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The Effect of the Youtube Phenomenon on the Soap Opera Text

The online video sharing service Youtube is a recent phenomenon, having only been established in 2005. It has yet to reach maximum penetration in a market that is still saturated with independent video sharing services like Break.com, MyspaceTV, Dailymotion, and Metacafe, corporate offerings like Google Video (Google now owns Youtube and maintains both), Yahoo Video, and AOL TV, and the newest entry, Hulu - a service supported by the major television networks that streams complete movies and television shows for free, though with embedded ads. While many other online video services like Divx's ambitious Stage6 and throwawayyourtv.com have died and others seem to be on their way out, Youtube continues to grow. According to Internet monitor Hitwise, Youtube's market share increased from 55% in March 2007 to 73% in 2008 with MyspaceTV trailing at a distant 9%. Clearly, the Youtube phenomenon has captured an audience.

Additionally, Youtube has provided a valuable service (or perhaps a major inconvenience) to American soap producers by providing a space for soap fans to upload and discuss video clips of their favorite soap operas, allowing dissemination of the soap opera text to a much wider audience. The NY Times aptly characterizes the dynamic between the mediums as “new media reviving fossil media” (Bellafante 2008, 1). How does this new medium revive the text as transmuted by the old medium of television? How does it change it and shape it into something else? Does it at all? In this study, I intend to examine this question from the perspective of users within Youtube.

In *Soap Fans*, C. Lee Harrington and Denise D. Bielby isolate the most relevant aspect of the relationship between producer and consumer to this study: who authors the text? Teams of writers come in and out of the producer's studio over the course of a soap's life, but fans remain as stewards of the text. Leaving aside the economic and legal aspects of authorship rights over the soap opera text, fans are what Harrington & Bielby call the "moral authors" of the text (Harrington & Bielby 1995, 155). In the eyes of both soap producers and consumers, the gratification of the fans takes precedence over the creative bent of any individual writer or team of writers. The production of the text in all ways relevant to the dissemination of the text among fans is carried out by the fans themselves whose efforts to protect the text, expand the text, and digest the text influence their perception of the text as a whole.

In order to maintain fan viewership of American soaps, soap writers must ensure that they develop characters "realistically" – that is, in line with fan expectations of the personality, decisions, and actions for each of the characters. Their job is to minimize the "writer's impetus" to inject the script with their own beliefs, values, and desires for the characters. A soap opera cannot appear to have a unique creator, and soap writers thus take great pains to understand the desires of fans. The soap script is actually a reflection of fan desire for the trajectory of the text. Thus, one could argue that authorship really lies in the interpreter – the fans (Harrington & Bielby 1995, 158). For the purposes of this study in which I do assume fan authorship, reader response theory becomes critical. According to reader response theory, the change in perception of the text by the audience is exactly the change that is in the text itself; interpretation by the fans is the most important way in which the text is defined. Using reader response theory in this study,

one can theorize Youtube to be the explanatory variable that, by forcing Youtube users to interact with a traditional text through a different medium, has an effect on the dependent variable - the fan's perception of the text, and thus, the text itself. By analyzing the experience of Youtube soap viewers and comparing their experiences to the experience of traditional viewers documented in the literature, we can measure the effect of Youtube, through the causal mechanism of reader response, on the text.

As this is an ethnographic study, I am merely observing the interactions between members without making contact. In particular, I am looking at the interactions of fans of *As The World Turns* (hereafter, ATWT) on the LukeVanFan (LVF) channel on Youtube. The LVF channel was created by a Youtube user named "LukeVanFan" and contains video clips of the entire Luke and Noah storyline on Youtube. The LVF channel has attracted at least 7,000 individuals who watch and comment on the videos, posted on a weekly basis.

The nexus between the fans and the text for the LVF channel is the Youtube user "LukeVanFan" himself. His selection process for uploading clips changes the ATWT narrative in a fundamental way. All other characters besides Luke and Noah, who appear in every single scene, become secondary characters. Their stories are only important in their effect on Luke and Noah. User comments on the LVF channel are fundamentally different from comments on general forums. Comments about Ameerah and the Colonel are brought back to Luke, for example. This fundamental change can be interpreted to be a transformation from a "feminine" text into a "classic (male) narrative," which, as defined by Laura Mulvey, is, "a narrative structured around a main controlling figure

with whom the spectator can identify." In this case, the focal point of the narrative becomes the quite singular entity known as Nuke.

The LVF community is not only composed of spectators; there are many contributors who post Nuke videos on their own channels. While they generally stay away from posting the same sort of videos that LVF posts – straight copies of the hegemonic text, they do post videos that enhance the Nuke experience. “Seannynj” posts candid videos of the actors Van Hansis and Jake Silbermann at fan parties, awards shows, etc. “MarkDutchViewer” posts Nuke episodes with translations in other languages. The user “bluemidnight02” uploads scenes from the Nuke storyline but replaces the dialogue in the scenes with dialogue she writes in subtitles. Each of these uploaders is subscribed to the others’ channels, so that videos either appear in a “Favorites” section or a “My Videos” section on multiple channels, effectively creating a redundant network of videos, most of which can be accessed from any node in the network. This video network places at the fingertips of Youtube Nuke fans a wide range of resources on the story, the characters, and the actors of the Nuke narrative. While fans on other forums are restricted to discussing their impressions on the hegemonic text, through the interconnected work of uploaders, fans are able to discuss many different texts that supplement their version of the hegemonic text – the Nuke storyline – and strengthen their knowledge of the Nuke text and validate each other’s knowledge of the text. Fans critique and praise each others’ videos, which actions emphasize within the Youtube community their narrative power and diminishes the perceived power of the now distant writers of the ATWT text. The individual confidence that inevitably builds within each member of this strong

community is likely what leads users like “Bluemidnight02” to post personal interpretations of scenes in the soap opera text.

Bluemidnight02’s postings are a powerful example of the way Youtube is transforming the soap opera text. These videos that bluemidnight02 calls “reels” are always converted to sepia tone so that the scene has a sense of fantasy or unreality. Further enhancing the unreality, the user removes all conversation and ambient noise (effectively muting the scene) and replaces the sound with a random pop song. Finally, the user adds her alternate subtitles. In a scene where Luke and Noah take Ameera to a bar, and a classmate hits on her, Bluemidnight02 makes the undercurrent of the situation comically obvious:

Bluemidnight02’s script:

Noah: Maybe you guys can get married.

Ameera: I want to marry you. I lust [for] you.

Luke: Yeah, but let me just clarify that Noah IS a homosexual. [to Noah] Ok, let’s boogie.

Ameera: But I just want to be with Noah!!!

Noah: I still [need] time with my bitch though.

Luke: And you’re pretty much getting on our nerves. Get a puppy or something.

Noah: Fo Realz.

Actual ATWT script:

Noah: He seems nice. Maybe you should go dance with him.

Ameera: I don’t even know him.

Luke: Oh come on, it might be fun. He seems cool. [in Noah's direction] Come on, guys, let's go dance.

Ameera: But I don't know how.

Noah: Nobody really does. We're just gonna wing it.

Luke: Yeah, dancing's no big deal here. Groups of kids dance together. It's cool.

Noah: Come on. Try it.

Bluemidnight essentially transfers her feelings about Luke, Noah, and Ameera into the narrative. She appropriates the template provide by the video and creates from it her own reading of the Nuke love triangle. This specific type of appropriation and interpretation is not feasible in any other format. Even traditional fan fiction, which is limited to text, does not evoke the same sense of complicit understanding that Bluemidnight's reels do. Comments from other users commend her for her talent in writing as well as commending the hilarity of her scripts. Their support of Bluemidnight's work encourages her to continue. When the occasional naysayer calls her "ignorant," she takes it seriously, responding, "It wasn't meant to be mean, it's all in good fun." These comments are likely a result of the form of fan expression that takes shape in the anonymous world of Internet culture. Internet forums allow fans to communicate at a "safe or removed distance" (Harrington & Bielby 1995, 167).

The community that rises around these "paratexts," or texts that surround the main text, has similarities to the communities on electronic bulletin board systems (BBSs). Youtube users are similarly free to say just about anything without fear of censorship or removal, though this freedom is subject to the prerogative of each video uploader. With such a contentious topic as the intimate lives of gay men, one would

expect flame wars to abound, but the LVF channel is almost unanimous in its support of gay relationships. This likely has a lot to do with the fact that the community is built around a gay relationship, but there are occasional users who protest the videos. Eager supporters of Nuke roundly reprimand these people, but nothing goes beyond the pale discussed in previous studies of online fan communities.

In general, the types of comments made do not differ greatly from those in the literature. Some “dual-format” viewers/fans watch the hegemonic text on TV and then coming to Youtube to rewatch their favorite Nuke clips and read others’ comments. Many others are strictly LVF fans. They and the “dual-format” Nuke fans both participate in interpretation: “The colonel will now go full steam ahead and try to break Nuke up. He didn't know about Ameera at first, but now that he knows about the marriage, he'll use it in whatever way he can”; ownership: “Ameera must go. I need to see some hot man-on-man action”; and authenticity: “The scenes with the colonel made this episode. Hmm, you know, he seems to draw the best performance out of his opposite actor somehow.” In many of the same ways that traditional soap fans translate the narrative into their own story, so too do Youtube’s Nuke fans as well.

According to Harrington and Bielby, soap fan subculture is defined by “emotion and feeling.” This is not lost on the LVF community. In fact, in comparison to the study done by Baym on the r.a.t.s. community, emotion is amplified. Many of the comments on threads fall into the category of love messages to either actor or character:

“I'm in love of Luke...He has a so sweet and innocent face...”

“Luke us so cute! even though he is mean to his parents he is so cute still!!!!!”

“I want to hold Luke in my arms, and I love to be held in Noah’s arms.

“Noah can hold me any day or night! yummy”

This is further exemplified in the playfully sexual comments that are constantly made:

“I want noah and luke to win best sex scene on daytime!!!”

“Planning a threesome [with nuke]? Where do I sign up for that? LMAO”

“I just wanna go inside the screen and bite noah on the lips! LOL”

Indeed, it seems that LVF fans latch on tightly to the Nuke phenomenon, investing themselves in the story eagerly.

As mentioned before, the fundamental difference between the LVF channel and standard television broadcasting is that the practice of allotting roughly equivalent amounts of time on a revolving-door basis to the many characters of a traditional soap is gone. The focus now being on Nuke, only characters whose relationships are tied directly to Nuke are built up. Other characters become more or less extras. However, this is not always the case. Some fans watch the entire show and care about the other characters. Occasionally fans will make comments about the other characters, but the community implicitly dissuades this as these comments rarely receive responses, and the vast majority of genuine comment threads deal only with Nuke.

As explained in *Tune In, Log On*, soap fans closely watch the quality of a soap, evaluate the acting, assess the realism of the plot, and critique the show’s message (Baym 97-104). Nuke fans do this as well, but on a microcosmic level – they only do it insofar as it involves Nuke:

“Well, actually I don't care about Luke's parents, they are getting on my nerves, but as far as Nuke is concerned, this clip was so sweet.”

“I’m with you on that one...Too much Lily and Holden, not enough Nuke!”

and

“That was SO cute. I loved all the scenes save for Lilden.”

The discussion centers on Nuke, the actors, the success of the show, and the Youtube community. Users provide a variety of reasons for opting for the Youtube version instead of official channels like streaming through the CBS site or watching it on television: A) they don't know when it comes on, or can't catch it when it comes on. B) they only want to see Nuke and so they wait for the LVF channel vids.

So how does Youtube shape the text? It brings the viewer closer to the characters. This is exhibited in their emotional outbursts and bold sexual comments. It allows new ways to appropriate and interpret the main text. Bluemidnight's videos are a prime example of this. At the same time, the text remains solidly soap. More importantly, the relationships remain distinctly ATWT. Fans perform their regular duties as stewards of the text, only in microcosm. What is troublesome is that this microcosmic outlook threatens to fracture the fan community even more than it already is. Fans are known to watch only their favorite characters' stories and fast-forward through the rest. In practical terms, does this make a difference? Perhaps not yet. However, it is likely that the longer fans are able to latch on successfully to a couple – more successfully than they can latch on to the text because of the simplicity and ubiquity and eternal presence of the Internet – the harder it will be to maintain interest in the text as a whole. One could imagine a world in which Nuke gets a spinoff show on primetime, and the less popular relationships are unable to carry the show because the diehard Nuke fans have stopped watching the show. The main problem boils down to – is the division caused by Youtube having a negative impact on viewership of ATWT? I suspect that because fans are less and less involved

with the rest of the text, they are reinterpreting the text strictly in terms of Nuke and are failing to understand the merits of the soap as a whole. This cannot be good for the future of ATWT.

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