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The Cult Afterlife

By Polly White

Introduction

This article looks at science fiction programmes that gain cult status via remediation after their initial release, and failure, as broadcast television texts, looking at both official and unofficial remediation. Bolter and Grusin explain “we call the representation of one medium in another remediation”, outlining that remediation is reform. I use the term to explore the official and unofficial (fan-driven) remediations of texts, as the text is reshaped in the process. Elements are emphasised or de-emphasised, added or taken away, changing fans’ relationship with the text. I explore this changing relationship through textual and extra-textual analyses of the case studies of *Firefly* (Joss Whedon, 2002) and *Cowboy Bebop* (Shinichirō Watanabe, 1998), due to their textual similarities and shared genre.ⁱ *Firefly* is a hybrid science fiction western, set in the future after a civil war between allied and independent planets, which the Alliance has won. The series follows the crew of the spaceship *Serenity*, many of whom fought in and lost the war.ⁱⁱ *Cowboy Bebop* is also a hybrid science fiction western, set in the future after an accident leaves the earth uninhabitable, forcing humanity to spread across the solar system. The series follows the crew of bounty hunters on the spaceship *Bebop*. Themes of resistance and freedom are driving forces for characters in both shows, and both texts belong to the science fiction genre. I am studying science fiction as it is predisposed to becoming cult due to the gaps around the text, allowing room for both official and unofficial remediations. This means that when both programmes ended on broadcast television, their lives were not over. I use genre as an entry point into locating cult, before searching for cult in the programme’s positioning and the circumstances

under which it was taken up by fans, which I argue ultimately predominates the role of genre'. In this article, I consider why *Firefly* and *Cowboy Bebop* failed – or were perceived to have failed – upon their initial transmission as television texts. I then outline in what forms the two programmes were officially and unofficially remediated, considering how each remediation challenges or reinforces fans' feeling of ownership over the text. Finally, I examine how *Firefly* and *Cowboy Bebop* gained cult status. My argument is underpinned by the protectiveness the fan communities have for the texts and how the shows are set apart from and in opposition to the mainstream. I strive to maintain a balance between the official and unofficial remediations of each text as I argue that both the active fan communities and the respective television and film producers played a role in the texts gaining cult status after initial release, despite, or because of, their early deaths as broadcast texts.

Defining Cult

Cult, in my work, refers to a status that a text acquires, gained through textual characteristics that are predisposed to be picked up by cult fans. Matt Hills asserts that cult texts can be analysed through “family resemblances”, where texts possess a network of similarities – either overall similarities or similarities of detail. “Cult status” holds no absolute definition and rather than considering “cult” a genre, it can be better understood that cult media possess similarities. Hills argues that an “Endlessly Deferred Narrative” is the biggest link between unrelated cult texts. Cult status then relies on “undecidability”; the leaving of space for interpretation and speculation. The hyperdiegesis of the cult text is the creation of an expansive narrative space, where only a small portion of the narrative space is seen directly in the text, but the whole of the narrative space operates in accord with the internal logic of the text.ⁱⁱⁱ It is for this reason that

certain genres are more likely to produce cult texts. Sara Gwenllian-Jones and Roberta E. Pearson support this argument, observing that cult television texts usually, although not exclusively, belong to a fantastic genre (e.g. science fiction and fantasy), an observation echoed in Hills' writing, as these genres are more likely to allow narratives across multiple time frames and settings, creating infinite metatextual possibilities.^{iv} Here the metatext can be understood as an amalgamation of that which exists around and between the text, it is a collaborative space which is added to, interpreted and tracked. I emphasise the common assessment that cult texts belong to genres that leave gaps to be further explored, as it will be useful to my article as I look at science fiction texts that have been remediated, where I argue that certain textual characteristics are required for a text to be picked up by cult fans and thereby gain cult status. However, my article is also occupied with failure, while these textual gaps hold significance, I find it more useful to pull out the idea of gaps a little further and look at how *Firefly* and *Cowboy Bebop* became cult because of gaps that were introduced as part of their failure as broadcast texts or the industrial gaps that fans worked to fill.

How *Firefly* and *Cowboy Bebop* died

This section examines why *Firefly* and *Cowboy Bebop* failed upon their initial transmission as television texts, beginning with *Firefly*. Whedon had intended for *Firefly* to be a serious character study, but Fox promoted the show as an action-comedy and requested changes to shift the tone to be lighter. Whedon states, “Fox came out of the box saying we’re looking for flash, we’re looking for comfort [...] there wasn’t a lot of either [in the original pilot]”.^v Reshoots for the pilot “Serenity” were needed to adjust the tone. An even more apparent conflict was the network’s reported dislike of the western genre, as discussed in the DVD commentary,

Joss Whedon: People on horses, really disturbing to the network. They didn't like the western thing, which is hilarious considering...

Nathan Fillion: That was the idea of the show.^{vi}

While this conflict in isolation does not spell out the cause of *Firefly's* failure, it does lay the foundations for the narrative that Fox mistreated *Firefly*, did not understand it or give it a chance to succeed.

The scheduling of the programme also contributed to its failure, as one of the reasons for cancelling the series was low Nielsen Media Ratings.^{vii} Fox interrupted the scheduled airing of *Firefly*, as Rhonda V. Wilcox explains, "Fox had paid a hefty sum to air Major League Baseball playoffs and therefore repeatedly cancelled episodes and disturbed the narrative of *Firefly*".^{viii} This irregularity of broadcasting is discussed with frustration by the cast in the fan documentary *Done the Impossible*,

Alan Tudyk: We've been beaten up for the last [...] weeks and months, and frustrated just like anybody who liked the show, that it wasn't on every week, it was on every third. [It] was the most insane non-chance of a TV show.^{ix}

This adds to the idea that Fox had mistreated *Firefly*, as irregular broadcasts meant viewers were unable to watch the show consistently, and no momentum was allowed to build before cancellation.

The episode release order has also been criticised. Fox felt that the two-hour pilot "Serenity" did not give enough action, so it was aired last in December 2002, after the show had been cancelled. "The Train Job" was requested as a replacement for the first episode. Keith DeCandido cites this as the reason for *Firefly's* failure "FOX did not give the show an opportunity to make that good

first impression, nor did it give viewers sufficient reason to tune in the following week”.^x The prevalent narrative is that Fox killed *Firefly* through a combination of not trusting in Whedon's vision for the show, inconsistent scheduling, and misordered episodes. As previously highlighted, Whedon and the cast of *Firefly* did not shy away from explicitly criticising Fox for their treatment of the series, holding them liable for its short run,

Nathan Fillion: They kicked us down, and then they kicked us while we were down.^{xi}

The message is clear: Fox is to blame for the failure of *Firefly* as a broadcast text.

Scheduling likewise played a role in *Cowboy Bebop's* failure. The show originally aired on the network TV Tokyo in a Friday 6:00 pm timeslot, which made many of its themes and content unsuitable, particularly its prevalent nudity and depictions of violence. For example, episode 1.1 has extensive graphic violence and explores drug abuse, showing the use of the drug “bloody eye”, which is taken by applying it directly into the eye. At one point in the episode, violence escalates as the drug is taken to demonstrate its authenticity to a prospective buyer, who then gets shot in the head during a gunfight between rival crime syndicates, demonstrating how unsuitable *Cowboy Bebop* was for its scheduled air time.^{xii} One reason for this was that the air time was not known when the show was being produced, as the cast explains,

Koichi Yamadera: They didn't know when it was gonna air, as soon as the schedule was set, the first episode was cut.^{xiii}

Of the 26 episodes, 12 with more reserved themes were released, while anything with more extreme violence and drug abuse was cut. Koichi Yamadera urges viewers to seek out the complete series, “[Because] they weren't all on TV, it's hard, but please watch them all!”^{xiv} As

the show was not aired in its entirety, it was effectively cancelled mid-run, failing on its first broadcast due to its unsuitability for the given time slot. In response, a special was created: “Session XX Mish-Mash Blues”. “Session XX” is an episode made up of clips from other episodes in the series, with the character’s voice-overs giving their thoughts. The episode begins with Spike saying that “nothing lasts forever” and explaining to the viewer: “It’s rather sudden, but this is the last episode, so this time we’d like to remember what’s happened so far and meditate on some things”. The characters speak on seemingly unrelated subjects, such as bonsai maintenance and their taste in men, each reflection offers a critique on themes of conformity, suppression, and the deprivation of freedom.

Jet: Each bonsai has its own personality, and you have to let those live. Foolish people will try to trim anything and everything all the same. They’ll just cut and cut and cut the parts that stick out. But the parts that stick out are its personality and its originality. People who don’t get that shouldn’t hold clippers.

Faye: If everyone had the same skin and the same face you couldn’t tell who you were.

Spike: If there’s a God in this world, I’d like to ask for one wish. Divine retribution to all those who take freedom away.^{xv}

The episode ends with a message (in English) saying, “You will see the real *Cowboy Bebop* someday”. This ending message tells the viewer that the *Cowboy Bebop* which had been aired so far had been censored to the extent it could not be considered the real show, an open criticism of the network and television as a whole.^{xvi}

It is important to consider what happened after *Cowboy Bebop* was cancelled. It was picked up by the network Wowow later that same year, airing all 26 episodes at 1:00 am, a more suitable

time slot for the content. SFE outlines that it is “this 26-episode ‘complete’ edition that was distributed abroad, and which won *Cowboy Bebop* its Seiun Award”.^{xvii} Sandra Annett argues that “despite (or perhaps because of) its controversial release, *Cowboy Bebop* won awards at the Kobe Animation Festival and the Japan National Science Fiction Convention in 2000”.^{xviii} Therefore, to say that *Cowboy Bebop* failed upon its first transmission is correct; however, it did not fail as a television text.

Resuscitation via remediation

The viability and success of the official remediation of *Firefly* was intrinsically tied to the fan activity in response to the show’s cancellation. Fans ran campaigns under the title of “Browncoats”, an identity adopted from the narrative of *Firefly* referring to the independents who fought and lost the war against the Alliance. Stacey Abbott observes that this identity “became a part of the fans’ positioning of themselves as fighting an ‘unwinnable’ fight against the network who cancelled the series”.^{xix} This “fight” took many forms, amongst them a postcard campaign sent to Fox and sponsors. These efforts failed in keeping *Firefly* on the air, however, Wilcox and Cochran argue they did result in the release of a DVD box set, as fans campaigned through visible spending, “[convincing Fox] that a DVD would be profitable”.^{xx} The *Firefly* DVD provided deeper insight into the production of the show with commentaries as well as the opportunity to watch the series as Whedon had intended. First, all episodes play in the correct order. Whedon expresses frustration that, with the pilot airing last, many of the mysteries being set up were already known to the audience, such as Kaylee not dying when at one point in this episode it appears that she does,

Joss Whedon: This being aired last, some of the surprise is kind of ruined.

Nathan Fillion: You can take some comfort in the fact that there's going to be some folks buying this DVD boxset who aren't gonna watch the pilot last.^{xxi}

Episodes were also re-edited for the DVD release. A graphic on the deleted scenes states that 'all of the episodes on this DVD appear as Joss Whedon originally conceived them', which informs the viewer that the DVD is the only way to see the show without network interference, making the experience seem more valuable as it is true to the author's vision. This is a feeling which is reaffirmed through the commentary on the final episode, which offers an intimate experience with Whedon as he speaks directly to the viewer,

Joss Whedon: [Taking] you through the process of coming up with this episode and what it means to me...^{xxii}

The DVD's high sales "helped light a fire" and bolstered Universal Pictures' decision to make the film *Serenity* (Joss Whedon, 2005).^{xxiii} Wilcox reports that "in less than 22 months, 500,000 copies were sold", with existing fans of the show buying multiple DVD's for themselves and as gifts to recruit new viewers.^{xxiv} Whedon recognises "[the] incredible amount of fan support and the intensity of it has always informed not just the studio's enthusiasm, but their strategies and how they want to handle marketing".^{xxv} This put the film in a difficult position: it needed to reward the loyalty of its vocal fanbase, provide closure to the cancelled series, set up future works in the *Firefly* universe and, importantly, appeal to a mainstream audience which would prove that more *Firefly* works were commercially viable and widely anticipated. Regardless of whether *Serenity* managed to achieve any of the above, it did reward the dedicated fanbase with a film after their campaigning. In Whedon's video introduction to "Can't Stop the Signal", a

preview screening of *Serenity*, he addresses the fans saying, “They tried to kill us. They did kill us. And here we are. We’ve done the impossible, and that makes us mighty”, signalling that “Browncoats” had fought to keep *Firefly* alive after its cancellation and won.^{xxvi}

As has been outlined, “Browncoats” campaigned in various forms for the success of *Firefly* and then *Serenity*. The promotion strategy for *Serenity* was highly reliant on fan campaigning. One fan who was active in the marketing of *Serenity* was “11th Hour”, best known for her creation of guerrilla marketing posters. 11th Hour was contacted by a lawyer of Universal Pictures and told she had to take down any merchandise in her store with a reference to the film's title. 11th Hour posted to a fan message board and fans responded saying that they had been tools for Universal Pictures to promote the film and now Universal Pictures were re-negotiating their relationship with the fan community.^{xxvii} “Browncoats” expressed anger that Universal Pictures had benefited from 11th hour’s marketing and were now threatening her and questioned the company’s ownership of *Firefly* and *Serenity* after the involvement of fans in the promotion of the film. Cochran explains that a “Browncoats” invoice was assembled, with fans tallying the volunteer hours given to the campaign and estimating that “Universal owed the fans \$2.1 million for about 28,000 ‘billable fan-hours’”.^{xxviii} This was not a real invoice, but one created to make a statement, showing self-awareness of the value of their fan labour.

Next, I consider the fans’ relationship with Whedon and if their resistance carries over in this relationship. While critical of Universal Pictures, *Firefly* fans are hugely celebratory of the source text. This is in large part due to the distinct relationship between Whedon and his fans; to reject elements of the source text would be to reject Whedon. His ability to position himself as “one of us” needs to be explored, as does the implication of having a celebrated author present in the fandom, as actions are likely to become less resistant to or critical of the text as to do so is to

criticise someone from within the fandom, this comes with the heavy caveat that Whedon retained his respected ‘author’ role which further protected him from criticism. Whedon performs as an authentic fan “who lurks on but also posts to and interacts with fans on message boards”.^{xxix} Posting on fan message boards allows Whedon to perform publicly as a fan, and this performance is perceived as authentically himself. The language of “us” and “we” is particularly evident of this fan positioning and the power that wields. As Cochran asserts, Whedon is an active participant in the complicated relationship between the fans and those they are resisting (Fox and Universal Pictures):

He has on occasion tried to calm fans’ ire for big entertainment by reminding them that *Serenity* would not exist without Universal’s support even as he sounds his ‘they-tried-to-kill-us’ battle cry.^{xxx}

While *Firefly* fans have been shown to be actively resistant, this resistance is not aimed at Whedon. I argue that this is in part because of his positioning as a fellow fan. There is evident tension between those who officially and those who unofficially produce in the world of *Firefly*; however, any resistant fan practices do not claim ownership of the text from Whedon.

To outline the unofficial remediation of *Cowboy Bebop*, which brought the show to the North American market, I will provide an overview of how anime was ‘pulled’ to America, as this context is important in understanding the level of ownership fans felt over anime in America. As Henry Jenkins observes, media convergence introduces new technologies which allow consumers “to archive, annotate, transform, and recirculate media content”.^{xxxi} This is true of *Cowboy Bebop*, as it was released in Japan on VHS, which opened it up to grassroots distribution

into America. Jenkins explains grassroots convergence as “the increasingly central roles that digitally empowered consumers play in shaping the production, distribution, and reception of media content”.^{xxxii} This grassroots convergence allowed Americans to seek global culture, and Jenkins argues that these audiences seek global culture for escape and that the appeal of Asian media is its cultural otherness. These fans are what Jenkins calls “pop cosmopolitans”.^{xxxiii} These consumers are positioned as resistant to the mainstream, as it does not provide “culturally other” media. Sean Leonard argues “the early pop cosmopolitans in anime fandom did not merely seek escape”; instead, fans worked to bring anime to their local communities.^{xxxiv} A distribution network developed between fans motivated by what Leonard terms a “cultural sink”, which he explains as “a void that forms in a culture as a result of intracultural or transcultural flows”.^{xxxv} The cultural sink “formed due to a dearth of sophisticated adult animated programming in America after a promulgated rearticulation of the cartoon genre in the 1960s”, which caused fans to pull content from Japan, rather than Japan pushing it through official distribution channels.^{xxxvi} This “pull” began with science fiction fan clubs who used VCRs to record anime aired on Japanese community TV channels. Fred Patten outlines that while from 1967 through 1978 no new Japanese anime aired on American television, “a very small number did appear on Japanese community TV channels”.^{xxxvii} With interest in anime growing, Patten further explains, fans began an international trade of videos through science fiction fan groups, exchanging American science fiction for anime. In 1977 there was enough demand for a new fan club centred around anime to be formed. Leonard asserts that it was “through these networks, many spread the knowledge of and enthusiasm for Japanese animation to their American counterparts”.^{xxxviii} Internet groups were formed and continued the spread of knowledge. Jenkins gives the example of the MIT Anime Society which, since 1994, “has provided a Website

designed to educate Americans about anime”.^{xxxix} Here both Leonard and Jenkins have emphasised the role of these anime fans in educating and encouraging interest in animation in America. It is through these grassroots practices that anime fans in America first watched *Cowboy Bebop* as it had been officially remediated in Japan on VHS and DVD. Leonard concludes,

fans had become activists. *Fans helped pave the way for the popularity anime enjoy today.* Without the fan network, and specifically without fan distribution, anime’s success could have never happened.^{xl} (Authors emphasis).

Fans of anime in America felt a level of ownership over the genre, having paved the way for its official distribution.

To examine the official remediation and localisation of *Cowboy Bebop*, I explore the dubbing of the show into English, and then the show being aired on Cartoon Network. Localisation is a process that covers the translation of both dialogue and written signs. However, in some cases, localisation moves beyond translation, changing elements of the original story to align it with North American sensibilities. The anime community which had gained access to original shows and translated them amongst themselves were highly aware of these changes. ADR Producer for *Cowboy Bebop* Yutaka Maseba explains that when translating an anime, they work to stay true to the original visions of the creators: “This is not our show. Our job is to be [...] accurate to what they were trying to tell in their stories”.^{xli} The dub gained the approval of the existing highly critical and vocal anime fans in North America.

Cowboy Bebop launched the programming block Adult Swim on Cartoon Network in 2001 as “the first anime offering in Cartoon Network’s effort to reach the adult male market”.^{xlii} Adult

Swim had its own editing team for localisation, which some fans feared would ruin the show, as shown in an interview on the Anime News Network before *Cowboy Bebop* aired, where many questions were raised about the editing process,

Having *Cowboy Bebop* on Cartoon Network is almost like a dream come true for a lot of its fans. I say almost because there are a lot of fans who are worried that extensive edits will [...] make it into a pale shadow of what it truly is.^{xliii}

All edits made were recorded by Pope on the Anime News Network. Three episodes were deleted from the run, as the content was seen to be potentially upsetting after 9/11. Pope provided summaries of the unaired episodes for fans who had not seen the show before it aired on Adult Swim.^{xliiv} The main changes made to *Cowboy Bebop* in these edits was the covering of bullet holes and the removal of blood, swearing, and nudity. These edits were largely accepted, with Pope ending their observations on the first run by saying they had been pleased that an “anime series geared exclusively for an adult audience was aired on US TV as close to intact as [Cartoon Network] was willing to risk”.^{xliv} Fans’ protectiveness of the text was clearly displayed through the close attention paid to the localisation of *Cowboy Bebop*, enabled by the unofficial distribution that had come before it.

Through remediation, official and unofficial, gaps around both text and industry were identified and challenged in both case studies. Fan activity blurred the lines between producer and consumer, as they became distributors and promoters, operating within industrial gaps and failings. To return to the metatext, outlined in ‘defining cult’, the space left around a text can then also be understood through failure and absence.

The afterlife

This section examines at what points *Firefly* and *Cowboy Bebop* gained cult status, identifying the textual components which predisposed the series to gain cult status and the role of the fan communities.

Whedon's role as author contributed greatly to *Firefly*'s cult status. Hills observes that cult status is recurrently linked to ideologies of romanticism, through notions of 'uniqueness' or 'art' via the figure of the auteur. Despite the problems with the idea that a single author can be identified in the collaborative space of television "fans continue to recuperate trusted auteur figures".^{xlvi} Whedon's performative role has been outlined, as he moulds the fans' relationship with the text. Kate Egan and Sarah Thomas argue that cult status "is heavily dependent on the ability to differentiate [...] from the mainstream, and ascribing a sense of the authentic is often central to this process".^{xlvii} This idea of Whedon as an authentic author had a strong impact on the fan community, as is shown in the fan song 'Ballad of Joss' which celebrates Whedon.

Fox cancelled his program, but that was their loss--

The creator of *Firefly*, the man they call Joss!^{xlviii}

Whedon spoke passionately about his experience after *Firefly* was cancelled, speaking directly to the fans as a fan and author: "It was exactly the show I wanted it to be from the moment I started and so to have it ripped untimely from the womb was not acceptable to me".^{xlix} Hills asserts that with cult programmes that attract a fanatical following, "it is the auteur which acts as a point of coherence and continuity in relation to the world of the media cult".¹ Indeed, Whedon became a rallying point as an author for the fan community after *Firefly* was cancelled. Here I have argued the role of authorship in the development of *Firefly*'s cult status, as it distinguished the show

with romantic ideals of art and uniqueness, and, set it apart from the “popular” media.

Furthermore, through *Firefly*'s failure upon initial transmission, and subsequent fan involvement in each remediation, *Firefly* gained cult status.

To next consider how to locate cult in *Cowboy Bebop*, I argue it is through a combination of Adult Swim opposing itself to mainstream networks by utilising practices already established by anime fans in North America, and these established fans' highly vigilant and protective behaviour over *Cowboy Bebop*, that the show gained cult status. *Cowboy Bebop* was positioned as a cult text by Cartoon Network as it launched anime on the Adult Swim programming block. Gwennlian-Jones and Pearson state that “as television industries [...] responded to the challenges of an ever-fragmenting audience and ever-evolving technologies, cult television became increasingly central to their strategic positioning in a marketplace”.^{li} Targeting “niche” audiences was an important strategy in the post-network era. Amanda Lotz explains,

in the network era, we could assume a broad and heterogeneous audience who viewed linear schedules of network-planned programs. Now we cannot presume that the audience represents the culture at large.^{lii}

This fragmented audience led “to the emergence of cable networks that rejected the broadcast, mass-market mandate in preference of narrowcasting to a select, niche market”.^{liii} The Adult Swim programming block worked to target narrower audiences with shared interests through cult programming, with *Cowboy Bebop* targeting the anime community in North America, which had already been established after a long history of grassroots distribution. Through this grassroots distribution of anime, the fan community felt strong ownership over Asian programmes when they entered North America. Evan Elkins argues that “Adult Swim exploits the aesthetic and political dispositions of movements and fandoms historically considered ‘subcultural’ on some

level”.^{liv} Cartoon Network was aware of the pre-existing “subcultural” anime fan community in North America, as admitted by Sean Akins, Former Creative Director for Cartoon Network, in an interview included on the *Cowboy Bebop* DVD extras: “I saw a bootlegged VHS early on”.^{lv} Furthermore, Adult Swim was aware of Pope’s edit list and provided an interview with Jason DeMarco Sr, a producer for Toonami, where he states, “[the] *Adult Swim* action block wouldn’t have been possible if CN hadn’t known there was an older audience out there who might watch that kind of thing”.^{lvi} Hills observes that since fan consumption behaviours that are at first resistive (such as the unofficial distribution of anime) are commodified by television producers, “the supposedly ‘resistive’ figure of the fan has, then, become increasingly enmeshed within market rationalisations and routines of scheduling and channel-branding”.^{lvii} Pope’s edit list is an example of the commodification of resistance (beyond the mere existence of an anime programming block on Cartoon Network). While it shows how fans enact ownership over the text, such attentive viewing practices also helped Cartoon Network induct new fans of *Cowboy Bebop* watching the series for the first time. Instead of losing confused fans after episodes were cut from the run, fans supplemented the missed plot lines. Furthermore, this blog ultimately (albeit tentatively) endorsed Adult Swim as an official distributor of anime in America. The fragility of the position of anime fans is shown here when an official distributor steps in and makes changes to the programmes which the fans cannot control – changes they had been able to make as a community before through unofficial remediation. This negotiation of power between the network and the fans meant that Adult Swim had to develop its brand carefully so as not to appear to be co-opting anime from the existing fan community which could reject the network. This was in part achieved by Adult Swim aligning itself with the subculture it commercialised, and against the rest of television. This is affirmed by Elkins:

Adult Swim builds its brand culture around a complex taste position that [...] revels in the ability of a fragmented media environment to cater to cult taste. By adopting and appropriating not only the maneuvers of youth subcultures but also the taste positions of groups explicitly resistant to mass culture, the network paradoxically builds a lucrative brand around the supposed rejection of mainstream commercial culture.^{lviii}

Cowboy Bebop gained cult status as it was first “pulled” by anime fans in North America before airing on Adult Swim, who branded themselves as part of the subculture that sought out cult texts. A balance between the constructed and the found was achieved as the network and the fans renegotiated ownership of anime in North America.

Conclusion

Remediation reshapes the text, therefore reshaping fans’ relationship with the text. This is achieved first through the collaborative metatext to which each remediation, official and unofficial, contributes. The DVD remediation of *Firefly* contained rewards for fans’ activities and enhanced Whedon’s role as author of the text. The DVD allowed for accumulation of behind-the-scenes knowledge, as well as personal commentary from Whedon, and the cast and crew talking about the impact that fan campaigning had on them. The official remediation of *Cowboy Bebop* was approached with more caution by the existing fans. While *Cowboy Bebop* being aired in North America rewarded the fans who had worked to bring anime to their local communities, the series was protected by these fans. The dubbing team’s fidelity to the original series gained the approval of the existing highly critical and vocal anime fans in North America. The Adult Swim localisation team was further subject to highly vigilant fans who tracked all

changes made, giving the fans a mastery over the text. Through creating an online encyclopaedia, the fan community held official remediations to a high standard and imparted knowledge gained through grassroots distribution of the Japanese remediation. It is fair to say that these remediations strengthened fan communities through a better knowledge of the text and enabled the protection of *Cowboy Bebop* against changes.

The question of industry positioning is also worth considering. Fans picking up *Firefly* as a cult text upon its cancellation was in part due to the role of Whedon, as he was offered up as an auteur figure. This imbued the text with legitimacy, as the auteur is still tied to the idea of “uniqueness”, setting *Firefly* apart from “popular” mainstream media. Whedon became a beacon in the fan community, supporting their continued and highly visible support. I argue that a series gains cult status when a textual characteristic (in this case, Whedon as an auteur) is taken up by cult fans. This builds on the discussion of Whedon performing authentically as a fan. This authenticity then translated to *Firefly* and its remediations, setting it further apart from the mainstream. While this auteur presence was visible before *Firefly* even aired, I have outlined how each remediation, coupled with Whedon’s performance of authenticity, encouraged further fan activity as well as discouraged critique of the text itself. To explore the role of industry positioning in relation to *Cowboy Bebop*, I outlined the niche targeting strategy of Cartoon Network with the creation of the Adult Swim programming block. *Cowboy Bebop* was used to target pre-existing anime fans in North America, offering up a place for the official distribution of adult anime. The negotiation of power between the network and the fans meant that Adult Swim had to develop its brand carefully so as not to appear to be co-opting anime from the existing fan community which could reject the network. This is in part achieved by Adult Swim

establishing itself as a home for cult programming and therefore labelling itself as a cult brand. It is clear then that both shows were offered as cult texts through the constructed presence of the auteur and the creation of a channel brand identity respectively.

To look, finally, at ownership, this article is fundamentally an exploration of fan ownership. Whether offered or taken, constructed or organic, fans' relationship with the text is what keeps it alive, even in the face of its apparent demise. That is not to say that this ownership is wholly resistant, or that fan practices can ever achieve pure resistance, but I have demonstrated that the appearance of a resistant culture is fundamental to these texts gaining cult status. Fans used *Firefly* as a representative of how marginalised they felt their interests were on broadcast television, and the show was taken up as a symbol of rebellion against Fox, who did not harbour their niche interests. Each official and unofficial remediation strengthened the fans' hold. *Firefly* fans' protectiveness of the text, and therefore cult activity, is a direct response to its early cancellation and consequent remediations. *Cowboy Bebop* fans also enacted ownership over the text through its official and unofficial remediations. Grassroots distribution of anime paved the way for *Cowboy Bebop's* very existence on Cartoon Network. It is because of these distribution practices that themes of resistance and ownership underpin the relationship anime fans have with anime in North America, having created the conditions for its official distribution. Cartoon Network was aware of this, working to create a cult brand through the niche targeting of this established group. Crucially though, anime fans had to choose to take what was being offered, despite having their own means of seeing anime in North America. The fans had to accept the official remediation and distribution, which they did with caution. While *Firefly* fans were protective of the show because of its initial failure and their personal relationship with Whedon,

lamenting its loss and working to see it again in any form possible, *Cowboy Bebop* fans were instead focused on the preservation of the show's original intent and Japanese origins. This meant that while both shows had highly visible fans who felt protective over the text, these communities responded to and created remediations in different ways. While neither fan group worked entirely against the interests of television producers, they acted how they felt would best protect and sustain the text, enacting the ownership they had developed through remediation.

The official and unofficial remediations of *Firefly* and *Cowboy Bebop* contributed to a shared metatext made possible in part by both texts belonging to the science fiction genre, which encourages the accumulation of knowledge, and genre has been an entry point to thinking through cult, however, genre is only one facilitator of these metatextual practices. Both texts were also positioned as cult by the television industry through remediation. In the case of *Firefly*, this was achieved through the continued unifying presence of an author, and for *Cowboy Bebop* this was a result of Cartoon Networks niche marketing. Finally, and most importantly, each remediation intensified the ownership both fan communities felt over their text, meaning the texts gained cult status in their afterlives.

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Bio:

Polly White is a Film Studies MLitt student at the University of St Andrews, having completed a BA at the University of Salford in Television and Radio Studies and is a recipient of the Santander Postgraduate Taught Scholarship award. Their research is engaged with fan studies and queer studies, with a focus on elements in a text which predispose it to be reclaimed or queered by an audience. They have previously written on queer pleasure in *The Love Eterne* (Li Han Hsiang, 1963) and positioning *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Jim Sharman, 1975) within the practices of experimental underground cinema to explore the cult audience’s response to the film. During their time at the University of St Andrews Polly has been involved at the Sands

International Film Festival as part of the curational team, putting together a family friendly screening, and as a contributor to the student-produced Zine.

ⁱ *Firefly*, directed by Joss Whedon (2002; United States: Fox, 2003), DVD.

Cowboy Bebop, directed by Shinichirō Watanabe, (1998; Japan: Beez, 2009) DVD.

Firefly fans are hugely celebratory of Joss Whedon and as a result celebratory language does appear in my work. This article does not intentionally uphold Whedon and seeks to unpack this relationship between the fans and Whedon through the lenses of cult stardom and authorship. Regardless of current discourse, it is never my place or pleasure to support a wealthy beneficiary of the heteronormative patriarchy, and this article at no point does so.

ⁱⁱ The parallel of the textual rallying after failure and the texts afterlife being one out of failure will be explored later in this article.

ⁱⁱⁱ Matt Hills, *Fan cultures* (London: Routledge, 2002), 101-104.

^{iv} Sara Gwenllian-Jones and Roberta E. Pearson, *Cult Television* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), xii.

^v Lynette Rice, “Joss Whedon Reshoots the Pilot for ‘Firefly’”. EW.com, accessed 19 May, 2023, <https://ew.com/article/2002/06/14/joss-whedon-reshoots-pilot-firefly/>.

The reports of reshoots came with reassurance’s that “[when] it comes to Whedon, that’s never a worry.” I include this to highlight the role of Whedon as a celebrated author.

^{vi} *Firefly*.

Nathan Fillion played the character Mal.

^{vii} The Nielsen Media Ratings is the system used to measure audiences in America.

^{viii} Rhonda V. Wilcox, “Whedon, Browncoats, and the Big Damn Narrative: The Unified Meta-Myth of *Firefly* and *Serenity*,” in *Science Fiction Double Feature: The Science Fiction Film As Cult Text*, eds. J.P. Telotte and Gerald Duchovnay (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), 102.

^{ix} *Done The Impossible*, directed by Tony Hadlock et al, (2006; YouTube upload 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Evu3JSf1VEQ&ab_channel=DoneTheImpossible).

Alan Tudyk played the character Wash.

^x Keith DeCandido, ““The Train Job” Didn’t Do the Job: Poor Opening Contributed to *Firefly*’s Doom,” in *Finding Serenity*, eds. Jane Espenson with Glenn Yeffeth, (Texas: BenBella Books, 2005), 56.

^{xi} *Done The Impossible*.

^{xii} *Cowboy Bebop*, 1.1, “Asteroid Blues,” directed by Shinichirō Watanabe, aired October 24, 1998, on Wowow.

^{xiii} *Cowboy Bebop*.

Koichi Yamadera is the voice actor for Spike.

^{xiv} *Cowboy Bebop*.

^{xv} *Cowboy Bebop*, Session XX, “Yoseatsume Blues,” directed by Shinichirō Watanabe, aired June 26, 1998, on TV Tokyo.

^{xvi} TV Tokyo was acting cautiously in the mid-1990s after a controversial episode of *Evangelion* (Hideaki Anno, 1995) was broadcast without executive approval. This meant *Cowboy Bebop* was being released in a censorious climate.

^{xvii} “SFE: *Cowboy Bebop*,” SFE The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction, accessed 19 May, 2023, https://sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/cowboy_bebop.

^{xviii} Sandra Annett, *Anime Fan Communities: Transcultural Flows and Frictions* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 124.

^{xix} Stacey Abbott, “Can’t Stop the Signal’: The Resurrection/Regeneration of *Serenity*,” in *Investigating Firefly and Serenity: Science Fiction on the Frontier*, ed. Rhonda Wilcox and Tanya Cochran (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008), 237.

^{xx} Rhonda V. Wilcox and Tanya Cochran, “‘Good Myth’: Joss Whedon’s Further Worlds,” in *Investigating Firefly and Serenity: Science Fiction on the Frontier*, ed. Rhonda Wilcox and Tanya Cochran (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008), 2.

^{xxi} *Firefly*.

^{xxii} *Firefly*.

^{xxiii} Joss Whedon, “*Serenity*: the official visual companion” (London: Titan, 2005), 17. *Serenity*, directed by Joss Whedon (2005; United States, Universal Pictures, 2005). DVD.

^{xxiv} Wilcox, “Whedon, Browncoats, and the Big Damn Narrative,” 103.

^{xxv} Whedon, “*Serenity*”, 39.

^{xxvi} Abbott, “Can’t Stop the Signal’,” 227.

^{xxvii} “Universal’s legal action against 11th Hour,” [fireflyfans.net](http://www.fireflyfans.net), accessed 19 May, 2023, <http://www.fireflyfans.net/mthread.aspx?bid=2&tid=24829&p=3>.

^{xxviii} Tanya Cochran, “The Browncoats Are Coming! *Firefly*, *Serenity*, and Fan Activism,” in *Investigating Firefly and Serenity: Science Fiction on the Frontier*, ed. Rhonda Wilcox and Tanya Cochran (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008), 247.

^{xxix} *Ibid*, 265.

^{xxx} *Ibid*, 265.

^{xxx} Henry Jenkins, “Pop Cosmopolitanism,” in *Globalization: Culture and Education in the New Millennium*, eds. Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco and Desirée Baolian Qin-Hilliard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 91.

^{xxxii} *Ibid*, 91.

^{xxxiii} *Ibid*, 92.

^{xxxiv} Sean Leonard, “Progress against the Law: Anime and Fandom, with the Key to the Globalization of Culture,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 8, no. 3 (1 September 2005): 282.

^{xxxv} *Ibid*, 283.

^{xxxvi} *Ibid*, 284.

^{xxxvii} Fred Patten, *Watching anime, reading manga: 25 years of essays and reviews* (Berkeley, California: Stone Bridge Press, 2004), 54.

^{xxxviii} Leonard, “Progress against the Law,” 282.

^{xxxix} Jenkins, “Pop Cosmopolitanism,” 99.

^{xl} Leonard, “Progress against the Law,” 298.

^{xli} *Cowboy Bebop*.

^{xlii} Laurie Cubbison, “Anime Fans, DVDs, and the Authentic Text,” *The Velvet Light Trap* 56 (2005): 54.

^{xliii} “Interview: CN Re: Cowboy Bebop and Adult Swim,” Anime News Network, accessed 19 May, 2023, <https://www.animenewsnetwork.com/feature/2001-06-27>.

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These summaries show that American fans already had access to the series and exemplify the efforts of anime fans sharing access and knowledge.

^{xlv} “The Edit List - Cowboy Bebop - Ep. 26,” Anime News Network, accessed 19 May, 2023, <https://www.animenewsnetwork.com/edit-list/2001-11-25/cowboy-bebop-ep-26>.

^{xlvi} Hills, *Fan cultures*, 99.

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^{xlviii} punctuationprecise, “The Man They Call Joss,” YouTube, November 30, 2008.

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^l Hills, *Fan cultures*, 99.

^{li} Gwenllian-Jones and Pearson, *Cult Television*, xix.

^{lii} Amanda Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized* (Second edition) (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 43.

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^{liv} Evan Elkins, “Cultural Identity and Subcultural Forums: The Post-Network Politics of Adult Swim,” *Television & New Media* 15, no. 7 (1 November 2014): 596.

^{lv} *Cowboy Bebop*.

^{lvi} “The Edit List Special,” Anime News Network, accessed 19 May, 2023, <https://www.animenewsnetwork.com/edit-list/2002-03-04/cartoon-network-interview>.

^{lvii} Hills, *Fan cultures*, 12.

^{lviii} Elkins, “Cultural Identity,” 606.