

## *From the Editor: Cultural Fragments, Cultural Flowers*

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Recently I read an argument (by Rana Emerson, in *PopMatters*) for the virtues of niche television. She is not the first, of course, to address the subject; I was paying particular attention because it was in the context of the study of Joss Whedon, an academic matter I am drawn to with an almost gravitational pull. I was also pleased to see follow-up discussion suggesting that television's network executives' gradual recognition of niche programming may have helped in the survival of that excellent Abrams/ Kurtzman / Orci series *Fringe*. We no longer live in the age of *I Love Lucy* (indeed, some of us never did), when one cultural icon united an audience that spread throughout the nation and beyond its borders. In a class earlier this year, I found that only half my students knew who John Wayne was; the Duke is receding into the past. Knowledge within one's own cultural niche is often sharp and clear (for survival as well as pleasure), but how many niches are there?

Connection, however, is still necessary. Our greater cultural fragmentation—or should I use the word blossoming? I should beware of my metaphors—makes the work more complicated and in some ways more difficult, but the very technologies that help create the multiplicity of these worlds make it more possible to collate them. That is part of our job as scholars. Do we see ourselves as living in a single cultural space? How single is any cultural space any more? Richard Dyer's seminal essay "White" reminded us to realize that some of us—many of us—were not even aware of our own blindness, not even aware that we used one frame of reference as a default. We need to at least try to glimpse a greater whole beyond the fragment; not just the petal, but the flower. At the same time, the best of aesthetics will see very specifically. We need to be able to focus both large and small. Probably it has always been so; we simply need to remind ourselves from time to time. So give me my niche TV, and I will try to convince you that it is as large as Shakespeare. After all, the Globe itself is not very big.

The scholars who undertake to meet the challenge in this issue start with a very prevalent cultural phenomenon many of us are aware of. Ananya Mukherjea writes on the social implications of the fiction of the Vampire Boyfriend as he is incarnated in a variety of popular forms—novels, movies, television. As she points out, he offers a fantasy of "an old-fashioned, generally wealthy, and socially dominant gentleman" as a reader deals with "the contradictory and conflicted relationship that many women have to feminism and femininity." His perfections are particularly appealing for the young female readership. Mukherjea explores many of the sociological implications of various texts. She demonstrates that in these stories in general, an equally important part of the appeal is that the focus is on the journey of the young female protagonist, rather than that of the superheroic vampire. Sabrina

Boyer discusses the adult HBO series *True Blood*, a modern vampire story set in Louisiana, as representing a kind of Southernness as a form of abjection, thus aligning it with the vampire's abjection. At the same time its protagonist is a not completely human woman, who represents another kind of abjection. The show also features a black gay character whom many viewers find appealing; and the network has used paratext to suggest a connection between gay rights and the civil rights of vampires. Boyer questions the success of the series as a social text, but honors its attempt to explore the issues. Katherine Gantz, in the third offering, also considers the status of women, in *Mad Men*. She focuses on visual elements, making a convincing case for the use of color as the "voice" of the women in this series set in the fifties. She includes statistical analysis of dialogue among male and female characters—and some thoughtful commentary on that dialogue. The black and white world of these men is part of what Dyer warned us about. Rather than speechlessness, Laura Jeffries examines the "Voice of Young Female Consumers" in a study of YouTube "hauls"—video blogs on particular shopping sprees. Her examination shows that many of the vloggers are actually highly sensitive to the quite stringent rhetorical requirements of format—but that those rhetorical requirements embody the necessary representation of American "nice girl" culture—"unpaid, unrude"—and unengaged in criticism. We move to the "white male adolescent" with Carey L. Martin's "Outsider Nostalgia in *Dazed and Confused* and *Detroit Rock City*." These two films, set in the seventies, indicate the outsider focus in part with heavy metal music to cue the nostalgia. Both, however, choose to vary from the standard patterns of film nostalgia by not filtering out the hurts of the past. The importance of music is even more central in Steve Hamelman's "The Beatles and the Art of the Tambourine." Beginning with a look at the history of the instrument, Hamelman provides a detailed analysis of its significance in the Beatles' music as "the index of a highly innovative rock aesthetic"—and a legacy for succeeding musicians. Last in the issue is another essay that insists on the audience's attentiveness. Jonathan L. Crane examines the effect on the crime story genre of the inclusion of violence traditionally associated with horror—and its connection with the invasive violence of American culture. Each of the essays in this issue pay careful attention to the specifics of the cultural form being examined, to illuminate aesthetic and social significance: each sees the detail and the big picture.

As always, the issue as a whole owes a great deal to those named on the editorial page. Thanks are always due to the associate editor and the editorial board for their review work; in addition, thanks are due to other scholars who have helped with peer review, including F. Brett Cox, Janet K. Halfyard, Lorna Jowett, Kevin Moist, Mary Alice Money, Carlos Ramet, Matthew Sutton, and Ed Whitelock. Thanks, too, to all of you who read these words. You are helping to make the connections.

*Rhonda V. Wilcox, Gordon College*