the family group" (162). Lawrence Grossberg (1987)

essentially repeats Ellis's assertion in his postmodernist account of "TV's affective economy," claiming that television's constant effacement of distinctions between programs and commercials is mirrored in its reception by "indifferent" television viewers: "It is absurd to think that anyone watches a single television show, or even a single series.... There is, in fact, a significant difference between watching a particular program (which we all do sometimes) and watching TV (which we all do most of the time). That is to say, the specifics of the episode are often less important than the fact of the TV's being on" (34–35). Writers within this paradigm cite a variety of evidence—the fragmented form of the morning news programs (Feuer, 1983), the narrative redundancy of soaps (Modleski, 1983), the particular quality of television sound which signals narratively important events before they occur (Altman, 1986), the seamless "flow" of the television signal itself (Williams, 1974)—to suggest ways television recognizes and encourages distracted and intermittent viewing.

While offering a useful corrective to the images of hypnotic absorbtion in earlier critical accounts of television spectatorship, such approaches have little or no way to explain the fan activities which concern us here. Indeed, having theorized a casual and emotionally distanced spectator, Ellis (1982) concludes that television fans are a theoretical impossibility, contrasting the alleged absence of "telephiles" to the prevalence of cinephiles. Grossberg (1987) suggests that the "in-difference" of television "makes the very idea of a television fan seem strange," since the medium's transience discourages affective alliances with particular programs: "Viewers rarely make plans to watch TV.... Its taken-for-grantedness makes it appear trivial, an unimportant moment of our lives, one in which we certainly invest no great energy" (34–45).

Ethnographic accounts of television use argue against totalizing theories: television is watched for many reasons and with different degrees of attentiveness as it is inserted into a range of viewing contexts. As Ann Gray (1987) writes, "the relationship between the viewer and television, the reader and the text, is often a relationship which has to be negotiated, struggled for, won or lost, in the dynamic and often chaotic process of family life" (40–41). The glancing or "indifferent" style of viewing Ellis and Grossberg describe is, thus, no more essential to television consumption than the hypnotic passivity sometimes ascribed to viewers by older critics. Both modes of reception reflect not innate qualities of

television but rather the very different social relationships maintained by specific groups of viewers in the context of domestic consumption: for some, mostly men, the home is a place of leisure; for others, mostly women, it is a place of labor. Men often have the freedom to give the television broadcast their full attention while women often face expectations that draw their interests elsewhere (Morley, 1986; Fiske, 1987). For children (Palmer, 1986; Hodge and Tripp, 1986; Jenkins, 1988), television becomes simply one more toy in the cluttered playroom and is watched only so long as it holds their fascination.

Moreover, the same person may watch television with different degrees of attentiveness and selectivity at different points in the day or according to the relevance of a particular program. Ann Gray (1987), for example, suggests that women watch different shows and with different degrees of interest when they watch videos with their families at night than with their female friends during the daytime. Often, she finds, evening viewing choices reflect the husband's tastes while the wife simply watches to maintain some social contact with her spouse; the wife watches in the evening only intermittingly, disrupted by the other expectations of the household. The women in Gray's study, however, also set aside time to view tapes they specifically chose to watch and that reflect their own tastes; these videos are enjoyed with concentration impossible in the evening hours. Even in women-only contexts, Gray claims, the women talk through shows that fail to hold their interests while watching others with a much higher degree of emotional involvement. As Stuart Hall (1986) writes, "We are all, in our heads, several different audiences at once, and can be constituted as such by different programs. We have the capacity to deploy different levels and modes of attention, to mobilize different competencies in our viewing" (10).

Fans also draw distinctions between regularly viewing a program and becoming fans of a series. Many watch a series, off and on, for an extended period of time before deciding to make a regular commitment to it. An *Alien Nation* fan (Cox, 1990), for example, recalled that she became interested in the series long after her husband started watching it and after she had half-heartedly viewed several episodes: "I did my distracted routine for a while ('yes, dear; nice show, but I'd rather read a book.') I think it all started when I started taping the show and I really started paying attention. Hey, I LIKE this show" (6). As many fans suggested to

me, the difference between watching a series and becoming a fan lies in the intensity of their emotional and intellectual involvement. Watching television as a fan involves different levels of attentiveness and evokes different viewing competencies than more casual viewing of the same material. Another *Alien Nation* fan recalls:

> I've got to be honest here. I never thought I'd feel as strongly about a TV show as I did about the original *Star Trek* series. Oh, there are other shows I've liked, a few I've bothered (or currently bother) to tape, one or two that have pushed me into fan activity. But after a certain number of years had passed, without a repeat of my experience with *Star Trek,* I was forced to the conclusion that being truly excited about a TV show was going to be a once-in-this-lifetime occurrence for me…. And then along came *Alien Nation*. Sneaky, sneaky *Alien Nation.* (Huff 1990, 13)

The fan describes the process by which she was drawn from casual interest toward a recognition of her strong emotional investment in the series and its characters:

> I saw the listing for the television premiere movie in the *TV GUIDE* and decided it was definitely worth following up, since it was science fiction with a premise we'd enjoyed [in the theatrical film]. We [she and her husband] even, being optimistic sorts, stuck a tape in the VCR. We liked what we saw immediately. And the more episodes we watched, the more we liked the show. Pretty soon we were watching *AN* tapes instead of CNN at dinner time because a week was too long to wait between episodes. Then it was *AN* in-jokes, trading bits of dialogue, and discussing plotlines. (Huff 1990, 13)

Far from indifferent, this viewer, like other fans, makes a commitment to the series, draws it close and interweaves its materials into her daily interactions with her husband. Here, the details of particular stories matter greatly. She is not simply "watching television"; she is watching *Alien Nation;* no other text could possibly substitute for the pleasures she takes in this particular program. (And, for that matter, the individual episodes

are far from interchangeable within her reception of the series, as we will see in chapter three.)

While Grossberg's "indifferent" viewer watches a popular series when it is convenient, when there are no other plans for the evening or nothing better on a competing channel, fans, as committed viewers, organize their schedules to insure that they will be able to see their favorite program. Confessions of missing an episode are almost automatically met with sympathetic offers from other fans willing to "clone" tapes to remedy this gap. The series becomes the object of anticipation: previews are scrutinized in fine detail, each frame stopped and examined for suggestions of potential plot developments; fans race to buy *TV Guide* as soon as it hits the newsstands so that they may gather new material for speculation from its program descriptions. Secondary materials about the stars or producers are collected and exchanged within the fan network.

While my description might make such practices sound fetishistic, these activities provide the fan with the information needed to participate fully in the critical debates of the fan community; a missed episode means a loss of information shared by others, making it harder to participate in discussions of the program and weakening their mastery over the series. Advanced information provides resources for speculation, creating opportunities for additional debates about the likely outcomes of a sketchily described future event.

If television often competes with other household activities and therefore does not receive the viewers' full interest, fans watch their favorite show with rapt attention, unplugging the telephone or putting the kids to bed to insure that they will not be interrupted. I asked Boston-area *Beauty and the Beast* fan club members to describe the context within which they normally watched the series. One woman wrote in all capitals, "ALONE—WITHOUT DISTRACTIONS OF *ANY* KIND," a theme repeated with somewhat less emphasis in most of the other responses. One woman preferred to watch in a room lit only by candles, another late at night when her family was away; the majority watch it by themselves or with other fans, since they feared others would not understand the protocols of viewing. Several described not the physical or social context where viewing occurred, but rather the emotions that motivated the experience. One watches her *Beauty and Beast* tapes "whenever I'm depressed or upset"; another said she watched it "alone, with a box of hankies nearby—(sniff)."

At one of the club meetings, the women took turns recounting the precise moment when they first realized they had become fans of the series; the women described the experience with the same pleasure with which one might recount the progression of a romance. Each personal narrative was met with applause and sympathetic laughter; there were frequent interruptions as the women shared similar experiences and it was through this process that the group reaffirmed its commonality and community: "I was sitting there and I didn't get any work done. My chin was on the ground! I couldn't believe what I was seeing." "I sat there and I sat there and I'm like this and my kids come in and I remember them going past me vaguely but I didn't let it distract me at all." The language of fans, like that of other enthusiasts, is exaggerated for comic effect as they speak of "addictions," "infections," and "seductions," descriptions accepted gleefully by the other members of the group. Yet this language also captures something of the closeness they feel to this program and the intense emotions they experience as they watch it. The fans may just be "sitting there" watching television but they are so emotionally engaged by the on-screen action that they seem oblivious to other household activities and actively ignore other family members' demands for their attention. Janice Radway (1984) has suggested that much of the pleasure for readers of romances may lie in creating time for themselves outside of the demands of other family members; the same can be said for female fans of programs like *Alien Nation* and *Beauty and the Beast,* though describing reading (and by extension, viewing) as a release from domestic demands only gives part of the picture. One still has to understand what these women find, what types of pleasures they gain from getting so absorbed in the series narratives, what interpretive strategies they employ in making meaning of their contents.

SITTING TOO CLOSE?

Recent formulations of critical distance and intellectual engagement leave us uncomfortable with such viewing practices. Surely, it can't be healthy (morally, socially, ideologically, aesthetically, depending on your frame of reference) to give oneself over so totally to a television broadcast! As Pierre Bourdieu (1980) suggests,

For those media fans who think 'The Big Three' newtorks are BCC1, BBC2, and ITV, we proudly present:

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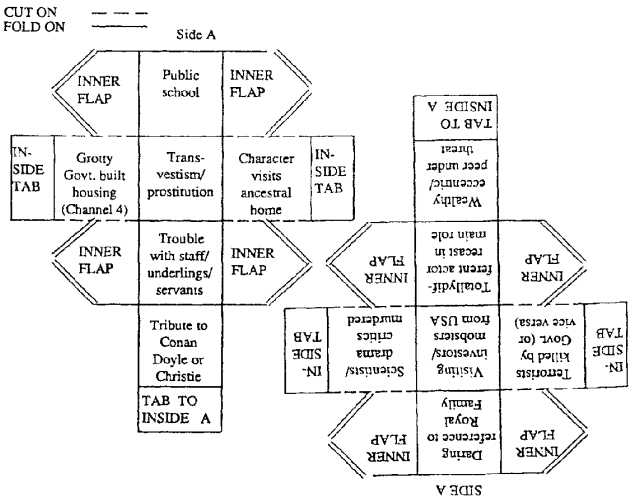


2.1 Acme Story Plotting Dice, Author unknown. This parody suggests how fans play with the narrative conventions of popular television.

contemporary "bourgeois aesthetics" consistently values "detachment, disinterestedness, indifference" over the affective immediacy and proximity of the popular aesthetic (237–239). The popular, Bourdieu claims, is often characterized by the "desire to enter into the game, identifying with the characters' joys and sufferings, worrying about their fate, espousing their hopes and

ideals, living their lives" (237–239). The "bourgeois" aesthetic Bourdieu identifies often distrusts strong feelings and fears the loss of rational control suggested by such intense and close engagement with the popular. Even when such critics accept some popular culture as worthy of serious attention, they typically read popular works as if they were materials of elite culture, introducing "a distance, a gap" between themselves and the text; the intellectual reader of popular texts focuses less on their emotional qualities or narrative interests than upon those aspects which "are only appreciated rationally through a comparison with other works," (upon evaluative notions of authorship, for example). Bourdieu finds this approach "incompatible with immersion in the singularity of the work immediately given" (239). These viewers, Bourdieu suggests, consistently deny the pleasures of affective immediacy in favor of the insights gained by contemplative distance. It is important to recognize that Bourdieu is describing a specific moment in the history of aesthetics, one often claiming the weight of a long tradition but actually a rejection of broader currents in aesthetics which embraced rather than rejected strong emotions (such as the aesthetic theories of Aristotle or of the romantics); Bourdieu is careful to specify the historical and social context where this ideal of distanced observation originated, though his followers have not always done so.

Since Brecht, this discomfort with proximity has assumed a specifically political dimension within ideological criticism: the naive spectator, drawn too close to the text emotionally, loses the ability to resist or criticize its ideological construction; critical distance, conversely, bestows a certain degree of freedom from the ideological complicitness demanded by the text as a precondition for its enjoyment. Within this formulation, distance empowers, proximity dominates. Mary Ann Doane (1987) suggests that the traits most often ascribed to the experience of mass culture, "proximity rather than distance, passivity, overinvolvement and overidentification" (2), are those traditionally ascribed to femininity. If traditional masculinity provides spectators with some critical distance from media texts, Doane argues, the female spectator is often represented as drawn so close to the text that she is unable to view it with critical distance and hence as less capable of resisting its meanings. Such identification, Doane suggests, cannot be "a mechanism by means of which mastery is assured,"

but rather "can only be seen as reinforcing her submission" to textual authority (16).

Michel de Certeau (1984) adopts a similar logic in his attempt to trace popular reading practices, falling prey to larger currents within European modernism that run directly counter to his larger argument. De Certeau constructs a dubious historical argument, positing a movement within Western culture from orality towards literacy which has worked to free the reader from textually imposed ideologies: "In earlier times, the reader interiorized the text; he made his voice the body of the other; he was its actor. Today, the text no longer imposes its own rhythm on the subject, it no longer manifests itself through the reader's voice. This withdrawal of the body, which is the condition for its autonomy, is a distancing of the text. It is the reader's *habeas corpus*" (176). If earlier readers linked the comprehension of the printed word with "uttering the words aloud or at least mumbling them," modern readers comprehend the text without moving their lips, without engaging their bodies. The result, de Certeau suggests, is that modern readers are able to hold the text at a greater distance and to gain mastery over its meanings, free of its physical hold on them: "The autonomy of the eye suspends the body's complicities with the text; it unmoors it from the scriptural place; it makes the written text an object and it increases the reader's possibilities of moving about" (176). The separation of speech from reading frees the reader to engage in the nomadic poaching that de Certeau ascribes to popular reading practices.

De Certeau's endorsement of critical distance disappoints in its refusal to recognize the most profound aspects of his own argument: poachers do not observe from the distance (be it physical, emotional, or cognitive); they trespass upon others' property; they grab it and hold onto it; they internalize its meanings and remake these borrowed terms. The easy fit between Bourdieu's "bourgeois" aesthetic of bodily distance and Brecht's political ideal of critical distance should make us suspicious: perhaps, rather than empowering or enlightening, distance is simply one of the means by which the "scriptural economy" works to keep readers' hands off its texts. For the distanced observer, the text remains something out there, untouched and often untouchable, whose materials are not available for appropriation precisely because they can never fully become one's own property. Proximity seems a necessary precondition for the reworkings and

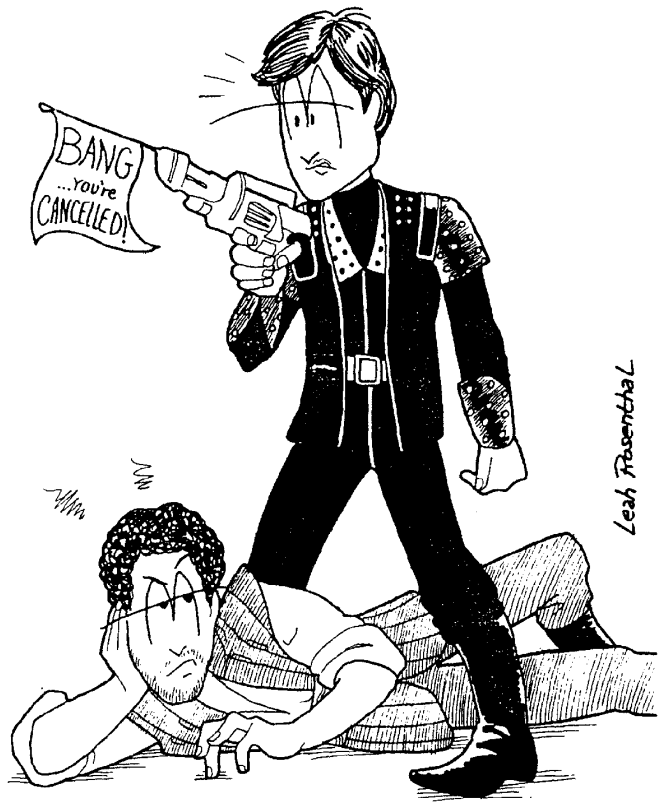
reappropriations de Certeau's theory suggests. The text is drawn close not so that the fan can be possessed by it but rather so that the fan may more fully possess it. Only by integrating media content back into their everyday lives, only by close engagement with its meanings and materials, can fans fully consume the fiction and make it an active resource.

Agency is an important variable in this discussion: contemporary accounts of proximity and distance, particularly those from post-1968 ideological critics, treat them as if spectator "positions" were effects of the textual structure, something that happens to readers in the course of consuming the narrative. The reader is "posi tioned" ideologically; certain textual features "determine" how the reader will respond to the represented events or the depicted characters; viewers have no choice but to accept the ideological "demands" of the narrative system. Such a reductive model ascribes little or no agency to the reader while attributing tremendous power and authority to authorial discourse. De Certeau's notion of textual poaching focuses attention on the social agency of readers. The reader is drawn not into the preconstituted world of the fiction but rather into a world she has created from the textual materials. Here, the reader's pre-established values are at least as important as those preferred by the narrative system. Proximity and distance are different approaches readers adopt in making sense of the constructed narrative: "Sometimes, in fact, like a hunter in the forest, he spots the written quarry, follows a trail, laughs, plays tricks, or else like a gambler, lets himself be taken in by it" (173).

The raw materials of the original story play a crucial role in this process, providing instructions for a preferred reading, but they do not necessarily overpower and subdue the reader. The same narratives (*Dragnet,* say) can be read literally by one group and as camp by another. Some groups' pleasure comes not in celebrating the values of their chosen works but rather in "reading them against the grain," in expressing their opposition to rather than acceptance of textual ideology. Perhaps the most extreme example of resistive reading involves what Jeff Sconce (1989) has described as "the cult of 'Bad' cinema," fans who celebrate the most dubious aspects of the Hollywood cinema and who are drawn toward low-budget exploitation films such as *Glen or Glenda, Robot Monster,* and *BloodOrgy of the She-Devils*. Sconce documents this movement's aesthetics ("It isn't enough that a movie be campy and

mediocre. It must show incomparably flawed craftsmanship in every detail. It must be so stupefyingly [sic] artless that it IS ART, albeit of the most accidental kind" [pp. 9–10]) and social mission ["The search for BADTRUTH.... To resist temptations of REFINEMENT, TASTE, and ESCAPISM"]). These fans celebrate the technical incompetence and flawed conceptions of what they identify as some of the worst movies ever made, finding there a repudiation of respectable taste and middle-class values. The directors of "BADFILMS" are treated as undiscovered stylists in a travesty of conventional auteurism and fans read with perverse pleasure accounts of the filmmakers' failed careers and struggles against spartan production circumstances. Sconce suggests as well that these fans un- derstand their relationship to the dominant cinema in explicitly political terms, seeing a rejection of conventional aesthetics as simultaneously a rejection of conventional politics. Here, the fans' pleasure lies in distancing themselves from the text, in holding it at arm's length and laughing in its face. Such an approach combines both a begrudging respect for these films, albeit within an inverted framework of evaluations, as well as a gleeful disrespect for their bad plotting, clumsy acting, and pretentious conceptions.

Here, as elsewhere in popular reading, proximity and distance are not fixed "positions," established at the outset of the viewing experience and unaltered by changes in the reception context or narrative information. Rather, these relationships between readers and texts are continually negotiated and viewers may move fluidly between different attitudes toward the material. As several accounts of fan culture suggest, a sense of proximity and possession coexists quite comfortably with a sense of ironic distance (Amesley, 1989; Ang, 1985; Buckingham, 1987). In fact, fans often display a desire to take the program apart and see how it works, to learn how it was made and why it looks the way it does. Commercial publications feed the fan's desire for "insider information" about make-up and special effects techniques, casting decisions and scripting problems, performer and producer backgrounds, and network programing policies that impact a favorite show's chances for renewal. If the classical Hollywood cinema and its counterpart, the realist television text, have often been accused of masking the mechanisms of their own production, one needs to reconsider the role(s) played by these extratextual discourses in the viewers' experience.



2.2 Fan cartoonist Leah Rosenthal often plays with the border between television characters as real and as constructed, as in this spoof of the final episode of *Blake's 7*.

Christian Metz (1977) has written of special effects (or rather, what he calls *trucage*) as an "avowed machination." The creation of these illusions is announced both within the film itself, through their formal presentation, and "in the periphery of the film, in its publicity, in the awaited commentaries which will emphasize the technical skill to which the imperceptible trucage owes its imperceptibility" (670). Thus, one experiences these effects by

"dividing one's credibility," enjoying the mechanics of these illusions while still losing oneself in their narrative implications. Metz's commitment to psychoanalytic models of subject positioning requires him to see this divided credibility as an effect of the text's structure, while his own account invites us to see it as a way that extratextually informed readers negotiate between different levels of discourse and different modes of viewing. A *Starlog* article on the making of *Teen age Mutant Ninja Turtles,* for example, provides an account of the "remarkable" Turtle suits manufactured by Jim Henson's Creature Shop for use in the film and of the "challenges" faced by the actress who must play opposite the Turtles: "The eye contact she would normally maintain with a fellow actor was severed by the false orbs in the Turtle masks. Nearly every simple exchange of dialogue she shared with her costars brought a barrage of voices down upon her, from the players giving their lines as well as from the technicians who were busily articulating their handiwork's expressions" (Dickholtz 1990, 19). The viewer, armed with this behind-the-scenes information, has the choice of watching such scenes with suspended disbelief (treating the rubber-masked characters as Turtles, sutured into their reptilian gaze) or with a renewed respect for the craftsmanship and technical expertise that made this illusion possible. One approach allows the viewer to be absorbed into the realm of the fiction, the other holds the fiction at a distance in order to better appreciate how it was constructed, but both approaches are central to the fans' experience.

Analyzing the oral comments fans make during public consumption of *Star Trek* episodes, Cassandra Amesley (1989) finds evidence that fans see the fictional characters and their actions as simultaneously "real" and "constructed", adopting a strategy of "double viewing" that treats the show with both suspended disbelief and ironic distance. The characters are understood as "real" people with psychologies and histories that can be explored and as fictional constructions whose shortcomings may be attributed to bad writing or the suspect motivations of the producers. One reading privileges the fictional universe, the other the extratextual information the viewer has acquired. Amesley (1989) suggests that this dual interpretive stance may be a necessary precondition for fans' creative reworking of the media content: "Recognizing *Star Trek* as constructed makes it possible to intervene in the construction; to take an active role in

appropriating new texts or commenting on old ones" (337–338). This distance from the fiction helps to explain how fans can pull the program close to them and still remain partially free of its ideological positioning. Yet, paradoxically, the closeness the fans feel toward narratives and characters motivates their extensive reworking and reappropriation of those materials.

VCRs, RERUNS AND REREADING

In an oft-quoted and little analyzed passage, Roland Barthes (1975) suggests that rereading runs counter to "commercial and ideological habits of our society" and thus books are constructed to sustain our interests only on a first reading "so that we can then move on to another story, buy another book" (15–16). Rereading is tolerated, Barthes claims with characteristic irony, only for certain classes of readers ("children, old people and professors"). His own account of the experience of reading Balzac's "Sarrasine" systematically privileges a first reading, driven by the desire to resolve the enigmas surrounding the central character's identity, an urge satisfied by the story's conclusion.

Barthes nevertheless offers several useful suggestions about the process of rereading: first, since narratives build heavily upon intertextual knowledge, all reading is essentially rereading as we draw upon cultural codes and social assumptions acquired through our previous encounters with other texts. Second, Barthes claims that the act of rereading fundamentally alters our experience of a fictional narrative: "Rereading draws the text out of its internal chronology ('this happens before or after that') and recaptures a mythic time (without before or after)" (16). The insistent demands of the hermeneutic code, the desire to resolve narrative mysteries, loses its grip on the reader once the story's resolution becomes fully known. Interest shifts elsewhere, onto character relations, onto thematic meanings, onto the social knowledge assumed by the narrator: "rereading is no longer consumption but play" (16). The reread book is not the work we encountered upon an initial reading; it is "the same and new."

Much attention has been placed on the reader's experience of intertextuality. Indeed, the first of these two claims has even been used to deny the possibility and desirability of popular rereading. Mike Budd (1990), for example, writes, "The rereading performed while viewing the film the first time can thus become a justification

for not viewing it, not rereading it, again…. For the film to become a commodity consumable in one viewing, rereading must be carefully contained, minimizing narrative or other puzzles that might prompt reflection or critical examination" (41). Budd, thus, uses Barthes as a basis for drawing a cultural distinction between high art texts, such as *Cabinet of Dr. Caligari,* which require rereading to achieve their full impact and popular texts which are routinely disposed after a first "rereading." Resisting that argument, I want to consider the second of Barthes' claims about rereading more fully here, to focus on ways that rereading alters the priorities of the narrative and allows readers to bring it more fully under their own control.

Even in literary studies, the work of Tony Bennett and Janet Wollacott (1987), Janice Radway (1984) and Helen Taylor (1989), among others, points to the important role which rereading plays in the popular consumption of books, requiring a reconsideration of Barthes' insistence that rereading is a relatively rare occurrence. Rereading, however, may be an even more important question for media studies than it is for traditional literary studies. If, as Barthes suggests, the economic rationale of publishing requires the continuous sale of new books and thus discourages repeated consumption, broadcasting does not sell programs to viewers but rather sells viewers to advertisers. If the same episode can be shown repeatedly and still attract new or repeat viewers, then, the broadcasters have found a way to expand economic revenues without additional expenses. The most lucrative aspects of broadcasting are not the first showings of new programs but rather repeats of old shows through reruns and syndication. As Todd Gitlin (1983) has explained, "In a sense, every series developed was an investment in the chance of syndication, although only one in forty series on the air lasts long enough to be syndicated" (66). Similarly, the economic logic of Hollywood now emphasizes a limited number of major blockbusters, seen multiple times by the cinema's dwindling audience, rather than a broader range of films viewed only once. This push toward repeat viewers is reinforced by videotape sales and rentals as an important secondary market for film releases. This experience of rereading must be understood as a central aspect of the reception of both television programs and contemporary films.

Despite the centrality of these practices to the economic structure of the film and television industries, relatively little research has been done on their impact on the readers' experience of these narratives. In one of the few studies specifically focused on the rerun, Jenny L.Nelson (1990) argues that this practice dramatically alters how we think about the medium. She identifies a number of reasons why watching a series episode in rerun is a fundamentally different experience from watching that same program on its initial airing. Traditional genre distinctions blur as categories such as "50s TV" (which includes *Dragnet* and *I Love Lucy*) become more descriptive than the category of sitcom (which could include everything from *I Married Joan* to *All in the Family* and *Major Dad*). Our emotional response to particular programs shift as they become dated or obsolete, such that *The Mod Squad* moves from socially relevant to laughably bad, as televisual codes and ideological assumptions that are natural in one context seem obvious and forced in another. Subtle changes within the development of individual series become more apparent as the episodes are shown outside of their original sequence, so that "Hawkeye rooms with BJ on Tuesday and Thursday and with Trapper John on Wednesday and Friday" (85). The episodes become enmeshed in the viewer's own life, gaining significance in relation to when they were first encountered and evoking memories as rich as the series itself; these experiences alter viewer's identifications with characters and the significance they place upon narrative events. The pleasures offered by the rerun episodes, then, reflect not simply the enduring quality of the original programs but the ways they can be inflected through the viewer's repeated experience of them. As Nelson writes, "Any change in this one-sided relationship can take place only through *my* initiative. It is I who modulates an already familiar setting by taking it up again and transforming it" (88).

Rereading is central to the fan's aesthetic pleasure. Much of fan culture facilitates repeated encounters with favored texts. As P.L. Caruthers-Montgomery (1987) recalls, *Star Trek* fans watched the series countless times in reruns. They also made other attempts to duplicate the viewing experience by using audiotape recorders to preserve the soundtrack, writing detailed plot descriptions either for their own use or for publication in fanzines, or trying to memorize the dialog. The first professionally published *Star Trek* books were novelizations of the original episodes; only later did

the professional novels build upon rather than duplicate the original stories. Guides to series such as *Doctor Who, The Avengers, The Twilight Zone,* and *The Prisoner* are also in wide demand. Where such professional program guides are unavailable, fans produce their own. One dedicated *Dark Shadows* fan, Kathleen Resch (n.d.), has spent years preparing a multivolume guide for the series, providing "accurate, fully-detailed summaries" of each of more than 1,200 aired episodes, helping to keep interest in the series alive during several decades when it was unavailable. An ad for *The Dark Shadows Storyline* claims, "the synopses are so detailed that seeing these fourth year episodes (if and when we do) will almost be an anticlimax." When professional program guides appear, they lack both the accuracy and detail of the fan versions; such books typically make mistakes such as misnaming minor characters, providing vague or misleading explanations for motivations, and distorting narrative actions and their consequences. Fans often see these commercial publications as hackwork lacking the affection, dedication, and rigor fans bring to similar projects. As a result, they supplement rather than displace the amateur guides.

The development of affordable home videotape recorders makes the rereading process far simpler not only for fans but for all viewers. Most fans now can own copies of the complete episodes of their favorite series and watch them whenever they wish. All of the members of the *Beauty and the Beast* fan club told me that they had archives of episodes on videotape. Many of the Boston *Beauty and the Beast* fans also listed a number of other series they collected. Several suggested that they have learned to tape pilot episodes of new shows, if they think there's any chance they will like them, since network reruns are increasingly unpredictable and series runs short-lived. Those who lacked one or two episodes of their favorite series were in the process of getting copies from other club members.

The development of new fandoms has increased dramatically since the easy access of videotapes allows the introduction of programs to viewers who may have missed them or were unaware of them when they were first broadcast. Some British series—*Blake's 7, The Professionals, The Sandbaggers, Star Cops, Red Dwarf*—have developed vital American fan followings with little or no airplay in this country, largely on the basis of the underground exchange of videotapes. In a fairly typical

transaction, my wife and I received the first seasons' episodes of *Blake's 7* as a Christmas present one year, never having seen the show before, and were so captivated by it that we negotiated with several different fans to acquire the remainder of the series. Since then, we have introduced a number of other people to the program ("New Souls for the Faith" as *Blake's 7* fans jokingly call them, a reference to a particular line from the series); each time, their initiation into the fandom obligated us to provide these new fans with access to videotape copies. As one fan explains, "Using the VCR and the pre-existing fan network, the TV viewer is freed of the constraints of local programing. Want to watch *B7* or *Sandbaggers* or *Red Dwarf,* but your station ignores your letters? Ask around, and soon you've got your own copy and you can ignore the stupidity of the program director!" (Meg Garrett, personal correspondence, 1990). Even where programs are locally available, fans tap into the underground fan network to gain early access to popular series such as *Doctor Who* which airs in America a season or two after its British broadcast; conversely, *Star Trek: The Next Generation* is hotly sought by British fans for similar reasons.

The exchange of videotapes has become a central ritual of fandom, one of the practices helping to bind it together as a distinctive community. Sometimes, fans offer two blank tapes in return for one of program material or fans may barter and trade treasures from their collections, but just as often, fans expect nothing in return for taping a favorite series to help another fan add it to his or her video archive. No sooner do two fans meet at a convention than one begins to offer access to prized tapes and many friendships emerge from these attempts to share media resources. Fans describe this process as "cloning" a tape. Here, as elsewhere, fan terminology is suggestive: to copy a tape is simply a matter of mechanical reproduction; to "clone" a tape implies that it will maintain some ties to the original (just as in science fiction, a "clone" is a genetic copy rather than simply a simulacra). Fans frequently remember who made them a "clone" of a particular episode as well as who they have made "clones" for and can often trace this process across multiple generations. Their tapes retain pedigrees that situate their copies within fandom's social network. This is especially true within many fringe fandoms or fandoms for non-American series where a high percentage of the circulating tapes originated from a handful of people; here, the story of their origins may be known by many who never personally met these

fans but still possess multiple-generation copies of their originals. The social institutions of fandom, thus, encourage and facilitate the rereading of prized texts. Fanzines frequently run want-ads from fans seeking obscure or short-lived series on tape or local interviews with stars of their favorite programs. One fan publication, APA-VCR, has members publish and regularly update lists of their video collections in order to facilitate the duplication and exchange of prized tapes; Members also run reports on syndicated shows appearing in their markets and volunteer to tape them for fans in other areas.

Videotape expands control over the programs, allowing us to view as often or in whatever context desired. Fan clubs may devote an entire evening to watching favorite episodes, spanning several seasons or even decades of broadcasting history in the process. My wife and I watched the final season of *Blake's 7* in less than a week, sometimes viewing as many as three or four episodes in a row; our fascination with the unfolding plot could be satisfied through our control over the tapes in a way that it could not be through weekly broadcasts. When we finally reached the climactic episode, we watched it several times in succession, trying to develop a better sense of how the characters reached their fates. The Boston *Beauty and the Beast* club planned a summer weekend during which all of the series episodes would be shown in sequence; they called it a "Beastathon." Another club meeting was a marathon session where fans brought episodes of favorite series that might not be familiar to the other group members. Other fans may choose simply to review a favorite scene, to stop the tape and replay a difficult or significant bit of dialog, or trace the progression of a character's costumes and hairstyles across a number of episodes, fastforwarding through the narrative to focus only on the elements of particular emphasis upon this viewing. Facial expressions and body movements are scrutinized for subtle insights into the characters. Others may try to spot continuity errors (a *Twin Peaks* fan discovered that the shots of the moon that are a running motif are shown in an order that distorts the narrative time of the story) or props that are reused in new contexts (Fans of BBC series love to spot gadgets and costumes that are exchanged between *Doctor Who* and *Blake's 7*) or cast members who appear in other media universes (a *Batman* fan recognized many of the henchmen from their previous appearances on *Superman*). Changes in costume or hairstyle between episodes

may be examined for evidence for shifts in character motivation and self-image. The introduction of a new fan to a particular program often requires a rehearsal of the basic interpretive strategies and institutionalized meanings common to the group, a process which makes effective use of the VCR's capacity to control the unfolding of program information. One unnamed fan's informally circulated essay described the process:

> The neofan will go over to an older fan's house. A favorite tape of the series is put into the machine. The neo may or may not watch the episode; the older fan will at least keep a vague eye on it. When a scene comes up that the older fan considers important, it will be replayed at least once, oft-times more…. This whole process means that fans learn to see things differently than a mundane (non-fan). Part of becoming a member of a fandom is learning which scenes are considered most revealing, fan-wise. Thus, where a mundane would see the would-be target talking with the boss while two agents stand uselessly in the background, a fan tunes in on the non-verbal interplay between the two agents.

These viewing strategies, made possible by the technology's potentials, extend the fans' mastery over the narrative and accommodate the community's production of new texts from the series materials. These strategies also create the distance required to perceive the series episodes as subject to direct intervention by the fan and the familiarity with all aspects of the program world required for the creation of new narratives. As Sean Cubitt (1988) suggests, "Video has enabled TV to take on an emphatically Brechtian reflexivity, making transparent its recordedness, and its openness to change" (80). This new relationship to the broadcast image allows the fans' liminal movement between a relationship of intense proximity and one of more ironic distance. Some viewings focus on aspects of the text's construction, others on aspects of character motivation, with the flow controlled by the readers' particular interests at the moment.

One fan described her experience of multiple viewings of *Star Wars:*

> Each time I see it, a new level or idea about something in it shows itself. As to the complaint that the characters were

> shallow and there's no background—nitpicky! That's part of the fun, piecing together from the few clues what the Old Republic was actually like, who the Jedi were, what Han's background was, etc., etc.…I'm fascinated with all of the different versions around in fandom of how the Empire came into being, what the Clone Wars were, what the reaction of the cantina's bar man toward the 'droids shows about the position of MAN in the Empire's culture, etc. The marvelous thing about *SW's* open-endedness is that there is room in it for a fannish writer to extrapolate, to fit their own theories and interests into the *Star Wars* universe. (Brown 1978, 7)

Her understanding of the film has become progressively more elaborate with each new viewing as she has made inferences that took her well beyond the information explicitly presented and that have both contributed to and built upon the shared lore of the *Star Wars* fan community.

Star Wars fandom may indeed be one of the most extraordinary examples of the productivity of this interpretive process. More than a decade after the last film in the series was released, fans are still publishing a substantial number of fanzines and fan novels, transforming some six hours of primary material into hundreds of new narratives spanning centuries of Imperial history. Every conceivable reference has been scrutinized and extrapolated in many different directions as the fans watch the films again and again, searching for new information that can feed their fascination with its universe.

Media critics often express skepticism about whether the formulaic texts of broadcast television and the Hollywood cinema warrant extensive rereading. Robin Wood (1986), for example, denies any possible parallel between academic rereading of high culture texts and fan re-reading of popular texts like *Star Wars:* "It is possible to read a film like *Letter From an Unknown Woman* or *Late Spring* twenty times and still discover new meanings, new complexities, ambiguities, possibilities of interpretation. It seems unlikely, however, that this is what takes people back, again and again, to *Star Wars*" (164). According to Wood's formulation, academic rereading produces new insights; fan rereading simply rehashes old experiences, a practice he labels as infantile and regressive. These films yield such easy pleasures on a first viewing, seem so transparent in their construction of reality, that they

seemingly hold no secrets justifying a second look. Fans would certainly disagree with such claims, suggesting that these programs may be richer and more complex than critics like Wood are prepared to acknowledge. Yet, much of that richness stems from what the reader brings to text, not what she finds there. As we will see in chapter three, repeat viewers play with the rough spots of the text—its narrative gaps, its excess details, its loose ends and contradictions—in order to find openings for the fans' elaborations of its world and speculations about characters. The *Star Wars* fan cited above aptly describes this process. What critics like Wood might perceive as flaws create opportunities for viewers to intervene in the narrative, to reshape it according to their own plans.

Yet each reviewing also threatens to exhaust the narrative's emotional hold on the viewer, to wear out the material so that it may be enjoyed a little less the next time. Despite the remarkable creativity of *Star Wars* fan writers, the fandom's membership has continued to decline, year by year, in the absence of new films which might spark new interests and offer additional raw materials for playful reworkings. Some fans ration the number of times they will watch a favorite narrative or space re-viewings so that a certain amount of forgetting allows them to look at the material with a fresh perspective. Watching the films seems a progressively less sufficient means of satisfying the desires that draw them back. This vague dissatisfaction often pushes them toward other ways of recreating the experience of the text. One fan writes: "For the first time in a long love affair with SF and SF-related things, I have been affected so profoundly by *Alien Nation* that I just can't get enough of it! My videos are getting worn out from watching them over and over, and I've even been forced to write my own stories just to get me through until the next episode is out" (Hillyard, 1990, 11). For these fans, a favorite film or television series is not simply something that can be reread; it is something that can and must be rewritten to make it more productive of personal meanings and to sustain the intense emotional experience they enjoyed when they viewed it the first time.

THE SOCIAL PRODUCTION OF MEANING

So far, our discussion has focused on the relationship between the individual fan and the broadcast material, though even this discussion has drawn us inescapably into the social network of an organized fan culture. For most fans, meaning-production is not a solitary and private process but rather a social and public one. Fan editor Allyson Dyar (1987) argues that most accounts of fan culture wrongly focus on aspects of the primary text rather than on ways that common references facilitate social interactions among fans:

> We started out watching the series *[Star Trek]* because we enjoyed the show but we watched the reruns, attended the conventions and published fanzines for something overlooked by these 'theories.' We fen [the fan slang plural of fan] are still around because *we enjoy each other's company*.... The majority of our social life revolves around fannish things: conventions, writing, drawing and publishing. While we fen still enjoy the series and movies, we enjoy sharing our enthusiasm with others even more. (2)

Fan reception cannot and does not exist in isolation, but is always shaped through input from other fans and motivated, at least partially, by a desire for further interaction with a larger social and cultural community.

Cassandra Amesley (1989) has focused attention on the comments *Star Trek* fans make while viewing the series in a group: "A new discourse emerges from the viewers which exists as counterpart to the original text, playing off it but providing creative pleasure for its participants" (337). Comments range from ironic reminders of conventions (such as the suggestion that red-shirted security crewmembers are "dead meat"), repetition of favorite lines ("He's dead, Jim"), references to other texts in which the performers have appeared (Joan Collins' performance in "City on the Edge of Forever" provokes remarks about her role as Alexis on *Dynasty*), or acknowledgements of errors in continuity and other plot problems. Amesley suggests that this running commentary functions as a secondary text which has the potential of revitalizing the viewer's interest in the series even after repeated viewings: "Since there are so many fans to draw on, different

readings can emerge all the time, as different questions raised outside a particular reading can be developed in different forms during it" (337).

Group viewing situations are common in fandom; fans wait in long lines to see the first showings of hot summer releases, knowing that the initial audience will be full of fans like themselves who will vocally participate in the emotional experience of the film. At one of the *Beauty and the Beast* fan club meetings, one member brought tapes of three episodes that had not yet been aired in the United States (due to its cancelation) but had been broadcast in French on a Quebec station. Here, mutual assistance was required to decipher the narrative content since none of the members was fluent in French. The members were encouraged to "shout out" if they could make sense of any of the words from their limited exposure to French in college or high school; there was an ongoing speculation about what was happening on the screen and, since I was a relative newcomer to the series, fans often provided me with background drawn from their previous knowledge about the characters and situations. Such mutual assistance occurs regularly at American screenings of Japanese animation, material which, like the Canadian prints of *Beauty and the Beast,* is frequently shown untranslated to an audience that understands little or none of the original language. Here, those who have seen the programs previously or who have access to written synopses help new fans to comprehend the events or to identify the character relationships. This situation mirrors the ways opera buffs prepare for performances in languages they do not understand, though fandom encourages a public exchange of information during the actual presentation that the norms of opera-going prohibit. It is this public sharing that shifts fannish interpretations from individual to collective responses. The commercial narratives only become one's own when they take a form that can be shared with others, while the act of retelling, like the act of rereading, helps sustain the emotional immediacy that initially attracted the fan's interest.

CASE STUDY: ALT.TV.TWINPEAKS

Subscribers to computer nets, such as Compuserve or Usenet, may participate in electronic mail discussions of favorite genres and programs, with interest groups centered on everything from *The*

Simpsons to *The Prisoner,* as well as more traditional fan interests such as *Star Trek,* comic books, and soap operas. These computer interest groups allow for almost instantaneous communication between their far-flung subscribers and handle a tremendous volume of correspondence. Alt.tv.twinpeaks, one such computer discussion group, emerged within just a few weeks of the series' first episode and quickly became one of the most active and prolific on the Usenet system, averaging one hundred or more entries per day during the peak months of the series' initial American broadcast.

The net group served many functions for the program's fans. One contributor provided a detailed sequence of all of the events (both those explicitly represented and those implied by textual references) and continued to update it following each new episode. Another built a library of digitalized sounds from the series. Excerpts of cryptic dialog were reprinted and closely analyzed. Fans provided reports from local newspapers or summaries of local interviews with its stars and directors. Others provided lists of the stars' previous appearances, reviews of Lynch's other films (particularly *Wild at Heart,* which appeared in the gap between the series' first and second seasons), accounts of the director's involvement with Julee Cruise's musical career, reactions to Mark Frost's illfated *American Chronicles,* assessments of Sherilyn Fenn's spread in *Playboy,* etc. Pacific Northwest-based fans provided details of local geography and culture as well as reports about the commercialization of the area where the series was filmed. The net also became a vehicle for exchanging tapes with fans who missed episodes scrambling to find another local fan who would make them a copy and with many fans seeking a way to translate Pal tape copies of the European release version (with its alternative ending) into American Beta and VHS formats. When ABC put the series on hiatus in the middle of second season, the net provided a rallying point for national efforts to organize public support for the show; the net provided addresses, telephone numbers, and fax numbers for the network executives and concerned advertisers as well as reports on efforts in different communities to organize fans. Some fans even wrote their own *Twin Peaks* scripts as fodder for group discussion during the long weeks between episodes. When the series' return was announced, the net was full of news about celebration parties and speculations about its likely chances in the ratings. The group, however, spent

much of its time in detailed analysis of the series and the decipherment of its many narrative enigmas. As one fan remarked just a few weeks into the series' second season, "Can you imagine *Twin Peaks* coming out before VCRs or without the net? It would have been Hell!"

Not surprisingly, these technologically oriented viewers embrace the VCR, like the computer, as almost an extension of their own cognitive apparatus. The net discussion was full of passionate narratives of the viewer's slow movement through particular sequences, describing surprising or incongruous shifts in the images, speculating that Lynch, himself, may have embedded within some single frame a telling clue just to be located by VCR users intent on solving the mystery: "I finally had a chance to slo-mo through Ronnette's dream, and wow! Lots of interesting stuff I'm amazed nobody's mentioned yet!…Reviewing this changed my thinking completely. I think BOB is not Laura's killer at all, but was her lover and grieved her death." Others soon joined in the speculation: Does Bob seem, just for an instant, to take on some of the features, say, of Deputy Andy, as one fan asserts? Is he beating Laura or giving her resuscitation, as several fans debate? What did you make of that shadow that appears for only a split second on the window behind his head, one fan asks? That door frame didn't look very much like the ones we've seen in other shots of the train car, another fan asserts, but rather more like the doors at the Great Northern. The viewer looks for glitches within the text (such as Laura's heart necklace that sometimes appears on a metal chain and sometimes on a leather thong) but more often, they were looking for clues that might shed light on the central narrative enigmas.

Fans might protest, as they often do, that those who centered only on the Palmer murder were missing the point of the series, yet their discussion consistently centered on the search for answers to narrative questions. The volume intensified each time it appeared that the series was about to unveil one of its many secrets; interest waned following the resolution of the Palmer murder, not sure where to center discussion, and only regained momentum as the Windom Earle plot began to unfold. Where the series itself did not pose mysteries, the fans were forced to invent them. In one episode from the second season, for example, Hank mockingly salutes Major Briggs, a throw-away gesture that is far from the focus of the scene, yet this gesture forms the basis of a whole series of

exchanges among fans: "Is Hank doing dirty work for this classified program the Major is involved in?…I detected a can of worms being opened here." The complexity of Lynch's text justified the viewers' assumption that no matter how closely they looked, whatever they found there was not only intentional but part of the narrative master plan, pertinent to understanding textual "secrets".

The computer net only intensified this process, letting fans compare notes, allowing theories to become progressively more elaborated and complex through collaboration with other contributors. All of the participants saw the group as involved in a communal enterprise. Entries often began with "Did anyone else see…" or "Am I the only one who thought…" indicating a felt need to confirm one's own produced meanings through conversations with a larger community of readers or often, "I can't believe I'm the first one to comment on this" implying that their own knowledge must already be the common property of the group. Several contributors vowed that "We can solve this one if we all put our minds to it," suggesting a model of collective problem solving common in technical fields. Netters frequently begin new entries with extensive quotation from previous contributors' letters; while sometimes this is for the purpose of "flaming" or criticizing what someone has written, more often, it is so they can add new insights directly into the body of the previously circulating text.

FAN GOSSIP

While patriarchal discourse generally dismisses gossip as "worthless and idle chatter," feminist writers have begun to reappraise its roles within women's culture. Deborah Jones (1980) defines gossip as "a way of talking between women in their roles as women, intimate in style, personal and domestic in topic and setting, a female cultural event which springs from and perpetuates the restrictions of the female role, but also gives the comfort of validation" (194). While the fluidity of gossip makes it difficult to study or document, Jones suggests that it serves as an important resource which women historically have used to connect their personal experiences with a larger sphere beyond their immediate domestic environment: "It is in terms of the details of the speakers'

lives and the lives of those around them that a perspective on the world is created" (195).

Jones identifies four major classes of gossip: house-talk, which allows for the exchange of practical information about domestic life; scandal, which involves judgement about moral conflicts and dilemmas; bitching, which allows expression of anger and frustration over the limited roles of women; and chatting, which is a process of "mutual self-disclosure" designed to initiate personal intimacy. Fans adopt all four modes in their discussion of television programs (though in the process, they broaden their focus to encompass not only their contradictory status as middle-class women within a patriarchal society but also as consumers within a capitalist culture). Fans exchange information about everything from the personal lives of stars to the corporate decisions affecting the series' chances of survival, from the availability of low-cost videotapes to the potential syndication rights of a recently canceled program. Fans offer moral judgement about the scandals surrounding interpersonal relations of characters within the series and the real-world conduct of stars during convention appearances or as revealed in commercial fan magazines. Fans "bitch" endlessly about actions that alter the program format or remove series from the air, complaints often centering around the fans' limited control over the decisions affecting a favored text. Fans also initiate more personal conversations, chatting about, say, responses they have received from family members or workmates, discussions often spilling over into more intimate topics such as health, romance, marital problems, or personal finances. As one fan told me, "We *live* by and for information ex change!" (Meg Garrett, Personal Correspondence, 1990) All of these forms of gossip are interesting to fans because of the light they shed on favorite programs or on their own participation in fan culture; they are exchanged because of their practical value in perpetuating fan culture and because they offer new ways of thinking about the programs. They also provide an outlet through which fans can voice their frustrations or laugh over their embarrassments.

The manifest content of gossip is often less important than the social ties the exchange of secrets creates between women (and for this reason, gossip about fictional characters may be as productive as gossip about real-world events.) As Patricia Meyer Spacks (1983) explains, "Gossip…uses the stuff of scandal, but its

purpose bears little on the world beyond the talkers.... The relationship such gossip expresses and sustains matters more than the information it promulgates; and in the sustaining of that relationship, interpretation counts more than the facts or pseudofacts on which it works" (5–6). Gossip builds common ground between its participants, as those who exchange information assure one another of what they share. Gossip is finally a way of talking about yourself through evoking the actions and values of others. The same may be said of the function of television talk within the fan community. In an increasingly atomistic age, the ready-made characters of popular culture provide a shared set of references for discussing common experiences and feelings with others with whom one may never have enjoyed face-to-face contact. The fans' common interest in the same program sparks conversations soon drifting far away from the primary text that initially drew them together.

Both the open-endedness of soap opera narrative and its focus on relationships, as Mary Ellen Brown and Linda Barwick (1986) note, make such programs ideally suited for insertion into the oral culture of gossip: "Not only do soap operas deal with the subjects that have been of particular concern to women under patriarchy (domestic matters of kinship and sexuality) but they also do it in a way that does 'minister questions' and acknowledge the contradictions in women's lives." There is a great deal of research tracing ways soap opera fans exploit these openings within their daily interactions with family, friends, and work associates (Seiter, Borchers, Kreutzner, and Warth, 1990; Brunsdon, 1981; Hobson, 1982; Hobson, 1989). Fans offer moral judgement about characters' actions; they make predictions about likely plot developments or provide background about the program history to new fans. *Soap Opera Digest* and other fan-targeted publications actively encourage such speculation, polling fans for their opinions and offering a wealth of information about contract disputes and the personal lives of the series stars; this "insider information" is quickly translated back into personal "gossip" about the series.

Fans discover that a much broader range of texts also offer the potential for television "gossip." One *Beauty and the Beast* fan told me what happened when a friend, who had previously expressed distaste for the series, watched her first episode:

> It's Saturday morning about 8 o'clock. I'm not even up out of bed yet. A car pulls up—screech—she jumps out. She walks in through the door and I'm not kidding you—she grabs me and she sits me down in the chair: "Alright now—tell me. What is this? What's going on? How come? Boy!"...I gave her a couple of my zines and then she came back for some more. We talked a lot about the show after that.

This woman's story describes in particularly dramatic terms the urge fans feel to reach out to others, to share their fascination with the series and to discuss its characters and situations.

Interestingly, as textual material is inserted into oral discourse, the fans often refocus their attention from events in the story onto the interpersonal themes that have always been the focus of gossip —onto religion, gender roles, sexuality, family, romance, and professional ambition. Some of their speculations center on questions explicitly posed by the program narratives: Will Matt and Cathy *(Alien Nation)* consummate their romantic relationship? How was Amanda *(Star Trek)* able to communicate her feelings of affection for the stoic Vulcan, Sarek, and what forms the "logical" basis of their marriage? What are Vincent's secret origins on *Beauty and the Beast* and how did he come to be under the care of Jacob Wells? Yet just as frequently, fannish interests are drawn from the boundaries of the series. Fans often ask questions the producers wish to repress: Is Captain Picard on *Star Trek: The Next Generation* Wesley's father? Did he and Beverly have an affair and did Picard send first officer Crusher to his death (in a science-fiction recasting of the Solomon and Bath-sheba story)? Could Starksy and Hutch be gay lovers? Why has Uhura been unable to achieve promotion within Star Fleet while Chekov and Sulu now command their own ships? The result is often a feminization of material originally targeted at predominantly male audiences, a process reaching its fruition in the fiction fans themselves write about series characters and situations.

Spacks (1983) stresses the aesthetic dimensions of gossip, suggesting its close relationship to the art of fictionmaking ("fragments of lives transformed into story"): "Gossip is not fiction, but both as oral tradition and in such written transformations as memoirs and collections of letters it embodies the fictional" (15). Gossip "impels plots" (7), Spacks writes, focusing attention on those aspects of experience that form the

basis for our fascination with fictional narratives; gossip fits those experiences into "established structures…[and] familiar patterns" that make unusual occurrences seem more comprehensible to the listener (14). The translation of the transient oral texts of gossip into the more permanent and material texts of fan fiction may not be as big a step, then, as it would first appear. Both gossip and fiction writing provide fans with ways to explore more fully those aspects of the primary series that most interest them, aspects often marginal to the central plot but assuming special salience for particular viewers.

Many times, fans are drawn to particular programs because they provide the materials most appropriate for talking about topics of more direct concern, because they continually raise issues the fans want to discuss; such discussions offer insights not only into the fictional characters but into different strategies for resolving personal problems. The alien worlds of *Star Trek,* for example, may be read as offering alternative conceptions of masculinity and femininity as well as posing questions about interracial relations. Discussions of characters like Uhura or Saavik may provoke discussions about styles of conduct adopted by women who want to win acceptance in the workplace. The romantic interest Chapel shows toward Spock, or Troi displays toward Riker, may invite debates about strategies for juggling the competing demands of career and marriage. Considerations of the "prime directive" often blend into disputes about America's intervention in the third world. One *Star Trek: The Next Generation* episode provoked a heated debate on abortion:

> *Star Trek* also affirms choice—in "The Child," there is discussion of the possible danger of Deanna's unborn child to the ship, posed by unknown alien intent. Deanna's decision—her CHOICE—is to have the baby. The decision is not made by Captain Picard or Riker or the doctor or anyone else; it is made by the involved individual, Deanna Troi. (Rhodes, 1989, 4)

Others drew on different incidents in the series to support their own pro-life position:

> I can't imagine Dr. McCoy (or even Dr. Pulaski) performing an abortion, except to save the life of the mother; and even then I bet they'd do their damndest to save the baby too.… *ST* defends the unalienable rights of all living things—including "living machines" like Data and severely disabled people like Captain Pike—and opposes the brutalization of the powerless by the powerful. (Burns 1989, 9)

Interestingly, *Star Trek* fans found the discussion of abortion appropriate as long as it was centered on the fictional characters and their on-screen adventures. Objections were raised to the introduction of "politics" into this fan forum as soon as the debate shifted onto the real-world implications of this issue. As one fan explained, "I have nothing against the debate on such an issue in the pages of a *Star Trek* magazine as long as it is applied to *Star Trek*" (Germer, 1989, 2) To talk about abortion directly would be to shift the terms of the debate and would threaten the cohesiveness of the group, thus blocking further discussion of a broad range of topics.

Gossip's power as a "feminine discourse" lies in its ability to make the abstract concrete, to transform issues of public concern into topics of personal significance. This shift in the level of discourse traditionally allowed women room in which to speak about factors that shaped their assigned social roles and their experiences of subordination. Often, it was a way of speaking through metaphor or allegory. If the public discourse of politics was reserved for men, the private and intimate discourse of "gossip" offered women a chance to speak about controversial concerns in a forum unpoliced by patriarchal authorities because it was seen as frivolous and silly. Gossip may have been a means by which women regulated violations of gender expectations and enforced conformity to social norms, as Jones (1980) suggests, yet it was also a way of speaking without being overheard about the most repressive aspects of those gender roles, a way of challenging those expectations without directing attention to the political dimensions of that debate.

To some degree, even though feminism has enabled more women to speak publicly about issues of concern to them, fan talk about television characters serves similar functions, creating a more comfortable environment for addressing topical issues. Female fans are often uncomfortable identifying themselves as feminists and adopting its terms within their own discourse, as Constance Penley (1990) has suggested, even though their

discussion of particular programs is often directed at issues central to feminist debate and analysis. Some women may discuss the marginalization of Uhura within the series but not the marginalization of all women within the workplace; they may criticize the macho posturing of Kirk and Riker but not the social construction of masculinity in the real world (though fans typically recognize that the characters within the fiction reflect real world contexts). In each of these cases, the programs provide tools to think with, resources that facilitate discussions. Popular texts, like traditional sources of "scandal," allow for a level of emotional distance not possible in a more direct confrontation with these same issues and yet also provide concrete illustrations absent in more abstracted debate.