The Ashgate Research Companion to Fan Cultures

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Placing Fan Cultures: Xenites in the Transnational Spaces of Fandom

Publication details

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Introduction

Dynamics of space and place and the process of deterritorialization have become central topics in media research due to new technological developments, increased media mobility and transnationalism. This chapter, situated in the field of fan geography, brings theorizations of space and place to the context of television fan cultures. As we know, television has traditionally operated as a national medium that extends to a particular geographic area (Hilmes 2008; Scannel 1996), giving television the power to define that particular region and address the audience through a shared national identity (Kraszewski 2008). Technological developments in the television and media industry suggest a departure from nationally scheduled TV programming towards more individualistic, participatory and transnational consumption practices (Chalaby 2005; Moran 2009; Sinclair 2009).

Fan cultures are seen to be at the heart of this media change, embodying the participatory audience practices with use of convergence culture, crossing the spatial and temporal boundaries of broadcasting with the shared transnational time-space of the fan forums (Bailey 2002; Jenkins 2003, 2004: 27). Transnational online fan communities operate in the context of the global media culture, be it Japanese anime, fantasy, science fiction or horror fandom, illustrating the popular tastes that are adopted, cherished and recognized across the world by members of particular interpretive subcultures (Choi and Wada-Marciano 2009; Iwabuchi 2010; Kalviknes Bore and Williams 2010; Lee 2011). Indeed, fandoms can be seen as resistant to the national boundaries of media culture by seeking cultural texts and communities beyond the easily available and often nationally bounded mainstream media. As such, fandoms illustrate the complexity of cultural globalization and the globalizing forces that operate from the bottom up, thus challenging the production and distribution business that clings to traditional commercial markets and understands audiences as being part of particular territories (Lee 2011: 1136, and also Chapter 14 in this volume).

This chapter explores the geographies of national and transnational online fandoms in the context of the Finnish *Xena: The Warrior Princess* (XWP) fan community and the ways in which spaces of fandom shape fan identities and the experience of being a fan. The case of Finland was chosen as it offers an example of a fandom in a small, linguistically specific region within a globalized media culture. It shows how new boundaries of identity emerge partly as a response to the process of globalization, how these boundaries connect with sense of place and the ways in which national media cultures become and remain relevant despite

the growth of global cultures. The case goes on to show the territorial forces that shape the experience of fandom. The simultaneous experience of a place as a constraint and as a shared cultural context become negotiated against the transnational space of fandom. Thus, the case offers insight into how national identities and transnational sensibilities collide in the experience of fandom.

The research is based on multi-sited ethnography conducted between 1999 and 2004.[1] The 12 interviews for the research were selected partly as a snowball method, but the initial three interviews came about as a response to a newspaper announcement on the research. The semi-structured interviews lasted from one hour to an hour and a half. Besides the thematic interviews, the research included observation of the main fan sites. These included two Finnish sites, Pauli's Xena site (http://www.sci.fi/~huuhkapa/xena/) and SubXena (http://www.angelfire.com/wa/axaXWP/), of which Pauli's Xena site and its guestbook was the most significant, and three international sites, Whoosh! (http://Whoosh.org), Tom's Xena page (http://www.xenafan.com) and Xena discussion group on alt.tv (https://groups.google.com/forum/?fromgroups#!forum/alt.tv.xena).

In addition the research data included participatory observation of a fan meeting in 2003 and a textual analysis of the series, and secondary media texts, such as news articles on TV-magazine *Katso*, concerning the show. As a multi-sited study, the research examines a given phenomenon from various sites in order to grasp the complexity of the phenomenon and the significant connections between the sites (Marcus 1986: 168, 171–3, 1995). Thus, the empirical material was collected by following the paths of fandom: the fan practices and the sites that emerged as relevant. By finding relevant intersections, the multi-sited research strives to connect the phenomenon with social, political and global developments (Saukko 2003: 177). The multi-sited perspective then questions the romance of the marginal and aims to show the ways in which different sites are shaped by relations with other sites, with social, political and economical conditions and therefore never purely grassroots or authentic. In terms of fan studies this means a more relational view to fandoms as part of the local, national and global cultures, and perspectives that acknowledge the relations between fandoms and media industries as well as various other cultural and commercial contexts.

As a multi-sited ethnography, this chapter also follows the strong ethnographic tradition of fan studies (Bacon-Smith 1992; Jenkins 1992; Kozinets 2001). Literature on fan ethnographies has discussed particularly the role and capability of critical distance of the researcher when being part of the community under research (Hills 2002: 40–43). In this case, however, the researcher was not part of the XWP fan community prior to the study. The role as an outsider provided opportunity to see the fan culture with the ethnographic gaze of a stranger as applied in anthropology; however, at the same time being an outsider may create challenges in terms of trust and access. The Finnish fan community was, however, open and welcoming and offered help and contacts whenever needed. It should be noted that as the fans struggled to strengthen their cultural position, the research in question could have been considered as one of the elements that legitimized the fan community and gave particular prestige to it. In that sense, the research, as research often does, took part in the cultural definition of its object, the XWP fandom in Finland. As always, the context and time of the research shaped much of the questions that emerged within the study. The fact that the ethnographic data is from the early 2000s means that the research was able to capture a moment when social media was only emerging and beginning to shape the practices and experiences of fandom more globally. At the same time the power of the national media was challenged with opportunities to connect and extend the fan experience beyond the rhythms

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1   The overall research included two other case studies on fandom: the fandom of Ally McBeal and fandom of Marco Bjurström, a Finnish television host (cf. Nikunen 2005).

and contents of national television. These are also the questions that became central for the interests of this chapter.

Extension of Localities

The recent transformations caused by mobility and advancements in media technology indicate a separation of space and place, meaning that social relations are not necessarily formed face to face. Rather, they are increasingly established across vast distances through media. This separation, also referred to as deterritorialization, challenges our notions and understanding of the sense of place. As Meyrowitz (1985) argued prior to the advent of the Internet, media challenge the situational geographies of social life. According to Meyrowitz, social roles and hierarchies change, since the media provide options to transcend the boundaries of physical settings, thus making these boundaries more permeable. For example, the Internet has exposed the private activity of television viewing, which usually takes place in the home, on public discussion forums and fan sites (cf. Moores 2004). The development of media technology and advent of global social media sites highlight the enlargement of the traditional notion of place. As David Harvey (1989: 240–41) argues, the ways in which technology changes our relation to place, space and time can be understood as a time-space compression where, due to communication technologies, the distance between various actions seems to be shrinking. However, Cindi Katz (2004: 226) offers a useful reformulation of the concept as a time-space extension, from the perspective of those whose local worlds are shaped by global cultures and industries. This means that various global and distant events are experienced at the local level and shape the local space.

The interactions across distances also point to the emergence of transnational space, with notions of transnational sensibility (Robins and Aksoy 2005) or particular cosmopolitan openness (Glick-Schiller, Darieva and Gruner-Dominic 2011; cf. Harvey 2000). Transnational sensibility refers to the capability to think and act across national boundaries, whereas cosmopolitan openness indicates a particular openness to the world. Such notions that emphasize boundary-crossings and a transnational sense of belonging seem relevant in characterizing the transnational online spaces of fandom. Fan sites can be understood as social spaces that enlarge the local spaces of fandom and exceed the constraints of geography. XWP fandom, the focus of this chapter, illustrates this type of deterritorialized virtual fan activity, where specific territorial boundaries and identities are transcended (Gwenllian-Jones 2000, 2004). However, transnational spaces may also enhance the need or longing for national boundaries or national constructions within the transnational. Nationalisms of this kind are reborn or activated in the interaction with the global media culture as a response or an attempt to define an identity in the global context. Moreover, the global flows and interactions are far from equal, harmonious and just. As Massey (1994: 147) points out, 'different social groups, and different individuals, are placed in very distinct ways in relation to these flows and interconnections'. A sense of confusion or powerlessness may appear in various ways. Uguris (2004: 6) argues that in order to regain power over space, a precise sense of boundary is created and unwanted elements are excluded from it. This pinpoints the contested, shifting nature of space. Space is not an independent dimension, rather, it is 'created and recreated out of social relations' (Uguris 2004: 4). Not all attempts to recreate boundaries are necessarily hostile, and they are not necessarily born out of fear, but, rather, out of a sense of not being able to express particular issues and dimensions of identity in the global context. This has also been termed as the production of locality in the context of intense globalization (Appadurai 1996: 179–82; Chow and De Kloet 2008).

Thus, the emergence of boundaries may reveal the definitional power of national regions on the one hand (particular topics rising from this realm) and the definitional power of the transnational space on the other hand (irrelevance of national topics).

While these issues have generally been discussed in terms of migration and multiculturalism, my intention is to explore the dynamics of space and place in the context of fandom that offers perhaps a less stark manifestation of power relations and inequality and, instead, points out the distinct definitional power of these different cultural sites and the relevance of the geographical place in times of time-space compression or extension. Moreover, experiences of fandom illustrate the affective sense of space and place, intimately experienced and embodied in notions of joy and excitement as well as in feelings of loneliness and marginalization.

In the context of fandom, discussions of space and distinction, as introduced by Bourdieu (1989), also bear relevance. Whereas Massey (1994) discusses the fluidity and multiplicity of space and place, Bourdieu emphasizes space as the realm of social differentiation. For Bourdieu, who distinguishes between social space and geographical space, the geographical space mirrors the social space and is structured according to different types of capital. 'The physical structure of the urban life may be viewed as symbolic battlegrounds' (Bourdieu 1999: 123). Geographical spaces are filled with various battles of distinctions. In this struggle, the attempts to transform the categories of perception or acquire strategies of self-presentation 'to influence the image of one's position in the social space' (Bourdieu 1989: 20) become relevant. In the context of fan communities, this can be understood as the self-presentation of the fan community and struggle over a particular subcultural position and value to change or influence the appreciation of the social world. In other words, this struggle is waged to gain a position and recognition. This can happen either in relation to other fan groups or in relation to the media industries that define fandom through marketing, production and distribution, particularly at the national level.

XWP in Finland

Xena: The Warrior Princess (XWP) is a US television series filmed in New Zealand and produced by Renaissance Pictures and MCA/Universal. It was created as a spin-off of the fantasy action series *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* (1994–2000) in 1995, tapping into the television fantasy boom of female heroines during the late 1990s, followed by series such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997), *The Legend of the Seeker* (1998) and *Relic Hunter* (1999). XWP is a happy mixture of fantasy, action, comedy and drama, introducing a female action heroine in the setting of ancient Greece. The series uses a mythological narrative that elusively travels across various historical periods, from ancient times to World War II, and combines the mundane and divine worlds of both humans and gods. The multidimensional intertextual narrative of XWP includes references to ancient myths and Christianity with a particular emphasis on lesbian sexuality. The relationship between the main character, Xena, and her counterpart, Gabrielle, is interpreted by fans as a lesbian love affair, referred to as 'the subtext' of XWP. Although the production of the series ended in 2001, XWP continues to have a wide international fan audience that is active on the Internet (Gwenllian-Jones 2004).

The first broadcast of XWP in Finland was in 1997 on the national commercial channel MTV3[2] and most of the fans first found the series through national television. However, the

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2   The channel is owned by a Swedish media corporation Bonnier. It has no connection to the international music television MTV.

broadcasting was interrupted in 1998 and characterized by disruptions, restricted visibility and contested scheduling. The fan community was formed in the spring of 1998 as part of the Finnish XWP fan site, 'Pauli's Xena pages' (http://www.sci.fi/~huuhkapa/xena/). The fan community, self-proclaimed as Xenites, consisted of about 90 fans, both male and female, ranging in age from 14 to over 60, from different parts of the country. The first Finnish website was extremely important in gathering the XWP fans, since there was little coverage of XWP in the mainstream Finnish media at the time. Like most fan sites, the XWP website included discussions, episode guides, fan fiction and fan art. Discussions on the website ranged from episode details to XWP actresses' media appearances and planning of events. Much of the interaction concerned practicalities, such as the exchange of DVDs, fan merchandise and technical advice. The XWP community was an example of a virtual community where anonymity was not necessarily useful while circulating and sharing fan items as well as organizing meetings. However, it would be inaccurate to describe the Finnish online space as a kind of egalitarian utopia, sometimes referred to in fan literature (Jenkins 1992; Kozinets 2001). When engaged in the virtual space of a fan forum, various hierarchies, organized according to sets of competencies, come into play (Baym 1998: 117, 125; Chin 2002; MacDonald 1998: 139). The Finnish XWP fandom exemplifies this. Technological competence, writing skills, knowledge of the series, active membership and organizational skills determine who gains the most definitional power over the fan community. Thus, those who actively organize fan meetings are also able to define the activities and assume positions as representatives of the community, for example in communications with the television channel MTV3. In terms of its hierarchy, the Finnish XWP community can be described as permissive and fairly open. One of the main reasons for this can be found in the struggle for acknowledgement in the eyes of MTV3. To gain importance, the fan community needed to gain members and visibility.

The fans organized several XWP meetings and small conventions between 1999 and 2011, starting with a modest meeting of two fans in 1999. Regular fan meetings, or 'Xenatures', have taken place in a rural setting, in an old school in a small village in the Eastern part of Finland every summer since 2002. These weekend-long meetings include XWP-related activities, a barbeque, sauna and swimming in the lake. Other meetings included the Xena cruise, 'Xenautica' (2004, 2009) and, 'Xena Night' (2000). Furthermore, fans from different cities have organized their own meetings, such as the Turku Xenites, composed mostly of female fans focusing on the subtext of the series. In addition, fans from Tampere organized an XWP evening at a local gay bar, Mixei (2 March 2002).

National Loneliness

As described above, the Finnish XWP fan community began to form on Pauli's XWP site in 1998. The first notes in the website's guest book reveal the importance of the discovery of other XWP fans in Finland. As these postings show, many were isolated from other Finnish fans and were surprised to discover that there were others who followed the series as well. Many shared the experience of 'being the only fan in Finland', and the discovery of the community was often expressed with excitement, relief and disbelief:

> *It was a great surprise to find the first Finnish Xena-site and a very successful one!*
> *I almost fell off the chair when the trembling Xena-sounds blasted from the speakers.*
> *Nice to know that I am not the only fan in Finland … (Heidi, posted in May 1998)*

Many of the fans were aware of the international XWP fan sites, but their discovery of one in Finnish was particularly significant and surprising since XWP remained almost invisible in the Finnish mainstream media, in the newspapers, magazines and television shows. The delight in finding other XWP fans illustrates the affective dimension of sharing fandom and connecting with others who can understand one's enthusiasm over a particular cultural text and narrative. In terms of identity construction, it is significant to be able to recognize and belong to a group with a distinct fan identity, where being a fan is legitimized and appreciated, instead of having to be isolated as the only fan in one's social circles. The following quotation from an interview is illustrative of this point:

> *It was like heaven realising that I am not alone here with this strange hobby. There are others as crazy as me or even worse! (Erja, 37, female)*[3]

The discovery of other XWP fans in Finland expands the social space of fandom beyond the geographical boundaries of one's local everyday life. At the same time the recognition of other Finnish fans addresses the sense of cultural proximity, the sense of shared experience of Finnishness that connects to various levels of fan experience. First of all, finding other Finnish fans means that it is possible to actually discuss the series and share fandom in one's own language. Secondly, finding Finnish fans makes it possible to arrange fan meetings and events in Finland, geographically closer than in most other cases. Thirdly, fans from the same region can share the same broadcasting schedules that help to synchronize the fan discussions. All these elements became relevant in the fan experiences although not all of them would be equally important to everyone.

Shared experience importantly connects with the notion of Finland as a place of exclusion. The online discussion includes several references to Finland as a backward, regressive and un-cultish place, lagging behind other European countries where XWP is appreciated and regularly aired in the national television:

> *Congratulations for the first Finnish Xena pages … I was starting to wonder whether the internationally popular cult series hasn't been able to charm anyone else here in this god-forsaken place. It was superfun to find your site and other Finnish Xenites. (Pia, posted in May 1998)*

> *Okay! I guess I ought to congratulate Finland for being a unique country. Here the grass is greener than elsewhere. Here the waters are clearer than elsewhere. Here every other person has a mobile phone. Here, Xena is not on TV! You see, I was on vacation in Cyprus and, what do you know, on Saturday night (about 9:45 pm) on came the dark-haired and fiery-eyed warrior princess whom we all know so well. Ok, the fact of course is that Xena is on TV in just about every other country in Europe and the West. Except in Finland (well, that's not news to us, is it?). (Kristian, posted in September 2000)*

The fact that the broadcasting of XWP was constantly disrupted was clearly relevant for the fans and shaped their fan experience by causing frustration and a sense of marginalization. The media companies were seen to hold definitional power over what kinds of cultural texts were available and appreciated in the Finnish culture at large. In this case, in the experiences of the XWP fans, Finnishness meant anti-cult and anti-XWP sentiments. Paradoxically perhaps, the affective sense of place illustrated in these notes draws heavily on

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3   Pseudonyms are used to protect the anonymity of the interviewed fans.

the national narratives of Finland being on the fringes of Europe. Low self-esteem, poverty and continuous hardships are part of the Finnish national saga reiterated in popular films, literature and music – even in the national anthem. The desire to be part of Europe, which emerged and strengthened after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the reformation of the European political scene, does not represent separate, individual notions, but is part of a larger ideology supported and produced in the fields of education, trade, industry and public policy (Alasuutari and Ruuska 1999; Ruuska 1999). In the context of XWP, it is also relevant to note that, at the end of the 1990s, gay culture was emerging, but still rather invisible in the mainstream media as well as in everyday life outside the capital city of Helsinki (Karkulehto 2007; Rossi 2003). XWP and its fan culture connected subcultural readings with gay consciousness in ways that were not commonly shared in the Finnish public sphere.

Part of being a XWP fan was also to distance oneself from the fixed and closed concept of Finnishness and to define one's identity as oppositional to that. The social space of fandom mirrored the geographical place, its constraints and boundaries, while simultaneously offering a means to redefine these boundaries. The affective sense of place, and the ways in which it was experienced and expressed by the fans, entailed the sense of isolation and separation. The fans, then, experienced a double exclusion: being trapped in the god-forsaken country on the fringes of Europe and being marginalized within it.

The Definitional Power of National Television

As discussed above, the broadcasting of XWP on Finnish television was interrupted in 1998. When the show returned, the scheduling caused anger among the fans. During the years 1998–2001, XWP was listed as a children's programme on MTV3 and aired on Saturday afternoons. Consequently the TV guide *Katso* made a report on XWP as an overtly violent series, unsuitable for children. Obviously, the Finnish XWP fans also strongly objected to the interpretation of the series as a children's programme and insisted on a change in the scheduling. They struggled to convince MTV3 of the cult status of XWP and tried to persuade the channel to move the series to an evening time slot. Their struggle with MTV3 illustrates the participatory dimensions of fan cultures, where fans strive to make an impact on the media industries and the distribution of cultural texts (Costello and Moores 2007; Jenkins 1992; Lee 2011).

Fans wrote individual letters and emails to the company and, as a collective effort, submitted a petition signed by 50 fans; however, their request did not elicit a response. MTV3 continued to target children as its main audience for XWP. The overall sentiment among the fan group was that MTV3 had remained ignorant of its audience and shown arrogance towards the fans. From the perspective of the XWP fans, MTV3 misunderstood the central 'cult' value of XWP and misinterpreted the fan movement. The local interpretation of XWP illustrates what Lee (2011: 1135) labels as the '"un-global" nature of the global distribution of cultural commodities, which is tightly bound by commercial considerations of local distributors, who are territorialized linguistically and geographically'.

In their struggle to differentiate themselves from the supposed audience – children – the Finnish XWP fans highlighted the complex and violent content of the TV series. In this definitional process, they also referred to the aesthetic value of the show to underline XWP as a cult text. The characteristics of a cult text are explained as follows:

> *[It] has various layers. It seems simple on the surface, but when you dig deeper, you
> will find other meanings and references to other texts. (Niina, 17, female)*

The abundance of intertextual references seemed to position XWP as a cult series, since understanding the series required interpretational skills and cultural knowledge. In this way, the fans could distance themselves from the easy readings and pleasures of children and *ordinary* people and position themselves as experts with complex interpretations (cf. Jancovich and Hunt 2004). This positioning connects with transnational cult fandom that operates as the basis of interpretive practices with particular fanon (fandom canon) created collectively (Jenkins 1992: 98) or in collaboration (Hellekson and Busse 2006; Turk and Johnson 2012). Fans then take a step back from the national identity (cf. Harrington and Bielby 2005) and position themselves as subcultural and savvy consumers who are trapped in a culture and a nation that does not recognize the existence of cult fandom. This illustrates the subcultural ideology as a way of imagining belonging to a social group and as a way to distance oneself from the place that is *backward* (Jancovich and Hunt 2004).

Clearly the mainstream media and the industry hold substantial definitional power over XWP as a cultural text and the fans as consumers of that text. As pointed out by Matt Hills (2002: 136), media coverage may render TV shows popular, trendy or cult. In the Finnish case, there were only a few stories on XWP featured in the TV guide *Katso* and the two evening papers *Iltalehti* and *Ilta-Sanomat*,. The question then was not about maintaining the cult status but rather achieving it.

Finally, in 2002, XWP was moved to Saturday evening on another channel (TVTV, later SubTV) owned by MTV3. The new channel focused on entertainment and the niche markets of various subcultures, such as fantasy and science fiction, thus it seemed to suit the cult status of XWP.

However, the new subculturally oriented channel SubTV had restricted reach, particularly in the north of Finland. Therefore, DVDs and videocassettes continued to be circulated among the fans to enable them to catch up with the latest seasons or episodes shown on Finnish television. Due to various disruptions and restrictions in the availability of XWP in Finland, the national broadcasting time of XWP was never quite established as the core of the XWP experience in Finland. However, even though fans were able to buy DVDs online and detach from the national television schedule, the scheduling was regarded as important in terms of fan identity. By defining XWP in a particular way, the channel defined its fans, who had to explain to their friends and families why XWP was more than a children's show to them. This was the core of the struggle: to translate the cult status of XWP to the Finnish people, who remained unaware of it mostly due to bad scheduling choices made by MTV3. The struggle was not only about the prestige and distinction. It was also a practical matter, to have the show running regularly on national television, and preferably prime time, would serve the Finnish fan audiences and their sharing of fandom.

Lacking such regularity the XWP fans had to cross the boundaries of national television and create their own cycles of viewing within the fan community by distributing and circulating the show on DVD or video and by organizing specific viewing events. This space of fandom was particularly significant for expanding the time-space of national broadcasting and for connecting with the transnational space of fandom. Indeed, the main source of support for the particular cultural value of XWP as a cult was drawn from the transnational fan sites. The connection between cult fandom and transnational online communities was particularly relevant for construction of fan identity.

Transnational Extensions of the Fan Experience

Most members of the Finnish XWP online community were also members of various transnational XWP communities or at least followed the discussions on international XWP sites, such as Whoosh!, Alt.tv.xena discussion group and Tom's Xena page (www.xenafan. com). Since many of the XWP fans were already part of other fan cultures (for example, Babylon 5, Star Wars), they had no difficulty in finding international XWP fan sites on the Internet. Transnational online sites offered a framework for the fans as part of global cult fandom as well as interpretative tools for the analysis of the show. As such, transnational fan sites created collective knowledge that could play a critical role in shaping global cultural markets, as argued by Lee (2011).

Consequently, the perspectives shared on these sites were used, first, to define XWP as a cult series and, second, to back up these interpretations in the national fan discussions. Thus, the transnational sites operated as sites of collective knowledge that helped the fans to build and define their tastes and cultural consumption. Indeed, discussions on the transnational online sites seemed to legitimize certain interpretations of the series put forward in the national online discussions. One of these topics was the subtext of the series. The relationship between the main characters, Xena and Gabrielle, was studied from the discussions on the international fan sites:

> First I thought that the subtext was pure imagination, but now that I have followed the episodes more carefully I have begun to think that there's something there. (Pauli, posted on 17 August 1998)

> I read an interview with Renee O'Connor on Whoosh! She said that the subtext scenes were added to the series after feedback from the lesbian viewers. (Antti, posted on 18 August 1998)

> The series has something for many (but not for everyone). A more explicit lesbian affair would drive many viewers away, especially in the puritan US (don't expect too much on the basis of American films). And even this aspect is adopted from the subtext positive alt.tv.xena news group. (Pauli, posted on 28 September 1998)

The necessity to search for evidence to support interpretations made on the transnational sites is partly explained by the fairly heteronormative public culture of Finland in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Although the subject would be discussed in a casual manner ten years later, during this period in Finland, discussions and debates over the lesbian affair on the television series were absent from magazines, newspapers and television shows. Therefore, the transnational fan sites offered an important interpretative base for the fans to depend upon as well as representations of more established cultures of sexual minorities in a popular culture context. This illustrates the ways in which the transnational space of fandom can expand the national space in terms of offering more open, multiple and subversive views on cultural texts in ways that are not always available or accentuated in national cultures.

The transnational sensibility in the case of XWP fandom was crystallized in the shared cult sensibility among the fans. Particular interpretations and understandings of the series as multi-layered, playful and sexually subversive exceeded national and cultural boundaries and were shared virtually, across distances. The appropriation of cult readings of the show offered tools for fans to evaluate their national contexts from more global perspectives. In the Finnish context this meant, for example, more outspoken views on the rights and social position of sexual minorities within the fan community.

However, the use of transnational online sites as a source of particular interpretations of the series points out the hierarchy between the small national and the more established transnational forums with thousands of members and activities operating in the English language. Finnish fans studied and learned from the views expressed on the transnational sites, since they offered more citations and material from the production (particularly Whoosh!), and they appeared to have power in terms of their ability to influence the production, as the postings above illustrate. Moreover, due to broadcasting schedules, the transnational fan discussions were more in sync with the actual production of the series than that on Finnish television. This created a sense of proximity between the transnational sites and the production that was not achievable in Finland. By participating in and following the activities on transnational sites, it was possible to imagine proximity with the production of XWP and a sense of being at the centre of XWP fandom. These engagements seemed to expand the fans' experience of XWP and offered the possibility to connect to multiple spaces of fan interpretations, debates and activities. The transnational fan community provided legitimacy for the cult status of XWP and, therefore, of the cult status of the fan community. The influence of the transnational fandom was seen not only in the debates and the formation of the fanon, but also in the practices of the fandom. Fan fiction and the introduction of fan activities online were increasingly written in English so as to reach international audiences and fellow fans.

The Return of the National: Geographic Encounters

As argued before, the experience of place among the Xenites was contradictory. On the one hand Finland was experienced as backward and on the other hand it was the cultural context of the XWP experience that they sought to share with others. While transnational sites offered to expand the fan experience beyond the national context, at the same time it could not provide for fans to express and share fandom in their own language with references to their culturally specific experiences. To be able to express their views, emotions and ideas inspired by the show in their own language was clearly important to the fans. Many of the XWP members had good English language skills, however just as many lacked adequate language skills to take part in the often linguistically elaborate discussions on transnational fan sites. Without Finnish discussions these fans would remain silent observers in fan communities. In addition, fans wrote fan fiction in Finnish and even a book (self-published) for the Finnish speaking fans and their friends. Over the years, the active members became well acquainted both online and offline. Many alliances were formed, interestingly, according to geography. Those fans that lived close to each other also connected offline. Two male fans, one over 50 years of age and the other over 60, both living in the north of Finland, became friends through the virtual XWP community. They started to exchange XWP merchandise and call each other on the phone weekly. Since both men were living alone, XWP fandom provided new and relevant social relations for them, expanding their local social circles. In another case, a 19-year-old female fan found another fan of the same age in a small town in the centre of Finland, and they started to see each other as friends, also taking up martial arts as a hobby together. Fan groups in the Turku and Tampere areas organized their own local events. These local meetings illustrate how social relations were formed outside virtual space and organized according to the geographical place. A sense of proximity was not experienced only because of a shared interest in XWP, it was also because of the shared experience of the place and the possibility of meeting physically.

There is a particular closeness in the shared space of fandom bounded by geography – a particular kind of national space that is based on proximity, both social and geographical. This seems to suggest that the national context does not simply restrict fan experience but also operates as material texture that provides for shared experiences otherwise unattainable in the context of global fandom.

Conclusion

Today, it seems easy to transcend the national boundaries of media. The possibility to download and stream episodes on the Internet, and to watch them anytime and anywhere, seems to epitomize the contemporary global media culture that has left national TV programming behind. Media use is seen as more fragmented, multi-layered and individualized than before. In some sense, cult fans have always been unsynchronized with the mainstream media. To be in the margin is, in effect, the essence of cult fandom that seeks its identity in the distinction from the mainstream, exploring novelties from the margins. Thus, to be able to explore the global media culture online, enhances the practices of fandom particularly well. The interactions between national and transnational fan sites speak of the emergence of a transnational space, with a particular sensibility of openness. Connecting with the transnational space of fandom seemed to enlarge the experience of the local and add to fan experience in important, even cosmopolitan ways, thus illustrating in practice some cultural implications of the time-space extension.

While crossing distances and connecting with global media cultures have become easier than before, it does not mean, however, that the transnational spaces are without hierarchies and that national broadcasting is meaningless to fan practices and identities. As this case has shown, national broadcasting affects fans and fan identities in various ways. The ways in which national broadcasting scheduling defined XWP as a children's show are illustrative of the power of definition by media industries. Examples of moral panic over anime or horror fandom also illustrate, in other contexts, the cultural battles into which fan cultures are drawn in the national mediascapes. In these battles, fandoms are defined and often misinterpreted. Therefore, the ways in which the mainstream media, such as national newspapers, television news and current affairs programmes, treat fandoms and the objects of fandom become relevant.

It seems that national television schedules still have the power, even among the technologically savvy and participatory audiences such as XWP fans, to shape and define viewing practices and fan identities, particularly through marketing and television schedules. This illustrates the power of media industries to position fans in the social space whereas, in the case of XWP, fans struggled to transform these positionings. These struggles are examples of geographical space filled with battles of distinction.

The relevance of a place becomes even more apparent in the practices of fandom: in the desire to share fandom and to meet face to face with others from the same national or local region, as well as in the desire to discuss XWP, to write fan fiction and to create websites in one's own language. The sense of place and proximity becomes relevant in shaping one's fan experience even if it does not determine it. It is something that gives the experience its cultural specificity and texture. A study that simply focuses on the technological advances of crossing distances may overlook the relevance of the various territorial forces that shape fandom. These dynamics of place and space are relevant in fan experiences but they are also areas that are transforming rapidly, particularly in linguistically small cultural areas. Furthermore, the sense of place and space are shaped differently in different contexts, thus

its contradictions may be experienced very differently among the fans, say, in Tokyo, San Jose or Tampere. To capture these differences and the various ways fandoms are defined and shaped locally and nationally, as well as to capture the ways these experiences are extended or shaped by the global forms of fandoms, is a significant and an emerging area for fan studies. The research on fan geographies is particularly prominent in demonstrating the complexity of global processes and the ways in which these processes may be resisted and advanced from the grassroots level, in the local and national everyday contexts of fandom.

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