The Fans Who Never Lost Faith: Slaying 1970s Subculture Theory

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[1] In 1979, theorist Dick Hebdige declared that popular music subcultures of the 1960s could be seen as resisting hegemonic oppression by using personal style in creative ways in his influential text, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. Is Hebdige's theory of subculture still useful today? The online fandom of the celebrated cult television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* reveals the limitations to applications of Hebdige's theory when it is examined through a range of post-Hebdige subculture theorists, such as Rupa Huq and Henry Jenkins, and through the prism of class, gender, race, and age. An overview of the key signs of this particular subculture (such as memorabilia), ethnographic studies, and my own fan experiences show that Hebdige's theory disregards pleasure as a motive.

[2] To begin with however shall be an explanation of the meaning of subculture. Subculture refers to a collection of people who share something in common which differentiates them from the rest of society. Chris Barker says that "subcultures offer maps of meaning which make the world intelligible to its members" (392). This could be a number of things, including sport, a particular genre of music, a film, or a writer. The examination of subculture prominently appeared in the 1970s by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies within the University of Birmingham (Martin 21). While the CCCS produced much important work, its perspectives on subculture proved problematic as it pigeonholed them into clearly defined groups. One of the university's alumni was Dick Hebdige, whose *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* is still considered a definitive text on the subject. In this book, Hebdige argues that subcultures reclaim objects, spaces and signs to use against the political system in place at the time (During 357).

[3] This idea of signs is extremely significant, as they can be used by people to show others they belong to a subculture. A *Buffy*-related example would be the countless DVDs, novelizations, critical texts, collector cards, and various other types of memorabilia available. The term 'bricolage' was important to Hebdige as for him it was a system of signs embedded in often-common objects whose appropriations are used by subcultures to establish their identity. By possessing an assortment of items in which to represent their subculture, Hebdige claims they are used collectively to create meanings that would not exist if they were viewed on their own merits.

Fig.1, "Signs of Fandom"

The image above displays just a glimpse of the bricolage that defines me as a part of this subculture. Although these artefacts may be considered meaningless to most people, this collage of media, tie-in products, and personal photographs are a huge part of who I am. Many of these items were collected from Starfury's Prime convention which was held in 2005. The folder contains a complete set of season 7 collector's cards, as well as autographs and photos of the cast I obtained there. It also includes the letters from Joss Whedon that came with both the *Buffy* and *Angel* DVD boxsets, as well as my own fan art, which are comic book style drawings complete with original speech captions, which exist as an outlet in which I could express my own interpretations of the show. The *Firefly* boxset is autographed by Whedon and all the show cast who attended a signing in my hometown, which will be mentioned again later. Also shown is my fanfiction, complete with a home-made front cover. Although derived from another person's work, the depth of characterisation in the show enables myself and others to explore further our own creativity. Joli Jenson has commented that the purchasing of such products can be considered as greedy consumerism, but, for a fan, these items may make them feel more closely identified with their passion (20).

[4] Another key aspect of Hebdige's theory was that of 'hegemony', referring to the different components that add up to a single sociological unit. Of hegemony, Hebdige writes: "The punk subculture, then, signified chaos at every level, but this was only possible because the style itself was so thoroughly ordered. The chaos cohered as a meaningful whole" (113). The chaotic image of punk was systematically put into place in order to defy the rest of society.

Although it must be pointed out that any kind of subculture is driven on some kind of political basis, this does not necessarily involve party politics. An example of this would be slash fanfiction, whereby fans are able to alter the sexual orientation of their beloved characters, creating meaning from their creative, sexual, and political interventions on popular culture. Henry Jenkins says, "Slash confronts the most repressive forms of sexual identity and provides utopian alternatives to current configurations of gender (189). For example, fans of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* could create their own stories romantically linking Buffy and Faith, which creates new meaning of their beloved text, expresses their own (narrative, creative, or sexual) desires, and make a political statement. (Ethnographic studies of *Buffy* fandom, discussed in depth later, suggest the importance of gender and the pleasures which are clearly connected to subculture.) The utopian fantasy mentioned by Jenkins is something which is overlooked by Hebdige. Frequently, Hebdige equates subculture with rebellion, dissatisfaction, political motivation, class, and race. This can at times seem as if he is trying to prove punk was solely a white, working class, youth movement, and that those involved could not amount to much later in life.

[5] Hebdige's theory also lacks the kind of empirical ethnographic fieldwork that grounds this kind of detailed description and analysis of culture (Barker 27). He continuously refers to subcultures as a youth practice, not taking into account that there may be a range of age groups with the same interests. He leaves out women altogether, a group connected to the punk scene that would eventually form riot grrl in the 1990s. He also does not consider that people of varying ethnicities could participate in these subcultures, or that they could include those from a variety of classes other than working class. By now including these issues, subsequent ethnographic studies of fans has become much more thoroughly enriched. These are the problems that will now be attempted to argue against. By looking at some modern theorists, as well as work published by *Buffy* critics, we shall see how this fandom highlights the limits of Hebdige's work.

[6] Created by Joss Whedon, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was broadcast by the WB and UPN networks from 1997 until 2003. Its plot focuses on a teenage girl, Buffy Summers, and her circle of friends, as they grow up in a small town, Sunnydale, which is also a social hub for vampires, demons and other fantastical creatures. Each character, whether good or evil, or in some cases both, learns hard life lessons about themselves and the world. The aspects which make this show stand out from others are witty writing, exceptional characterisation, and plotlines which combine fantasy, drama, comedy, and melodrama. The fantasy component is

significant as it is used in various ways as metaphors for real life issues which anyone can identify with. Whedon's subsequent work—*Angel, Firefly, Serenity,* and *Dollhouse*—all share similar themes which have resulted in related fandoms in my experience. Therefore these works may also be referenced as *Buffy* fandom is analysed.

[7] Although the show ended on television so many years ago, it still has a significant following, which can particularly be seen in the many fan-made websites and forums still active, and the number of people who continue to visit them. This includes sites such as the "Buffy Forums", the podcast "Upside Down and Halfway to Happyland" where people can voice their opinions on why Buffy is important to them, and the long-running "Slayage: The Journal of the Whedon Studies Association', a website which publishes academic work related to *Buffy* creator Joss Whedon.

[8] *Buffy* fans are so loyal to its creator they will follow any subsequent work he is involved with. Derek Johnson writes of this dynamic:

> *Buffy* creator Joss Whedon is often deified by the fan base. As an auteur, Whedon's authorial signature linked *Buffy,* spin-off *Angel,* and even the diegetically autonomous *Firefly* in an intertextual relationship (sometimes referred to as the "Whedonverse" or "Jossverse"), reinforcing the hyperdiegetic coherence of those worlds by promising consistency, continuity, and quality within and between texts (292).

This is made clear in the fan-made documentary *Done the Impossible: The Fans' Tale of Firefly & Serenity.* Although directed and produced by fans of the show, it is hosted and narrated by stars of the show; as well as containing many interviews with the rest of the cast and crew, who all show as much passion for the *Firefly* series and sadness at its cancellation as the fans do. This film highlights how much support fans have given to a charity close to Whedon's heart, Equality Now. Founder Jessica Neuwirth says of Whedon: "He just has a way of communicating with people that is like magic." This love is also displayed by the fans in their attempts to have the show resurrected and their hostility towards the Fox network, which could be considered a rebellious and political attitude. However, Tanya R. Cochran writes: "I do not believe any of us is part of a war effort against a clearly identified enemy – no 'us against them.' I am neither disenfranchised nor the hero; the Alliance is neither totalitarian nor the villain" (249).

[9] Whedon himself has actively made attempts to calm fans' dismay, as well as encouraging participation such as the writing of fanfiction and other creative outlets like fan art (Cochran 248). My own experience of this was at the 2005 Edinburgh International Film Festival, where *Serenity* premiered. I had previously not heard of either the film or the show, being completely dedicated to *Buffy* and *Angel* only. While walking down the city's main shopping street, however, I noticed a poster in the window of a major music and DVD store that Whedon and a number of other people related to this premiering film would be holding a signing the following week. On the day, I purchased the boxset for the show I had never previously watched and eagerly waited in line. As so many of the actors were present one did not have a seat at the desk, and in a moment of extreme embarrassment I almost bypassed him, mistaking him for a member of security. To my knowledge this is one of the few occasions such an event has happened in relation to this film festival. I was also handed one of two free tickets available to that night's screenings while queuing, and although I blushed and quivered, unable to utter a word to Whedon as I reached him, this remains one of the most special days of my life, as it was so clear how involved and caring these people were about their fans.

[10] In order to study *Buffy* fandom more closely I contacted people on the online forum 'Buffy-Boards.com', asking each about their affiliation to the programme and its online community. 'Drizzlydale', aged fourteen from Singapore, wrote:

> As with things I love, I Google. I found a lot of rich discussion that I could partake in, with many different views, realized that I had more to add, and decided to join, which led me deeper and deeper into the fandom. As for fanfic, it wasn't a big leap for me to fill my need when the episodes themselves were no longer enough, and the more I read, the more ideas I had, which prompted me to write my own.

This is interesting as it shows the need people have to continue exploring the *Buffy* universe on their own through the writing of fan fiction. Other responses I received when conversing with fans were love for the characters and online bonding over said characters which spurred people to visit these forums. This all indicates a pleasure motive to fan activities. Matt Hills says, "Without the emotional attachments and passions of fans, fan cultures would not exist, but fans and academics often take these attachments for granted or do not place them centre-stage in their explorations of fandom" (Hills, 90).

[11] In order to gain a better ethnographic perspective of the types of people the above characteristics apply to, I carried out an online survey, providing a link to this on my personal blog and the official *Buffy* Facebook page. Due to time restrictions, there were less than twenty answers, but these contained some interesting results. Questions were asked about age, gender, and ethnicity; whether respondents had written fanfiction; whether they considered themselves to be shippers; and whether they followed Whedon's other work. Participants could also leave a comment on why they contributed on forums. (See Appendix.) The results of this survey showed that out of those who responded there was a very mixed age group, two thirds were female, and were mainly from America but other locations included Sweden and Germany. Some other interesting points to note are that 61.5% of those who answered had previously written fanfiction and 76.9% were shippers – that is they supported a relationship between characters, whether actually existing within the show or created by the fan. Everyone who replied have followed Whedon's career since the end of the show. The responses to regarding forum participation were all very similar. One contributor wrote:

> Everyone has their own ideas about a character or a ship or a storyline, and I always find it fascinating (and yes, sometimes infuriating) to see someone else's take on a character or storyline, and I like to talk about it and see why they feel this way (Appendix).

Each response mentioned the rich discussion which could be had, and that their participation was based on the debates involving characters and episode narratives.

[12] A much larger ethnographic survey was carried out by Claudia Rebaza. Although hers was carried out on a greater scale, taking place over four weeks and gaining 1663 responses, there were some interesting points to note about this. What was noticeable was her results regarding education. Rebaza writes:

> 27 percent of the overall fan group reported having a graduate degree or higher. Given that in 2003, the U.S census reported 9.3 percent of the U.S population as holding at least a master's degree, the fan portrait is that of an educational elite (152).

Rebaza also mentions that 10% of respondents had an annual income of over $100,000 (153). A significant portion of this part of the *Buffy* online fandom are well educated and have a high income, which is solid evidence that subcultures can not be regarded as strictly working-

class movements. Although the majority of respondents were from America, other English speaking nations were well represented, such as the UK and Australia (152). As previously mentioned, my own survey had respondents from non-English speaking countries, showing that although a language barrier may be problematic for conversing online, the show is enjoyed by numerous races.

[13] Rebaza's survey found that the majority of fanfiction writers were females, confirming surveys of other fanfic communities, and 37% were from the 18-24 age group (154-55). As this survey did not include those aged under eighteen for legal reasons, the percentage of young writers should be even higher. The website 'Fanfiction.net' includes thousands of works of writing by fans. When looking at its TV show category, *Buffy* is listed as the third most popular show for writers, having at this time of writing 44,175 entries. The most popular show is *Glee*, having a total of 73,533 works. As *Glee* is marketed towards teenagers, this is great evidence that Rebaza's findings are correct, and if she had been able to survey younger age groups there may have been an even larger proportion of female fanfiction writers. These findings prove that subculture does indeed include women; in this case more than men (Huq 26).

[14] Subcultures have also become much more internalised. The invention of the internet allows for a more personal and enclosed experience. Rupa Huq discusses how subculture can no longer only be applied to youth, commenting that the fans of the 1970s music scene did "not evaporate but themselves age" (157). Subcultures of the past do not stay in the past but remain with people as they grow up; youths do not abandon their passions when they reach adulthood. This in turn signifies that the case-studies Hebdige wrote on were not merely politically motivated in an act of rebellion, but also as an outlet for people to express themselves through their interests.

[15] This is clearly shown in the fan-made documentary *IRL (In Real Life): The Bronze Documentary Project*. This film explores 'The Bronze' online community, which used to be the official forum for *Buffy* fans, and how the relationships between these fans developed. What is noticeable about this documentary is the difference between the ages of those who are interviewed, ranging from teenagers to much older adults. As the documentary was released three years after the show ended, it stands as evidence that subcultures can be inclusive by age and that such communities themselves age.

[16] The continuation of such interests also rebuts the fact that the feeling of belonging to a subculture is a pleasurable experience. This is summed up excellently in Gerry Bloustien's chapter "*Buffy* Night at the Seven Stars: A 'Subcultural' Happening at the 'Glocal' Level", where he describes how *Buffy* fans would come together once a week in an Australian pub to eagerly watch the new episode of the show. He writes:

> During the *Buffy* evenings, the customers would order drinks and chat during the commercials, but would watch in rapt silence once the programme started. The sudden hush descending on the room was one of the first things that newcomers would notice about the atmosphere on a *Buffy* night, attempting at first to talk through it – but not for long. The will of the many would take over. Silence would reign – that is, except where, after a particularly witty comment or an exciting fight sequence, the audience would spontaneously laugh and clap together, and sometimes at a particularly exciting moment cheer and clap together. These moments of group response were important for the overall enjoyment and understanding of an episode. The same episode watched again, alone at home, was often reported not to seem quite as funny or as dramatic (153).

This sense of community was clearly vital to the enjoyment of this group, with no notion of rebellion or defiance, and also goes so far to subvert the normative social function of a bar.

[17] Since the publication of Hebdige's text, London's King's Road has now become the bedrooms of enthusiasts, where they are free to communicate with others all over the world online. In our postmodernist age, digital media have transformed how we deal with class, gender, race and age issues. Ethnographic studies have shown a much augmented appeal, of which Huq says: "Academic analyses have frequently fallen disappointingly short in their highly selective dealings with youth based on a one-dimensional, often purely textual approach" (20). Along with my own ethnographic survey, Rebaza's previous analysis, and both self-ethnographic documentaries *Done the Impossible: The Fans' Tale of Firefly and Serenity* and *IRL: (In Real Life) The Bronze Documentary Project* all create a much more nuanced and grounded foundation on which to analyse subculture and fandom.

[18] In conclusion, although the music subcultures of the sixties and seventies may have developed out of dissatisfaction of current affairs, the same cannot be said of such groups today. As Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington put it, "pleasure and love of the fan object are often seen as quintessential qualities of fan consumption" (15).

Limitations both Hebdige and Huq share are by only analysing music subcultures (such as punk, reggae and rave), but there are many different types such as the *Buffy*—and other Whedon fandoms. The scholarship on fandom in recent times by critics such as Jenkins and Hills, as well as the cases of ethnography mentioned above, have presented a much more current critical frame, which highlights the sense of nostalgia and belonging fans feel when able to share their thoughts and feelings with others; as well as proving the diverse social and cultural backgrounds of such communities. For myself, I will always re-watch *Buffy* with nostalgic fondness. Other shows have come and gone but as my first love it will always remain incomparable.

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