

Rethinking the Audience/Producer Relationship

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Intensified Empathy: Show's Producer as Show's Fan?

It has always been evident that fans create strong relationships to the shows (or other objects) that they follow. Fans incorporate the people involved in making the show – show runners, writers, directors, actors (“the producers”) – into this web of relationships. I am fascinated by these relationships that fans cultivate with these people who they cannot know in traditional sense, especially when, increasingly, these relations are not one-sided. They are now mediated by various social technologies that allow producers to participate in a conversation with a genuine “back-and-forth” quality. The nature and extent of this back-and-forth will of course vary from fandom to fandom. Some fandoms are extremely active on Twitter, for example, while for others these newer platforms are not used as extensively. The series *Supernatural* is one of the latter examples, yet the relations of *Supernatural* fans with their producers do nevertheless manifest what I am calling an intensified empathy.

In considering the sense of empathy between fans and producers, the question may be begged as to whether a sense of intimacy and even empathy is anything new. It is not the case that fans had not previously had any means of establishing the imaginative bonds necessary to constitute empathic feelings. After all, long before the internet there were fan magazines, press interviews and conventions have existed long before.

Even so, something is different, and it is technologically-based. These older means of establishing connections with producers remain (i.e. conventions), yet their purpose has been altered by the nature of the relations that are now possible via the newer technologies. I suggest, for instance, that conventions provide a further intensification or even physicalization of an intimacy that is already being courted through digital relations. Thus, while fans have always been able to cultivate intimacy or perceived intimacy, there is now a more rapid relay of communication available with the technologies of Facebook, Twitter, Livejournal, television-centric blogs, sites and discussion boards. This permits the rapid sharing of interviews, panel discussions, chats, producer-made videos, set reports, even unplanned encounters, among fan communities. Again, all of these create not just interactivity but an unprecedented intimacy among fans and producers.

To give some examples: Eric Kripke (*Supernatural* show runner until recently) has issued, more than once, statements “correcting” aspects of story that caused fan ire or confusion, almost immediately after the episode in question aired. There has also been much conversation about the willingness of the producers to alter some aspects of the story in accordance with fan wishes. This was confirmed by executive producer McG in an interview at last spring's 100th episode celebration, in which he stated that Kripke and the writers are “good sports” who attempt to integrate fan wishes and desires as much as possible.

But this is not a one-sided affair of (attempted) appeasement of fan emotions. The emotions of the producers are also in evidence. Kripke has also stated in DVD commentary and interviews that he reads on-line comments and that they hurt his feelings. Recently at the *Supernatural* panel at Comic-Con, he referenced his reaction to certain fan comments regarding the season five finale. Moreover, these communications do not arrive only from the show runner. We have opportunities to “feel” the emotions of executive producer/show runner Sara

Gamble and executive producer/writer Ben Edlund. On more than one occasion Jared Padalecki (Sam) has referred to himself as a fan of the show, while all of the actors' passion about their characters and their trajectories is patent. Fan acknowledgement of the emotions of these people is evident in their continued concern about all those who surround the production. Recently, fans took out an ad in *Variety* to thank Kripke for his five years as show runner, and they were fulsome in expressions of condolence for the passing of favourite director Kim Manners. Finally, there is surely ample evidence in the text of *Supernatural* itself, in its unprecedented meta-textual "back and forth" about what how the text should unfold.

Perhaps this is a naïve interpretation of these interactions, which of course do have elements of performance and promotions. But again, this is not an issue that turns on true knowledge. Empathy is an imaginative act, a sense of the realness of another's inner world. Fans can see that, in a sense, a producer is a fan of the show too; certainly they have just as much emotional investment in its success, if not more. Why should we insist on difference in kind between the work (emotional, creative, etc.) of so-called authors and the work of fans? If nothing else, we are in a position to see the producers' love for their text. Is this love any different in kind from the love expressed via fandom?