

Buffy, Britney, and the Bard of Avon

By Ryan McGee

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Some people just don't get it. Peoples' obsession with pop culture, that is. These same people look down on the rise of Cultural Studies in academia as the scourge of Western Civilization. Surely we can't talk about Immanuel Kant and "Blade Runner" in the same sentence, they decry, noses in the air, sipping a Venti Macchiatto with a twist of lime and pretending they're in a respectable café when in fact they are on one of 164 Starbucks on that particular urban block.

The same people will probably snicker or just feel sad for the depraved soul that is I for having a moral crisis last night between going out with friends and watching the series finale of "Buffy The Vampire Slayer". The fact that television almost won out over a social outing only confirms that fact that I spend a good deal of time dealing with pop culture that is, like the Thane of Cawdor might say, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.

I'd love to argue that when you get right down to it, there's little difference between Shakespeare, "Buffy", and Britney Spears.

Now, are there qualitative differences? To be sure. But, the beauty of these three lies in the fact that, to a certain extent, any debate about their relative merits is rendered moot. Put an English professor, a 20-something, and a 12-year old girl in a room. Place before them a copy of the "Complete Works of Shakespeare", a copy of a "Buffy" DVD, and a copy of a Britney CD. The professor will talk about iambic pentameter, the 20-something will end a lot of words unnecessarily in the "-y" suffix, and the 12-year old will mimic the moves in the video "(Oops!) I Did It Again" perfectly. Each will argue the merits of their chosen object of affection until blue in the face. Each will insist that theirs is the best achievement.

So, who's right?

Hopefully, the very question itself is rendered ridiculous by this example. It's not a matter of right or wrong; it's a qualitative opinion. In essence, the odd triumvirate of popular culture above come at their respective objects of affection with equal aplomb, and as such, should be equally respected.

Now, does that mean you have to respect their object? Certainly not. But people are not only offended by the pop culture tastes of others, they in turn are offended by the person harboring such delusional tastes. The two apparently come as a package deal. Buffy's baggage, for some people, is my baggage. I've seen it. Heck, I've dated it.

It's interesting to watch the transubstantiation, as it were, between the object of pop culture and the one who likes said object. Whatever pre-conceived notions people bring to a despised element of pop culture are, in essence, transferred to me once they find out my affinity for it. The biggest example of this

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is, of course, pro wrestling. I used to be quite defensive about my watching of the show. Simply by tuning in, I was accused of encouraging misogyny, violence, and depravity. Heck, all I did was watch the darn thing. I didn't put a supermodel through a breakaway table. Honestly. Wasn't me.

Of course, the reverse is true, as well. Look at Marilyn Manson being accused of basically causing the Columbine massacre. The link between their fandom and the killings was intrinsically linked for many people. Never mind the millions of other Marilyn fans who never killed anyone. The properties of one engage in a symbiotic relationship with the other; to be separate, for many people, is impossible.

Is this true? Am I intrinsically linked to "Buffy", "Alias", "24", Phish, or Nick Hornby? Do I have any autonomy from these objects? I can't imagine these elements to be intrinsically linked to me. The only connection is that something in each of these objects speaks directly to my emotional or intellectual faculties in some way, shape, or form. There's a social energy (to borrow a phrase from Stephen Greenblatt) going on here, but it's not quite the all-consuming symbiosis some people claim it to be.

It's like a jigsaw puzzle. Everyone's tastes are shaped in a unique way, and sometimes the unlikeliest pieces fit in the pop-culture puzzle of your psyche. Hey, I am as surprised as soon that I turn up the radio anytime "Cry Me a River" comes on the radio. A few years ago, I either would have fought the impulse, or at least not revealed it to anyone.

But why should I, or anyone, be embarrassed about their tastes in pop culture? Why should we go out of our way to deny ourselves pleasure in the form of a song, book, or movie that we really like? My own jigsaw puzzle dictates that a Coldplay song will resonate deeper within my soul than a Sean Paul jam, but sometimes, I really like dance hall. I can appreciate watching a steel-cage match on RAW and realize that it's not quite as satisfying as reading "The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay". For other people, the only Clay they need is on "American Idol". Fair play to all involved.

Some people would love to believe that there's only room for high or low culture within a particular person's palette. That would just be sad, in my humble opinion. If you can't get up on a table after five drinks and scream "Take On Me" at the top of your lungs with 15 of your new closest friends from the table nearby with the cute girl with the tongue ring, then you're just not doing it right. Is it "Eleanor Rigby"? Jeez, it's not even "Billie Jean". That's not the point.

At that moment, 16 of you are connected by something none of you can explain, but all of you can feel. And it's in those moments where pop culture, or all shapes, sizes, and demeanors, enters into the collective spirit and prove its worth to all of us.