



POP JUNCTIONS

REFLECTIONS ON ENTERTAINMENT, POP CULTURE, ACTIVISM, MEDIA LITERACY, FANDOM AND MORE

Can One Be A Fan of High Art?

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A Tale of Two Checkovs Some years ago, I co-authored a book called *Science Fiction Audiences: Watching Doctor Who and Star Trek* with a British cultural studies researcher John Tulloch. We had interviewed different groups of consumers about their responses to *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and *Doctor Who*. In my own work on *Star Trek* fans, I focused on three core groups: the members of the mostly female fanzine writing community, a mostly male and highly technologically focused group of MIT students, and the members of the Gaylaxians, a group of Gay-Les-Bi-Trans fans who were interested in the show's social politics. Tulloch's work went back across several decades of interviews conducted on multiple continents and found a range of different thoughts and reflections on the series.

Then, Tulloch went on to another project that involved interviewing theatre goers at productions of Chekhov plays (the Russian playwright, not the classic Trek character). In our work on science fiction audiences, we found enormous variability in the ways that fans talked about their favorite series. For example, asked about the characters one by one, most of the MIT students defined them as autonomous problem-solvers, whereas most of the female fans read them as part of a social network with the other characters.

When Tulloch applied these same methods to talk to theatre patrons, however, he found much less variation in the ways they talked about the work they had just seen. Most of them fell back on a handful of things they had learned about the playwright in school or the kinds of insights that are most often to be found in the Cliff Notes style study guides to classic literature.

It is hard to say precisely why the range of interpretations of Chekhov were so restrictive -- was it because people are intimidated to talk about high culture and so they repeat things they know to be true even if they also see them as boring and unoriginal? Did they see the interview as a chance to impress the researcher with how well they had mastered their lessons? Were they less likely to appropriate from or speculate about the plots and characters and so had a less intimate relationship with them? Was this a product of contemplative distance and the aura of high art?

If high art is supposed to be so enriching and intellectually engaging, why do we respond to it in such predictable and predetermined ways? And if popular culture is supposed to appeal to the lowest common denominator, why does it generate such a broad array of different responses?

The Pleasures of Imperfection

Italian critic Umberto Eco suggests that cult movies are rarely perfectly constructed nor are they treated with respect: "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 to the whole." Most cult films fall apart in our hands and we have to work hard to make them cohere. It is their incoherence that makes such works rich resources for reworking.

I have similarly suggested that fan culture is born of a mixture of fascination and frustration. The work has to fascinate us to inspire fan-like responses but if the work fully satisfied all of our desires, we would have no need to rework it in our imaginations. If you look at the most productive sites within any given fan culture, they often grow up around the very things that frustrate fans the most about the original source material. The author introduces a character and never realizes her full potential. We get a tantalizing bit of back-story and then it gets abandoned, never fully developed or integrated into the narrative. The character acts in a way that seems to contradict everything we previously believed about them. And so forth.

Yet, if great works of art are great because they represent the accomplishment of perfection or near perfection within a particular tradition, then perhaps they don't have the kinds of loose edges that we want to keep playing with. I suspect this is not really the case -- there are, for example, a fair number of fan stories about the characters and situations of Jane Austin for example, and critics, directors, and actors have struggled to make sense of some of Shakespeare's characters for centuries. Rather, I think we are taught to think about high culture as untouchable. We appreciate it. We may even love it. But we rarely approach it as a fan.

In his book, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, Lawrence Levine describes the process by which Shakespeare's plays moved from being a living part of the culture of 19th century America -- where they were freely appropriated and performed by a wide array of different groups -- and became a sacred and untouchable aspect of our culture in the 20th century. Shakespeare was once thought to be emotionally accessible to all; increasingly, Shakespeare has become something we have to be taught how to appreciate, rather than something we instinctively love.

The Wondering Minstrels

These questions have come back to me in recent week as I have been reviewing a thesis currently being completed by one of the Comparative Media Studies graduate students Amulya Gopalakrishnan. Gopalakrishnan has been applying ideas from fan studies and work on online communities to explore the activities of the Wondering Minstrels:

The Wondering Minstrels is a poem-a-day mailing list of over four thousand people, the majority of whom have a South-Asian connection, but includes members from all over the English-speaking world. The group was formed in 1999 by a couple of Indian engineering students who felt the need for a 'more everyday experience of poetry' and to demystify the appreciation of it, and gradually drew in their friends and acquaintances, until it grew to its current dimensions. The poems are archived and open to commentary and discussion at any time. While the people who run it handle much of the regular poem submissions, those sent in by other members ('guest poems') reflect the heterogeneity and energy of the group. The accompanying comments pay attention to form and

technique, as well as biography and shaping context, but the guiding principle is individual connection with the poem, and some personal comment on why a contributor considers it significant or memorable....

For those who did not get a headstart at home, a community like Minstrels broaches poetry on its terms: as an everyday medium that speaks of ordinary lives and moments in an extraordinary way, one that simply draws attention to the world by drawing attention to language. Sending in a poem, or reacting to someone else's comments about a poem may be a way of tentatively dipping your toe in the vast ocean of notions built around literary works. Just like other fan communities, through conversation and correspondence, they can inaugurate a space that may prove more humane and democratic than the everyday world. The feeling-oriented, middlebrow aesthetic of The Wondering Minstrels is a conversation and counterpractice that challenges conventional classroom

approaches to canonical poetry.

In other words, Wandering Minstrels is a fan community which has grown up around the exchange of poems -- mostly works that are part of the Canon of western literature, though also including a broader range of materials -- poems from other parts of the world (including a fair number from the South Asian Diaspora), song lyrics, rap songs, and so forth. Part of what fascinates Gopalakrishnan about the group is precisely the ways that it cuts across traditional high and low splits -- treating Eminem alongside Elizabeth Browning.

Getting Emotional About It

If Tulloch's Chekhov patrons were surprisingly inarticulate about their actual emotional responses to the plays, these fans of poetry emote, gush, share their memories of childhood, suggest personal associations,

speculate about the motives, and generally talk a lot about the poems that are being transmitted within the community. Participants respect these poems but they do not hold them at a critical distance. These poems are part of their lives; they are tied to their earliest memories of schooling and home life; they are treasures they take with them as they move from one part of the world to another; they are things they want to share with others as part of the ongoing life of this thriving virtual community.

Gopalakrishnan was motivated to explore this group for two reasons, one intellectual, the other personal: first, she was concerned by arguments that pit digital media against literary culture (such as those advanced by Sven

Birkerts), seeing ways that digital culture can enliven and expand our experience of literature, and second, she had herself been a long-time participant within this community (like many of my other friends who write about popular culture texts, she is a fan writing about her own fandom.)

Here's how she describes her own early experience within the group:

when I joined Minstrels, the first poem I sent in was a poem I'd read in the Times Literary Supplement, by a Welsh poet named Sheenagh Pugh. I'd never heard of Pugh before, and indeed, she was relatively unknown at the time. When I sent in the poem along with my English-major attempt at analysis, I received an email from Pugh herself commenting on my comments, adding to them, mildly disagreeing, but eager to carry on the conversation. She later became a Minstrels member herself, and wryly responding to the disproportionate success of her own poem, 'Sometimes', admitted that she 'mistyped "sorrow" for "snow" and then decided I liked that better. I believe in letting the keyboard join in the creative process now and then. Anyway, here's the text, and if you like it, I'm pleased for you, but I'd be more pleased if you liked something else better!"

The Web makes interactions like that possible, and the juxtaposition of Pugh's comments and mine both framing her poem, neither of which claims ultimate authority, invites other readers to participate in the mystique of the poem's

artistry. Rather than destroying the aura of literature, this surrounding conversation only adds to it.

The Wandering Minstrels also suggests something important about the globalization of culture. On the one hand, the group draws heavily upon British poems which were transmitted around the world as part of the colonialist

educational project. In fact, since western schools have often moved away from these works, these poems may be more familiar to people in South Asian or other former Commonwealth nations than they are to people in the United Kingdom or the United States. It is the shared (if imposed) literary heritage that allows people around the world to participate in this forum. The same kind of infrastructure may, ironically enough, be provided by American popular culture, which circulates to countries worldwide, often driving out local media production, but providing a shared framework of meanings and memories that allows communications within a global network of fans. The same is certainly true as well of the "soft goods" -- anime, manga, and games -- produced and circulated by Japan and across parts of the work, the works of the Bollywood film industry may play this role. For a global community to operate, members have to have something in common to talk about. It almost doesn't matter whether the core material is high culture, low culture, or middlebrow culture as long as it allows everyone to participate from a more or less equal footing and as long as it provides an opportunity for each member to contribute a unique perspective to the conversation.

There is nothing about high culture texts that discourages this kind of intimacy and participation. Many of them were part of popular culture at the time they were created. Many of them can be pulled back into popular culture when read in the right contexts. Rather, their untouchable quality has to do with the contexts within which we are introduced to these texts and the stained glass attitudes that too often surround them. Gopalakrishnan has taught me that you can indeed be a fan of high culture.

