

5

Spoiled and Mashed Up

Viewer-Created Paratexts

Many of the examples and case studies presented so far in this book examine industry-created paratexts, from hype and marketing, to spinoffs, to introductory sequences. However, audiences create paratexts too, and while they commonly lack the capital and infrastructure to circulate their paratexts as widely—or at least as uniformly—as can Hollywood, their creative and discursive products can and often do become important additions to a text. In its most common form, this audience paratextuality occurs anytime two or more people discuss a film or television program, but audience paratextuality also includes criticism and reviews, fan fiction, fan film and video (vids), “filk” (fan song), fan art, spoilers, fan sites, and many other forms. Type the name of almost any popular film or television program into Google, and beyond the first two or three links for official, industry-created paratexts, one will likely find several if not hundreds or thousands of pages with various forms of audience-created paratexts. In this chapter, I turn to the role that audience-created paratexts play in challenging or supplementing those created by the industry, in creating their own genres, genders, tones, and styles, and in carving out alternative pathways through texts.

I begin with a brief discussion of fan studies’ wealth of material on more explicitly antagonistic paratexts, by way of underlining that my interests in this chapter do not reflect the totality of viewer-end paratexts, only one variety. Subversive fan fiction has attracted many a case study, but other viewer-paratexts—particularly spoilers and vids—remain relatively underexplored. My first case study draws on a survey Jason Mittell and I conducted to discover why *Lost* fans who read spoilers of upcoming events on the show enjoy doing so. Mittell and I initially approached the spoiler fans as an oddity, not understanding why they would ruin a good mystery by “cheating” and reading ahead, but we came to see that

the circulation and creation of spoilers helped many of those fans to engage with *Lost* on their own terms. The spoilers as paratexts helped carve a more personalized route through the text. This notion of carving out a particular route through a text is also central to my next case study, as I examine fan-made “vids” of popular film and television programs. Focusing on character study and relationship vids, I look at their capacity to create a reflective space in which viewers can engage more closely with the psyches, motivations, and specificities of multiple characters than they might be able to in the films or programs themselves.

However, to talk of viewer-end paratexts such as spoilers or vids is to talk of lesser-known paratexts—indeed, while I do not doubt that my readers are familiar with trailers, bonus materials, and sequels, for instance, I expect that at least some may be unfamiliar with even the terms “spoiler” and “vid,” let alone with specific examples. Thus, toward the end of the chapter, I discuss the key issue of paratextual privilege—who gets to make them, and who has the power to circulate their own readings and versions of the text en masse. While the cases of spoilers or vids contrast obviously with the industry-produced paratexts discussed in chapters 2–4, chapter 5’s final case study turns to the more liminal example of press reviews. Mass-circulated via newspapers or prominent websites such as *Slate* or *Salon*, press reviews are written by relative insiders who have been allowed advance copies of shows, and yet they are also written outside a studio marketing team’s immediate sphere of influence. As such, they enjoy peculiar powers of being able to set up initial frames for viewing—working as an anti-trailer—and to establish value—working as an anti-bonus material. I examine these in relation to numerous reviews for the debut episodes of NBC’s *Friday Night Lights*. Throughout this and the other case studies, chapter 5 looks at viewer-end paratexts as traces of an individual’s or a community’s strategies of reading, as tools for better realizing those strategies, and as frames for others to use.

Viewer Cartographies, Routes, and Marginalia

As a wealth of fan studies literature has argued, fan-created paratexts can facilitate resistance to the meanings proffered by media firms through their own texts and paratexts. The products of fan creativity can challenge a text’s industry-preferred meanings by posing their own alternate readings and interpretive strategies.¹ Similarly, fan and audience discussion alone can become a strong paratext, as was examined in the previous

chapter. As Henry Jenkins argued in his seminal account of television fandom, *Textual Poachers*, through fan activities and practices, fans “cease to be simply an audience for popular texts; instead, they become active participants in the construction and circulation of textual meaning,” and they “actively struggle with and against the meanings imposed upon them by their borrowed materials.”² As have numerous subsequent fan researchers, Jenkins analyzed the social process of meaning construction that occurs in fandom, whereby a significant portion of a text’s value comes from how it is used. Matt Hills notes that “the fan’s act of appropriation of a text is therefore an act of ‘final consumption’ which pulls this text away from (intersubjective and public) exchange-value and towards (private, personal) use value, but without ever cleanly or clearly being able to separate out the two.”³ But fan appropriations are also acts of creation and production that are frequently communal by nature. Challenging this notion of the individual fan’s “final consumption,” Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse write of the process by which fan communities distill a version (or versions) of the text—the “fantext”—that includes fan additions to the world (not just “canon” but “fanon” too, source and fan paratexts), so that the multitude of fan-created stories and variations therein becomes

a work in progress insofar as it remains open and is constantly increasing; every new addition changes the entirety of interpretations. By looking at the combined fantext, it becomes obvious how fans’ understanding of the source is always already filtered through the interpretations and characterizations existing in the fantext. In other words, the community of fans creates a communal (albeit contentious and contradictory) interpretation in which a large number of potential meanings, directions, and outcomes co-reside.⁴

Fan discussion of the text, as well as further fan creativity, will hence often prove as aware of the limitations placed on interpretation as of the scope for creative expansion provided by earlier fannish interpretive retoolings of the fantext.⁵

If we analyze Jenkins’s key metaphor for fan practice, borrowed from Michel de Certeau’s discussion of the practice of reading in general, the notion of “poaching” suggests the complicated nature of cultural consumption.⁶ Whereas crude ideas of passive, mindless audiences deal only with the territory on which consumption takes place, Jenkins demands a human geography of consumption, realizing that just as understanding

the life of a nation requires more than lists of longest rivers and tallest mountains alongside pretty cartography, so too must textual analysis at some point take account of the readers who populate the text. Within this schema, we might regard paratexts as citizen-made structures that similarly change the nature of the geography, and that must be accounted for.

Much early fan studies work exhibited particular interest in fan activity that repurposed or resisted the territory. Constance Penley wrote of fans as giving a text a vigorous massage that might hurt but is best for it in the long run,⁷ while Jenkins wrote of how fans treated the text like silly putty, “stretching its boundaries to incorporate their concerns, remolding its characters to better suit their desires.”⁸ Fan fiction, for instance, has been seen as a paratext with which fans can repurpose characters, whether by adding reflection on issues absent from the show, expanding the generic repertoire of the show (adding romance to science fiction, for instance), or multiple other strategies that reclaim ownership of the text, its characters, and its meanings. Fan creativity can work as a powerful *in medias res* paratext, grabbing a story or text in midstream and directing its path elsewhere, or forcing the text to fork outward in multiple directions.

However, in part because multiple fan studies have already mapped lines of textual resistance and rebellion, in this chapter I am particularly interested in paratexts that do not so much work against a show or radically alter the text as much as they invite increased attention to a given plot, character, relationship, or mode of viewing. On one level, viewer-created paratexts are pre-constituted audience research, providing evidence of how viewers make sense of texts. Just as H. J. Jackson notes of studying marginalia in books, paratexts reveal how text and viewer fashion themselves in relation to one another: “A marked or annotated book,” Jackson notes, “traces the development of the reader’s self-definition in and by relation to the text. Perhaps all readers experience this process; annotators keep a log.”⁹ On another level, though, since many paratexts are shared with others, a close study of viewer-paratexts can reveal ways in which *communities* of audiences interact with and thereby create texts, not just ways in which individuals fashion them. By nature of its popularity, any popular text must have popular meaning, which in turn means that viewer-created paratexts will surround the text. Those paratexts may echo industry-created paratexts, but they might also, as I will examine here, call for subtle changes in interpretation, valuing the text’s various elements differently from industry-created paratexts, and opening up new

paths of understanding. Just as outright subversive readings of a film or television program destabilize the show as center of meaning, so too do supplemental paratexts challenge the primacy of the show.

No Crying over a Spoiled Lost (with Jason Mittell)

One such supplemental paratext is the spoiler. Spoilers include any information about what will happen in an ongoing narrative that is provided before the narrative itself gets there. To tell someone who will die on next week's show, what a film's key plot twist is, or what to expect next is to "spoil" the person and/or text. Spoilers can result from some viewers seeing a film or program before others, or from information gleaned through back channels that stands to spoil viewers ahead of time. Given different audiences' uneven paces of progress through many ongoing narratives, spoilers have become an increasingly touchy subject in today's media environment, as some producers have gone to inordinate levels of secrecy to protect news of what comes next, and as fans (or anti-fans) circulate spoilers to a mixture of chagrin, annoyance, disinterest, and enthusiasm. While movies with twists, such as the works of M. Night Shyamalan, or *The Crying Game* (1992), *Planet of the Apes* (1968), or *Soylent Green* (1973), stand out as particularly vulnerable to spoiling, serial television and film have also attracted a spoiler entourage, with their own dedicated websites, such as spoilerfix.com, and their own dedicated sections of fan sites.

As a mysterious show in which few solid answers exist as to why the characters are where they are, who can be trusted, and so forth, *Lost* has a particularly active spoiler fandom online and offline. Spoilers for *Lost* range from leaked plot points, leaked clues, leaked photos of filming, casting information, and plenty of "foilers" (fake spoilers) too. Precisely because *Lost's* pleasures would seem to rely so heavily upon the enjoyment of its suspense and mystery elements, spoilers would seem to "ruin" *Lost* (hence their name: spoilers). Thus, in 2006, Jason Mittell and I set out with the challenge of working out why people would actively seek out spoilers, and what these paratexts did for or to their consumption of the show.

We approached the topic as outsiders, given that neither of us enjoyed spoilers, yet both of us greatly enjoyed *Lost*. To understand the spoiler world better, we designed an anonymous online survey addressing these issues¹⁰ and posted an invitation to participate on five discussion boards (televisionwithoutpity.com; lost-forum.com; thefuselage.com; abc.com;

losttv-forum.com) and one listserver (LostGame@yahogroups.com) dedicated to *Lost* and frequently the site of spoiler threads and discussions. Here, I summarize that research. The survey clearly attracted interest from the show's dedicated fanbase: within a week, 228 people visited the survey, with 179 completing at least half of its questions. Around 80 percent of respondents identified themselves as American, with seventeen other countries represented in the survey. Sixty percent of respondents were female, and respondents' ages ranged from eighteen to fifty-four, with a mean age of twenty-nine and median of twenty-seven. The survey combined open-ended questions with more guided choice questions, with topics ranging from the specific pleasures offered by *Lost* to the ethical implications of spoiling. While the invitation did not explicitly indicate that the survey focused on spoilers, as we wished to gather data from viewers who consume them and those who avoid them, the majority of respondents did indicate that they consume spoilers to some degree—37 percent frequently consume spoilers, 32 percent sometimes read them, and 14 percent both consume and disseminate them online, with only 16 percent of respondents indicating that they avoid spoilers as much as possible. Although this should not be mistaken for an accurate portrait of the spoiling tendency of all *Lost* fans, or even those who frequent online discussion boards, clearly a good number of active *Lost* fans engage in spoiler consumption.

In conducting this study, one of the few existing studies of spoiler fans that we had to work with was Henry Jenkins's analysis of *Survivor* (2000–) spoiling communities who research where the show is filming and who gets voted off when, and then post this material online. Jenkins's work poses spoiler fans as resistive, engaged in "a giant cat and mouse game that is played between the producers and the audience."¹¹ *Survivor* producer Mark Burnett, known to some fans as "evil pecker Mark," tries to hide his reality set and the elimination order, while "brain trusts" of fans pit their skills against his. Jenkins's study posits these spoiler fans as often working against the pleasures of the show, resisting both it and the creator, and as regarding their activities as a game unto itself, a contest between fans and producers. The fans develop "collective intelligence" and enjoy the communal relations of the spoiler-circulating community, but there is little sense of them engaging in reading and/or circulating spoilers as a way to enjoy *Survivor* itself. In short, their pleasures seem largely external to the show, even if they rely upon its existence. By contrast, our sense was that *Lost* spoiler readers often cared deeply about the show, and this

sense was quickly borne out by the data. Few if any spoiler readers pitted themselves against executive producers Damon Lindelof and Carlton Cuse, most were avid viewers, and little comment was made of the joys of the spoiler-circulating community. In other words, every sign pointed toward these fans using spoilers as a way of getting *into* the text.

While Mittell and I have published a fuller-length version of our research findings elsewhere, here I am interested in how spoilers worked as paratexts that negotiated particular ways of reading the text, not necessarily resistive but still less than normative. Given *Lost's* frequent use of suspense, one might expect that viewers enjoy being surprised, experiencing a fresh plot that grabs them unaware, and that they are likely to focus primarily on plot developments as the source of narrative originality and pleasure. Our research, though, suggested that spoilers allowed some fans to experience the program in other ways, and that the practice of spoiler reading also rendered clear other appeals to this text in particular and to narrative consumption more generally.

First off, we hypothesized that spoiler fans might enjoy spoilers because they preferred to watch in-the-know and were more comfortable with seeing the known than the unknown. A second and accompanying hypothesis was that spoiler fans see the revelatory aspect of the plotline and pleasures of suspense as relatively unimportant, obscuring more enjoyable textual qualities that they seek out, such as narrative mechanics, relationship dramas, and production values. Martin Barker has argued that media studies have been wholly biased toward the specificities of plot, but in doing so have often taken their eyes off other elements of textuality.¹² The normative judgment of spoilers as “ruining” texts stems from this bias, but as Laura Carroll provocatively argues, the underlying assumption behind spoiler avoiding “doesn’t imply much respect for anything that a fiction might offer you except abrupt and sensational narrative developments, or much long-term durability of a story. [. . .] A well-constructed story will stand up to decades of use and abuse, won’t it?”¹³ Carroll reasons that literature professors have long “spoiled” texts in their classes without concern for actually ruining the text, precisely because a text is about more than just surprises and plot-twists. In fact, the long history of storytelling suggests that unspoiled narratives are far less common than spoiled ones—from *Oedipus Rex* to *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Odyssey* to any historical narrative, many of our culture’s most revered stories are “spoiled” from the outset. Meanwhile, Derek Kompare observes that much of television is reruns, sometimes new to any given viewer, but sometimes

not,¹⁴ while Barbara Klinger notes that favorite movies are often watched again and again, whether on DVDs or on television,¹⁵ meaning that consumption of the familiar often constitutes a considerable portion of our narrative engagements.

The survey data proved less conclusive for the first hypothesis, but stronger for the second. Many *Lost* fans still clearly enjoyed the suspense, with 90 percent selecting “I enjoy the suspenseful plot” as a reason for watching, and 24 percent listing this as their primary pleasure. However, echoing Carroll’s commentary, one spoiler fan wrote, “The initial shock value may be ruined, but if a drama has nothing else to offer then it isn’t worth watching in the first place.” While such outright dismissal of shock was rare among respondents, many clearly allowed their foreknowledge of events to attune their viewing to other pleasures of the text. Spoiler fans noted that knowing what will happen does not take away from their enjoyment of the show’s performances, dialogue, production values, humorous moments, and focus on character relationships and development. As one fan wrote, “The words of a quickly written spoiler don’t do justice to the actual episode.” For some, the reduction of suspense enables greater attention to these details, and even enables a level of emotional connection with characters—one fan wrote that he used spoilers to avoid investing his attention in relationships or characters that are doomed. Thus, for some, learning the events of an episode in advance can yield greater access to the show’s other pleasures, allowing them to avoid being distracted by the moment-to-moment suspense. Mittell has argued that a key pleasure for many viewers of narratively complex television lies in the “operational aesthetic,” whereby viewers are encouraged to watch the gears of the storytelling machinery while being taken for a ride.¹⁶ For spoiler fans, having already discovered what will happen freed them to concentrate on the formal pleasures of innovative narration and inventive presentation. As one respondent wrote, “It’s like reading a book and then watching the movie even when you know the ending.”

Spoiler fans were often quick to point out that spoilers reveal the “what” but not the “how,” and in doing so sidestep the risks of “ruining” the plot while increasing anticipation. As one respondent offered:

When the *Losties* are going to discover something new about the island, and I already know about it, I still want to know HOW they find out. It’s still just as exciting, if not more so, to see how they’re going to come upon it. For instance, I knew about the Black Rock, and that it was a

boat, before they found it. But that didn't really TELL me anything about it, or why a boat would be in the middle of the jungle. It was even MORE mysterious to KNOW the "answer." That's why *Lost* is so fun, even with some spoilers.

Here, this respondent reverses commonsense logic regarding spoilers, arguing that they improve, rather than ruin, his experience of the text by focusing his attention on the unfolding story and its telling. Spoilers work to help fans concentrate on what they consider the most important elements of the show. *Lost*'s flashbacks, large cast size, complex narrative, and multiple concurrent mysteries clearly confuse—or at least run the risk of confusing—many viewers, and these viewers spoke of spoilers as focusing their viewing. Spoilers are enjoyable, noted one woman, "because you can pick up on subtle hints and clues between characters, and know what it means," while another talked of the "peace of mind of not having to take all info in at once." We might therefore draw a parallel to another established form of spoiler: study guide summaries of literary texts such as CliffsNotes. Like *Lost* spoilers, CliffsNotes allow a window into future narrative occurrences, so that the individual reader can follow ongoing events more easily: for instance, knowing that Magwitch funds Pip's rise to wealth in *Great Expectations* foregrounds themes of redemption that one may otherwise miss. As such, spoiler fans may not use spoilers to "skip ahead" as much as to "catch up" as they are watching, or to appreciate the fullness of a scene or episode's narrative dynamics. "They give me an idea," wrote one fan, "of what to look for in an action filled show like *Lost*."

Another reason for enjoying spoilers that revealed itself was that many saw *Lost* as a giant puzzle, and their primary interest lay in solving the puzzle rather than in following the plot in linear fashion. *Lost*, after all, is already a slippery, "messy" text¹⁷ that tells its story across time, with the present of the island, flashbacks, and (though not used when we released our survey) flash forwards. Watching requires that viewers piece together information from an erratically drawn timeline. Meanwhile, through the show's transmedia strategies, which have included embedding potential secrets in alternate reality games (ARGs), jigsaw puzzles, a multitude of websites, and spinoff novels, *Lost* has already challenged its own textual boundaries, actively inviting fans to look for clues outside of the program itself.¹⁸ If we think of *Lost* less like a conventional story and more like a puzzle or game, spoilers become appreciably more legitimate:

in attempting to solve any large-scale puzzle or game, players are encouraged to gather as much information and research as possible, not relying on one limited source. Moreover, given that spoiler sources are not always reliable, especially with both production staff and fans circulating foilers to dupe fans, rarely can fans rely on spoilers being accurate, thus rendering them yet one more piece of evidence to consider in fan speculations. Spoilers, as one fan noted, “intensify the mystery-solving aspect of the show”; another offered, “Spoilers make the difference between informed speculation and crackpot theories”; and a third said that she reads spoilers “to find clues to the game.” For most spoiler fans, spoilers rarely foreclosed the text’s meaning, much less its mysteries; instead, many talked of spoilers *adding* to the mysteries, so that “you find out one thing, but there are 10 new things that pop up from it.” Typical spoilers may point to little pieces of the show’s major enigmas, but rarely provide information that would reveal the larger mystery of the island. One fan wrote, “I like to know what questions or puzzles will be solved, but not what the *answers* will be”; as did many others, this fan saw spoilers as creating as many questions as they answer, and as enhancing the terrain for speculation about the general puzzle surrounding *Lost*.

Granted, not all shows or films are puzzles, and thus spoilers will work differently for different shows or films, with this study only examining one case that is not necessarily representative. But the audience members who responded to our survey clearly used spoilers to open up the text in ways that were meaningful for them, just as will spoiler fans for any text, even if in starkly different ways. In the case of *Lost* or other shows, paratexts manage the text, allowing fans to make of it what they want rather than simply follow a normative plot-centric approach.

A final way in which they used spoilers as paratexts, we observed, was to take control of their emotional responses and pleasures of anticipation, creating suspense on viewers’ own terms rather than the creators’. On one level, spoilers serve to stoke the fires of anticipation for fans, working much as trailers and previews do for continuing texts (indeed, as some respondents felt, “next week on”-style trailers can be seen as industry-circulated spoilers). On another level, though, reading spoilers and debriefing them with friends proved a way of satisfying one’s cravings to know what’s happening. Serial television comes to us slowly, with weeks or even month-long hiatuses separating episode from episode. In this intervening time, then, spoilers can step in and fill the gaps with textuality. While the show is absent from the scene, the text nevertheless lives on through

the paratext (as will be discussed further in chapter 6). While spoilers do not outright cure the desire to reach the next episode, they help reduce anticipation between installments by reducing narrative suspense and giving fans a focus for their speculation, theorizing, and anticipation. Rather than obsessing over this week's cliffhanger, spoiler fans can attend to larger narrative issues and work on piecing together the big picture. And it is in such moments that the blurred line between text and paratext becomes particularly evident. Spoiler fans attempt to eliminate their undesirable anticipation for the next episode by reading spoilers, thereby creating a new form of anticipation for the pre-viewed events while watching each show. Spoilers, as such, become an intrinsic part of the text as experienced by the spoiler reader: the paratext allows a certain type of reading of the text, and in doing so becomes an inseparable part of the text, and a mediator of the spoiler reader's interactions with and reactions to the text.

While we began our project trying to make sense of the unknown, we came to realize the mediating role that spoilers, as paratexts, play in allowing viewers to find their own routes through *Lost*. Of course, the split side to this is that spoiler *avoiders* consciously keep their distance in order to maintain their different routes through *Lost*. From this example, then, one can see how varying paratexts can be consumed, dabbled in, and/or actively avoided as a way to chart different paths through a text, and/or as a way to open up texts to other consumptive pleasures. In this case, we saw that while a good story can be a well-told tale, it can also be a puzzle and a challenge, an object to be marveled at (directing focus to the well-told tale's actual *telling*), a familiar space, a complex network to be mapped, and a site to stimulate both discussion and the proliferation of textuality. Our choice of which paratexts to consume, and which paratexts to create, lets us work out what we want to do with any given tale before us.

*"The Ultimate Close Reading":
Vidding Character and Relationship Studies*

Earlier, I noted a parallel between media paratexts and the marginalia in library books. But surely all of us have had the experience of marveling at marginalia in a library book that made us wonder to what purpose the "vandal" was using the text. When placing books on reserve in my university library for students in a class, I have at times felt the need to instruct the students to ignore the underlinings when the scribbler clearly

followed a different path through the text than I wish my students to take. In short, I must plead for them to ignore the paratexts, lest their experience of the text be one that will not help them in my class. Likewise, I have at times hesitated to lend books to a friend, afraid that my own marginalia will betray my odd reading of these texts. And Jackson's careful study of marginalia takes as its data numerous books with famous marginalia writers, noting the titillating nature of reading someone else's marginalia, and thereby gaining a window into their own experience of a text. In a similar manner, all viewer-created paratexts can work as highlighters and underliners, plotting a course through a narrative and leaving tracks for others to follow. To highlight or to underline is to annotate, to choose a specific route through a text. To produce a paratext of any sort is similarly to engage in such route-making.

I have argued that spoilers show how some viewers experience the narrative as a whole. But paratexts can also draw our attention to specific characters and relationships, "highlighting" their path through a tale, and thereby drawing our attention to their peculiarities. In few sites is this process as obvious as in the thriving art form of fan vidding. Vids are music videos, usually made with a selection of clips from a given film or program that the vidder painstakingly juxtaposes with the lyrics of a background song in order to offer an interpretation of and/or argument regarding that show. To the newbie eye, vids can appear somewhat trailer-ish, with rapid-fire and (for the better ones) polished editing; however, with the exception of "recruiter vids," their primary purpose is to comment upon the show, not to sell it per se, and since they are song-length, they usually provide room for a more sustained examination of a show than do trailers. As editing software becomes cheaper and more user-friendly, an increasing number of fans are trying their hand at the art form, circulating their creations within interpersonal fan networks, via imeem (www.imeem.com), YouTube, personal websites, and/or at fan conventions, including Vividcon, an annual vidder convention.¹⁹ Multiple styles and genres of vids exist, but in this section I wish to examine several vids' character and relationship studies and the ways in which these ask the viewer to engage with those characters and relationships.

Vidders Wolfling and Magpie offer a particularly effective character- and relationship-study in "Winter." Set to the slow and mournful song of the same title by Tori Amos, "Winter" edits together footage from the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy that follows Éowyn and her uncle Théoden. Éowyn has a few key moments in the films, most notably when she slays a



Fig. 5.1. Wolfling and Magpie accompany a clip from *The Two Towers* of a solitary and pensive Éowyn with lyrics that suggest her loneliness.

ringwraith in *Return of the King*, but it is otherwise somewhat easy to lose sight of her amidst the multiple other characters and storylines. However, “Winter” studies her relationship with her uncle, a character who we first meet in *The Two Towers* as a decrepit old king under the spell of the wizard Saruman. The vid focuses on tender moments when she tends to her uncle, and shows her as very much alone in Théoden’s cold, wintery hall, especially following the loss of her brother (fig. 5.1). The song lyrics ask Éowyn on Théoden’s behalf, “When you gonna love you as much as I do?” yet the vid shows no outward sign of his love, instead showing the niece care more for her uncle, and showing her cope on her own as those lyrics announce, “I hear a voice, / ‘you must learn to stand up for yourself, / ‘Cause I can’t always be around.” Then, when Gandalf frees Théoden from the curse, we are invited to see his return through Éowyn’s eyes: where the scene is notable in the film almost solely for the editing and makeup that shows him lose many years of wrinkles before our eyes, the pathos of the song (“I tell you that I’ll always want you near, / You say that things change my dear”) and the focus on Éowyn now recontextualize the scene as deeply touching for her.

Yet despite the lyrics’ brief mention of melting Winter, the joy is similarly brief. Théoden is still distant, as he must bury his nephew, then lead his men and (unknown to him) his niece into battle. As one watches his preparations for battle, one gets the sense of an uncle and niece who are unable to communicate, yet who are, or at least could be, each other’s closest companions. Finally, Théoden is mortally wounded on the

battlefield, leaving Éowyn to avenge him. Wolfling and Magpie match this act of vengeance to a faster-paced section of the song and show us the uncle and niece's brief moment of togetherness before his death; however, the song's eventual return to a slower, sad pace once more suggests a pervasive loneliness, or Winter, for Éowyn. The song lyrics that "things are gonna change so fast" serve only as a taunt, as little changes for the character. Thus in six minutes, Wolfling and Magpie succeed in providing a masterful, detailed character study of Éowyn that matches the lyrics to a tee. The vid invites viewers to contemplate the character, her motivations, and her relationship with her uncle, and allows viewers the time and reflective space to do so that the films never truly provide. Éowyn is one of only three substantive female characters in the trilogy, too, so this act of highlighting her and her story tries to carve out space for a female character and journey in what can otherwise be quite the boy's story and world, and for readers to appreciate the depths of this character.

Another character and relationship study vid by Wolfling, "Sick Cycle Carousel," examines the anger and rage of Anakin and Luke Skywalker in the *Star Wars* films, and Obi-Wan Kenobi's own entrapment within that cycle using the Lifehouse song of that title. Although this vid focuses on three characters that are at the center of the *Star Wars* trilogies, its deft act of collating and juxtaposing many of the films' scenes of Skywalker anger and of Skywalker–Kenobi conflict invites viewers to contemplate Luke's, Anakin's, and Obi-Wan's inner psyches arguably more than do the films. Moreover, as does "Winter," it provides space for the reflection upon these psyches. The title of the piece immediately suggests a pattern of cyclical rage, as do Lifehouse's alternative rock sound and lyrics about an unhealthy relationship and the singer's struggle to end it:

So when will this end?
 It goes on and on
 And over and over and over again
 Keep spinning around
 I know that it won't stop
 Till I step down from this for good.

Yet gradually we see Luke and Anakin triumph over this rage, and thus where the films contextualize Anakin's eventual, dying act of heroism in macro terms, as saving the universe and defeating its prime evil, "Sick

Cycle Carousel” contextualizes his triumph as a personal and familial one, a last-ditch attempt to end the “sick cycle” that has enveloped him and his son.

This ability of vids to drill deep into a character’s psyche leads to many of the form’s better offerings. For instance, while the show *Dexter* is remarkable for being one of the few on television to study one character’s psyche in depth, and for using voiceover from Michael C. Hall and flashbacks to open the character’s mind up to the viewer, Luminosity’s vid “Blood Fugue” arguably opens that mind up yet further. Drawing heavily from clips at the end of the first season that revealed Dexter’s horrific past—watching his mother be slaughtered with a chainsaw in front of him, before staying locked in a cargo container in a pool of her blood—“Blood Fugue” offers a three-minute examination of Dexter’s bloodlust and of the genesis of a serial killer. While *Dexter* itself hardly shies away from creating reflective spaces for the consideration of its titular character, never has it offered such a sustained period of introspection, more commonly employing dark comic relief and/or subplots to break up its journey into the passages of Dexter’s mind. All the while, too, “Blood Fugue” is set to Dog Fashion Disco’s “Mature Audiences Only,” a frenetic string piece that puts the viewer on edge with mumbled phrases such as “there was blood everywhere,” “I’m losing my mind,” “these dark sexual urges,” and “there are many demons I face every day” sampled into the music. As Kristina Busse writes:

There are many quick cuts between past and present, job and secret life, victim and killer, interspersed with slower moments of Dexter’s introspection, often accompanied by images of water/blood/drowning. The voice over the heavy violins (sounding like saws?) whispers of blood and dark sadistic urges, and the screams mid-vid offer a vision of Dexter that the show whitewashes to a degree. In fact, the entire vid seems to resurrect the violent unconscious that somehow, even amid all the blood and torture and murder isn’t quite present on the show itself.²⁰

Luminosity makes it darker still, then. And what Luminosity does for a reading of *Dexter*, obsessive²⁴ does for a reading of *Fight Club*’s narrator in “Cells” or *Heroes*’ Sylar in “One of a Kind”; here’s luck does for a reading of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*’s Spike in “Glorious,” Willow in “Atropine,” or the relationships between Buffy and Faith in “Superstar” or Willow and Tara in “Writing Notes”; Shalott does for a reading of the *Star Wars*

trilogies' Amidala in "Kid Fears"; and countless other vidders do for readings of what makes many central or peripheral film and television characters and their relationships tick.

Such is the development of vidding as an art form that several versions of vids have been made with a commentary track overlaid. These allow us access to the vidders' intended meanings and suggest that the casual vid watcher may wish to engage more closely with the nuances of edited storytelling. Of a crucial segment in her vid "Change (in the house of flies)," about the Clark Kent and Lex Luthor friendship in *Smallville* (2001–), obsessive24 notes what her vid dramatically shows and argues, that Superman failed Lex as a friend, a notion that opens up significant ground for new, or at least more nuanced, readings of the two characters and of the Superman mythology more generally. She states:

And here we come into the crux of this vid, which is: Lex will save Clark, but in the end Clark doesn't save Lex. Sure, he saves him in superficial ways, in the same way that he saves anyone else, but I guess what we're talking about here is a spiritual saving, where Lex propels Clark onto his path as Superman. But what does Clark do in return? He does the only thing that he can do under circumstances, also on his path of destiny, which is to cast Lex down into the abyss[. . .] Clark is really almost a villain in this story, because they made each other who they are. In Lex's case, he made Clark great, but in Clark's case, he kind of failed in making Lex the man that Lex had originally set out to be. He wanted to be good, but later, much later in the future, Lex couldn't remember this, and I doubt that Clark could either, but the audience can, and I guess that's where the tragedy lies.²¹

When television shows have multiple seasons behind them, the visual catalogue open to the average vidder is huge, allowing significant ground for character and relationship studies, arguments, and observations that pull together scenes and moments from across the series, as does obsessive24, meaning that some of the more thoughtful and thought-provoking commentary on such longrunning shows as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Smallville* exists in the world of vids.

In an email interview, obsessive24 wrote to me of the importance of using trusted betas (editors), but if repurposed, her comments provide a way of thinking of the relationship between the film or show and the vidder for character study or relationship vids. She wrote:

I'll try to take on all of their suggestions even where I don't personally agree. This is because I think the artist him/herself has blind spots when it comes to actually communicating to the audience what s/he wants to say; it's a beta's job to point out the bits that don't work and force you to change it, even if you love it personally.

Perhaps, just as betas help vidders to communicate more clearly, so too do vids help the film or show to communicate more clearly. Or, as obsessive²⁴ also notes of her own character study and relationship vids, many are "trying to 'read deeper' into what's already there and [are] bringing it out so that other people can see it more easily." In another email interview, here's luck observes, "Vidding is the ultimate close reading: a vid sends the vidder, and possibly the viewer as well, back to the text in a profound and literal way." As all of the vidders and vid-fans to whom I talked noted, many of the better vids have something interesting, substantive, and/or revelatory to say about the show. Many of the better vids send us "deeper" into and "back to the text," having said something of substance about it.

here's luck's declaration of a vid being "the ultimate close reading" is highly apt, given a good vid's ability to unlock and make sense of parts of a text while being considerably more entertaining and affectively gripping than are most close readings. To this end, here's luck notes, "I'm not sure that vids allow me to say things I otherwise couldn't; [but] they do allow me to say some things more elegantly or persuasively or quickly. And they allow me to invite an audience to collaborate in making meaning with me, which I think is pretty cool." Vidding's "elegance" lies in the fact that it is its own art form, presenting its case in a visually and aurally pleasing manner. Hence, just as Jenkins notes that spoilers might become the text itself for spoiler fans, as those spoiler fans circulate them and engage in a giant "cat and mouse game" with the producers more for the sake of it than for the enjoyment of the text being spoiled, so too have vids become texts in and of their own right, watched closely, parsed for meanings, eagerly anticipated, traded in fan communities, given commentary tracks, and becoming the basis for their own conventions.

Another helpful way to understand vids, both as texts in their own right and as paratexts, is offered by academic, fan historian, and vidder Francesca Coppa, who argues that fan fiction in general follows dramatic rather than literary modes of storytelling. Responding to the endless and frequently facile criticism of fan fiction being "merely derivative," Coppa states that

in literature, fan fiction's repetition is strange; [but] in theatre, stories are retold all the time. Theatre artists think it's fine to tell the same story again, but differently: not only was Shakespeare's *Hamlet* a relatively late version of the tale [. . .] but we're happy to see differently inflected versions of the tale. Moreover, there's no assumption that the first production will be definitive; in theatre, we want to see *your* Hamlet and *his* Hamlet and *her* Hamlet; to embody the role is to reinvent it.²²

Coppa's argument suggests that we could see gifted vidders as thoughtful actors or directors working with a script, not simply repeating the lines of a "derivative," stale performance, but trying to make new sense of a character or characters. Meanwhile, just as many theater buffs attend multiple *Hamlets*, *Macbeths*, and *King Lear*s over the course of their lives, each hopefully further fleshing out the plays' enigmatic figures, vid audiences similarly watch to see and hear new or developing interpretations of characters. Fan fiction, writes Coppa, "is community theatre in a mass media world,"²³ a staging and therefore a reading of a text.

Further echoing this notion of vids as performative, Luminosity explained to me, "Vids allow me to *show*, which is better than tell," and she later added:

All of my vids are personal expressions. [. . .] I don't know if it's my age or the fact that I have been an artist all of my life, but I "own" everything about my vids. They're moving paintings of my thoughts about specific issues or events within the universe of the show or movie—or maybe about just one thing, or maybe even about a universal thing that I choose a specific source to explore. For example, my father died in 2004, and I was very close to him. Part of my working through my own grief included making the vids "Art of Dying" and "Serenity." If I had been painting then, I would have painted my grief instead, but I was vidding. When I look back at those two vids, I'm able to see how I channeled my sense of loss into them. I suppose that's where "personal expression" really lives, and it's something that I do a lot. [. . .] I tend to explore my own psyche when I vid (as well as the imaginary characters' motivations, etc.).

Luminosity's narrative suggests a complex yet energizing relationship between text, paratext, fantext, vidder, and audience member. She suggests a process whereby her personalized construction of and relationship to *Kill Bill*, vols. 1 and 2 (2003, 2004), and *Firefly* (2002), respectively, based in

part on a grieving process following her father's death, is worked into her own artistic performance and act of creating the vids, and is thus communicated to and shared with a broader audience or community of vid watchers. She therefore in part close-reads those texts and directs her audience to resonances of *Kill Bill*, *Firefly*, and *Serenity* that they may have overlooked, and in part adds new meanings and resonances to them, broadening viewers' understandings of the texts.

Given the degree to which vids carry resonances and messages that will prove more meaningful for a particular community of fans with the necessary fannish and interpersonal knowledge to decode them in full, some vids operate within these communities and not more broadly for a wider audience. While some observers may see the result as an insular art form, it also shows how paratexts can domesticate texts to specific communities (as does community theater), offering the prospect for those communities to construct a more intimate relationship to what may otherwise seem a "mass" text. Moreover, not all are so insular. Vids, after all, are also vehicles for some fantastic songs, for small stories and arguments, and they can also exhibit significant editing prowess, none of which necessarily require knowledge of the fan object. For instance, a particularly famous vid, "Us" by Lim, juxtaposes numerous clips that are often used in vids or that have become iconic for fans, but it also uses a catchy song by Regina Spektor and shows off Lim's significant editing and animation skills, making it visually stunning for the uninitiated viewer. Others approach the level of parody, and thus have comic potential in and of themselves, as is the case, for example, with Luminosity's "Hopeless," which playfully examines the love affair between various *Lord of the Rings* characters and the ring, while set to the cheesy Olivia Newton-John song. Regardless of their intended audiences, however, vids can offer fascinating close readings that energize many of a text's elements, lighting up the vidder's path through a text while also cutting deeper, often more nuanced paths into the text for others to follow, and thereby contributing to what Hellekson and Busse call the fantext.

"You" and Your Limits: Privileged Paratexters

While the vids that I focused on above illustrate viewer-paratexts' abilities to study characters and relationships, of course other viewer-paratexts will study other aspects of texts, illustrating considerable variety in paratextual focus. The fanvid itself is a diverse form, and character study and

relationship vids are only two related genres within a wider catalogue. Other viewer-paratexts change focus too. Fan-written episode recaps, for instance, can range from those that function strictly as plot recaps, to those that treat the characters as eye candy and focus on the show's erotic elements,²⁴ to many of *Television Without Pity's* recaps that call for a playful, ironic reading of the episode. Each style will simultaneously provide evidence about how any given community or individual watches the show in question, and it will serve as a paratext that encourages others to watch in a similar manner. By contrast, some media-related wikis (such as *Lostpedia* or *Wookieepedia*) tend to treat texts as expansive universes with dense histories and sociologies that require archiving and the constant oversight of a fandom's collective intelligence. Other wikis actively invite audiences to continue the creation and performance of the text themselves, as with *Wikiality* (fig. 5.2), a wiki based around *The Colbert Report's* slyly satiric celebration of style over fact, and of white conservative American chauvinism.²⁵ Posing itself as a *Wikipedia* for "truthiness" (Colbert's term for opinions that hold no factual basis but that "feel" true), and claiming to host 10,747,142 articles in "American" at last visit (early 2009), *Wikiality* includes entries, for example, on "Global Warming" that at present calls it "a complex consumer confidence scam put forth onto the American public by Al Gore and the Weather Channel," and on Colbert's parodic target and conservative pundit, Bill O'Reilly, that calls him "a godlike killing machine, liberating the world from the liberal, ivy-league media elite and their front politicians known as democrats." Here, fans are invited to continue Colbert's brand of ironic punditry and to enjoy each other's wit. Indeed, since Colbert's satire relies quite heavily upon the ironic juxtaposition of his own supposedly cult-like fans—"the Colbert Nation"—to the allegedly unthinking, sheeplike fans of self-worshipping American conservative pundits such as O'Reilly, the wiki's removal of Colbert from this supposed altar to the character, and its fans' ability to produce a similar brand of humor without Colbert present, is arguably important in assuring that the ironic contrast holds. These and countless other examples of viewer-created paratexts all invite different relationships to the associated film or television program, and all stand to recalibrate the text's interpretive trajectory as a result.

However, while audiences and fans can and regularly do create their own paratexts that privilege their own readings of texts and their own interpretive strategies, we must avoid the trap of seeing these as necessarily of equal presence and power as those created by film and television

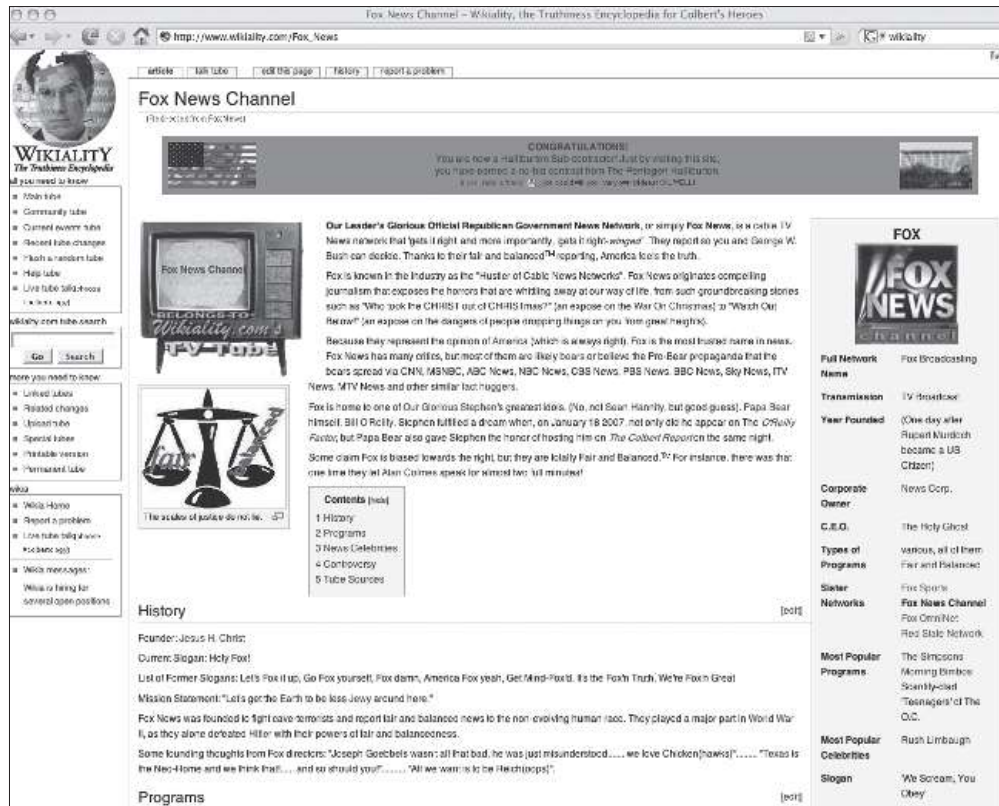


Fig. 5.2. A page from Wikiality, a wiki playing along with and honoring *The Colbert Report's* satiric take on the state of American politics and media.

producers and their marketing teams. Bruce Leichtman, president and principal analyst of Leichtman Research Group, Inc., while presenting at 2008's National Association of Television Production Executives convention in Las Vegas, was particularly keen to dispel some of the digital era's utopian rhetoric, noting the fact that on an average day, YouTube attracts as many viewers as does one episode of FOX's prime-time karaoke competition *Don't Forget the Lyrics* (2007–). Even on YouTube and imeem, viewer numbers suggest that many more people have seen the *Iron Man* trailer than even the most-watched vids, while on the average day *Lost* spoilers likely reach fewer readers than did *Six Degrees'* New York hype campaign at its peak. The recent advent of online communities, social networking, and video-sharing sites, as well as various digital platforms and technologies that assist in ripping and burning video, has led to much "You-topian" rhetoric of which we should be wary. In 2006, *Time* announced that its Person of the Year was "You," thereby repeating

many popular and academic accounts of the rise of audience power. Much of the hoopla surrounding Web 2.0's multiple sharing sites, such as YouTube, MySpace, and Facebook, has focused on how they challenge corporate culture and logic, opening up cultural production, authorship, and distribution to seemingly anyone. In the face of such excited rhetoric, though, we must remember that "You" still require significant technology and communications infrastructure to be able to enjoy this new era, and hence "You" often excludes all of those on the other side of the digital divide who do not own computers with editing software and high-speed Internet service. Also, media multinationals frequently have considerably more time and resources than do "You" to produce, publicize, and circulate paratextual entourages.

Legally, these multinationals also have considerably more clout to police the acceptable edges of textual universes. Trailer editors, hype campaign designers, and other industry-made paratextual artists rarely have their names attached to their work, but no litigation would likely follow from the release of such names. By contrast, most vidders use aliases, some admittedly for other reasons, but some in fear of reprisal from a grumpy and aggrieved media production company's law firm. Carlton Cuse and Damon Lindelof's publicly voiced distaste for *Lost* spoilers²⁶ and J. K. Rowling's elaborate legal attempts and threats to keep *Harry Potter* news under wraps till her publisher's release dates²⁷ further warn of the acceptable limits of paratextual production for insiders (whether *Lost* cast or crew member, or Bloomsbury or Scholastic typesetter). Even some reviewers have been threatened, not with lawsuits but with blacklisting, when their caustic comments stand to damage a show's public reputation. And though legal scholars have argued for fan fiction's legality,²⁸ the lack of case law to serve as precedent has notoriously enabled media firms to send cease-and-desist letters with wild abandon, and with little consistency as to what constitutes (to their mind) acceptable use of a show's diegesis.²⁹

Hence, if media multinationals and individual audience members or communities have varying interpretative, framing strategies that are built into their paratexts, media multinationals have a significant advantage in both blanketing the media environment with their own images, and making that environment inhospitable for others' images. Despite the enthusiastic discussion of YouTube's or Web 2.0's prospects for developing grassroots politics, everyday creativity, and a more democratic version of cultural production, then, YouTube and friends are also home to thousands

of film and television trailers, many with viewership in the millions, while the Internet more broadly is populated with hundreds of glitzy official film and television show web pages, complete with their small armies of paratexts. Moreover, rather than see media firms' paratexts and fans in competition or contrast, we should also acknowledge the increasing incidence of media firms creating policed playgrounds for fans, setting up fan sites that invite various forms of fan paratextual creativity and user-generated content, yet often imposing a set of rules and limitations and/or claiming legal rights over the material. Thus, several companies have experimented with releasing clips from shows and encouraging fans to edit together a montage or trailer to be entered into a competition at the show or film's official website. Similarly, fan film and fan fiction have at times been brought under the "protective umbrella" of various media firms, while representatives of the producer's or marketer's staff regularly expunge fan discussion at official fan sites when they deem it to be offensive or inappropriate.

The power to create paratexts is the power to contribute to, augment, and personalize a textual world. Thus, many media firms' frequent acts of filtering acceptable content from fan creations (whether film, fiction, or simple discussion) seek variously to outright deny fans the right to contribute, augment, or personalize; seek to co-opt and profit from fans' paratexts; and/or seek to strictly limit the scope of possible meanings that fans can attach to a text. Most notoriously, slash fiction and fan film—those that posit a same-sex relationship between two characters—are often met with disapproval by media firms' moderators. But on the less overt end of the scale, media firms can still subtly reinforce their own preferred meanings by privileging certain fan products whose meanings wholly conform to those of the firm, and hence that effectively echo the firm's own paratexts and paratextual meanings.

Many media firms' restrictive reactions to fan creativity tellingly reflect on the degree to which they realize the power of paratexts. For instance, when Lucasfilm drew a hard line that fan creativity could be parodic but not expansive of the *Star Wars* universe, their decision was likely forced on one hand by precedent regarding the legal status of parody, and on the other hand by the knowledge that fan creations could hijack "their" text.³⁰ Viewer-made paratexts are resources with which, whether through creation, consumption, or both, viewers can add their own voice, interests, and concerns to a textual world. They give partial ownership of a text to those other than the initial creators. And thus Hollywood has often

come down hard on paratexts, or on certain types of paratexts, in order to maintain ownership privileges and rights. Of course, such proprietary acts are often futile. As discussed in chapter 1, a text only becomes a text, only gains social meaning and relevance, at the point that it comes alive with its audience. Therefore, a text is always already a collaboratively created entity, and regardless of how media firms rewrite copyright law to give them power of attorney over a text, the only texts incapacitated enough to be ownable are those that have absolutely no social relevance or audience attention. At the moment that audiences care about a text, it has multiple creators, and that creation is often maintained by paratextual creation and consumption. Along with Henry Jenkins, then, I am depressed by some media firms' dogged refusal to accept what is already occurring, and by their desperate attempts to keep proprietary status over their texts. As Jenkins notes, "Over the past several decades, corporations have sought to market branded content so that consumers become the bearers of their marketing messages," and yet, he also notes, the same corporations have a tendency to cry foul "once consumers choose when and where to display those messages, their active participation in the circulation of brands" now stunningly becoming "a moral outrage and a threat to the industry's economic well-being."³¹ Never will such legal maneuvers ever truly exclude audience readings and strategies altogether, but their ramifications for the scope of fan paratextual creativity can often be significant.

Moving the Goal Posts: Press Reviews and Friday Night Lights

Beyond media firms, though, we might also look to other privileged paratextual creators. Audiences, after all, are by no means equal. A prominent vidder with a large audience will enjoy privileged status as a paratextual creator over someone whose viewing circle of friends is small. A person with a fancy, well-funded website with thousands of viewers can similarly enjoy privileged status. Anyone with the capacity to reach a large audience will have greater potential power to offer his or her interpretive strategies to others and to gain converts. A particularly prominent example of such a privileged decoder is the critic. Critics occupy a hybrid space between the media and the audience, frequently receiving copies of shows before the rest of us, yet not officially affiliated with any media firm and thus supposedly neutral and objective. Prior to the release of a new film or television show, press reviews can catch the audience at a decisive pre-decoding moment, just as the text is being born. But even for long-

running television shows, as Amanda Lotz points out, in a post-network era with hundreds of channels in many homes, “Critics become increasingly important as their reviews and ‘tonight on’ recommendations provided promotional venues to alert viewers of programming on cable and network channels they did not regularly view and as legitimate, unbiased sources within the cluttered programming field.”³² Of course, just as audiences might miss or ignore the hype, they might miss or ignore critics’ reviews. Nevertheless, upon release, as does a network’s marketing machine, reviews hold the power to set the parameters for viewing, suggesting how we might view the show (if at all), what to watch for, and how to make sense of it.

Barbara Klinger clearly illustrates the subtle power of reviews in her discussion of *Home Theater* magazine’s regular feature, “Snacks, Wine, and Videotape.” Here, the editors review films by way of suggesting food pairings. As Klinger notes of their pairing of *Shawshank Redemption* (1994) with filet mignon and exotic marinade, the effect is to suggest a decidedly more upmarket film, whereas their pairing of *Ed Wood* (1994) with hamburger

suggests that the film’s concerns (i.e., cross-dressing, drug addiction, and bad filmmaking) give it a more questionable, campy status that detracts from its consumption as “serious.” However, even here, hamburger is made more respectable by associating it with Dijon mustard, Thousand Island Dressing, and chilled grapes. Thus, the hamburger is rescued from ordinariness by accompanying relishes and food items.³³

Albeit in less graphic or appetite-inducing manner, all reviews similarly try to pair a film or television program with an image. Labeling *Ed Wood* as a “hamburger with Dijon and chilled grapes”-type film firmly places it on a value hierarchy, but also suggests something of its meanings and the attitude with which viewers should approach the film. While it is a frequent retort from aggrieved creators to harsh critics to “do something” rather than “just” criticize, their criticism very much “does something,” mediating and hence co-authoring a media text at the constitutive moment when it becomes a text and launches itself into popular culture and/or an audience member’s mind.

Seeking other examples of where reviews dictated textual meaning, in the fall of 2006, I collected multiple reviews for several of NBC’s new shows using an online review aggregator—Metacritic (www.metacritic.com).

com)—and later I examined them for the rhetorical and hermeneutic moves they make in trying to position the shows. My interests lay in how paratextual authors play an intermediary role between production and reception, as part author/encoder, part privileged reader/encoder. Elsewhere, I discuss the reviews of *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip* (2006–7) and *Heroes*,³⁴ but a particularly stark attempt at recoding the marketing rhetoric was evident in the reviews of *Friday Night Lights*. Though the show's interest in high school football allowed reviewers plenty of opportunities for football puns, most reviewers were also quick to insist that the show is not “just” about football, or not *even* about football. Thus, the reviews tried to move the show's generic goal posts.

Reflecting quite openly on the opportunity that the football show allows him, for instance, Matthew Gilbert begins by noting:

One way to praise NBC's “Friday Night Lights” would be to say, “It's a stand-up-and-cheer drama about football!” And then to use football metaphors such as “Catch this TV forward pass.” Because, as the show's Dillon High Panthers wrestle for a Texas state championship on the field, you'll want to stand up, cheer, and program the series onto your DVR. But “Friday Night Lights,” which premieres tonight at 8 on Channel 7, is more than a football drama for ESPN types.³⁵

The show was widely praised by reviewers, yet often with surprise. The cause of the surprise is obvious—many thought it would be “just” a football show, “just” a high school drama, or worse yet, just a high school football drama (fig. 5.3). Tim Goodman notes that *Friday Night Lights* “manages to be everything you don't expect it to be—a finely nuanced drama instead of ‘Beverly Hills 90210’ [1990–2000], a portrait of small town life instead of a cheesy back-lot fantasy, and even a sports story with real authenticity, from the preparation to the game action.” The show, he states, “has to overcome so many preconceived notions, so many reasons not to watch, that it's the dramatic equivalent of a Hail Mary pass falling miraculously into the hands of an open receiver.” Thus he marvels that what producer Peter Berg “manages to do here is wholly impressive. If you don't care for football, or high school football in particular, or even the concerns of a bunch of high school kids and their fanatical grown-ups—which plenty of viewers probably don't—Berg makes you care.”³⁶

The litany of “this is not a football show” resounds throughout a reading of multiple *Friday Night Lights* reviews, as many reviewers share

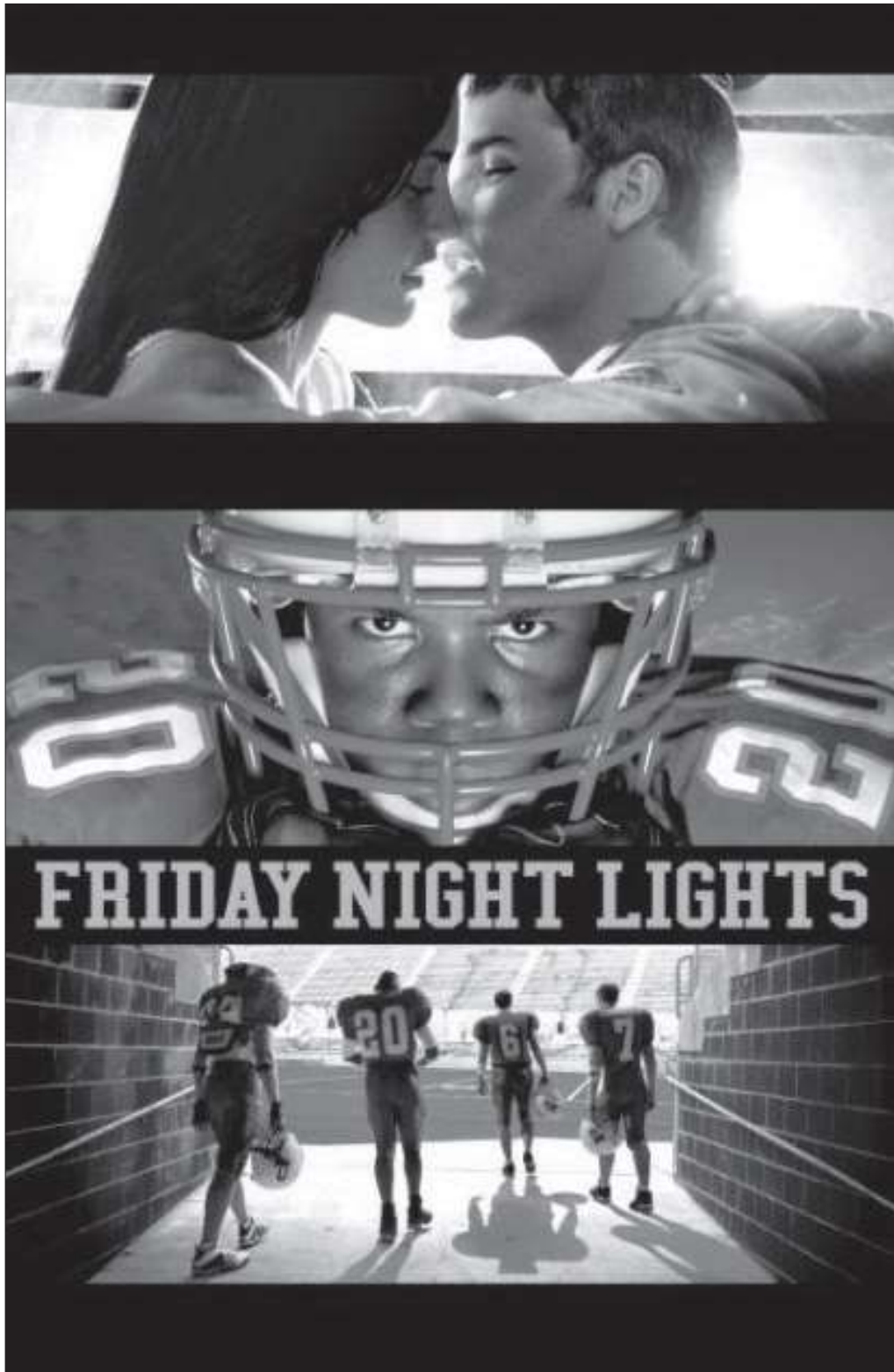


Fig. 5.3. A poster advertising *Friday Night Lights* hails football fans and teen-drama fans, two groups away from which many press reviews seemed determined to shepherd the series.

Goodman and Gilbert's dislike of football and/or football shows, as well as of high school dramas, yet also share their desire to paint the show as much more than either genre. Regarding the football, we're told that *Friday Night Lights* "isn't just about the gridiron,"³⁷ that "football is only the kickoff,"³⁸ and that "even skeptics, even people who hate football, could easily be caught up in the drama."³⁹ While on one level, this description is reasonably accurate, the declaration is often intoned with gratitude and relief, the "skeptics" of this latter quotation clearly including the critics themselves, who furthermore imagine their audiences to be skeptics. Doug Elfman states point blank that the show "makes me care about a subject I have zero, or possibly negative, interest in, no matter how rah-rah I was as a teen: high school daddy ball in rural Texas, where prayers are reserved for scoring touchdowns."⁴⁰

Yet if the danger of a football show requires a "hard defensive line" to deflect, Elfman's invocation of his former, lesser teen self also reflects a general sense in the reviews of the high school drama being a lesser genre. Gilbert glows, for example, that "there's nothing corny or precious about Dillon—none of the soapy romanticism of the towns in 'One Tree Hill' or 'Dawson's Creek.'"⁴¹ *One Tree Hill* (2003–) proves a common intertextual contrast, as a "soapy" program that lacks *Friday Night Lights*' humanity, grit, and realism. Even if they don't actively distance the show from the high school drama label, many reviewers are keen to crown it as the best of the lot, and another variety altogether. Diane Werts states that "none of this plays as soap opera, or perhaps it actually is soap opera in the finest sense, as a penetrating moral compass on the way humans privately direct their lives."⁴² Hal Boedeker writes, "Television needs a good high-school drama, and NBC's Friday Night Lights is a great drama."⁴³ And Melanie McFarland observes that *Friday Night Lights* represents a new brand of family-friendly programming, "stylish, intelligent and blissfully free of teen caricatures. Granted, the teenagers in 'Friday Night Lights' are TV beautiful, but the characters are steeped in an authenticity that serves as an antidote to all the MTV reality images that have been pumped into our culture."⁴⁴

We therefore have a case of reviewers keen to "rescue" a show from its low-culture connotations. Perhaps concerned that they need to justify the presence of their columns in a medium that is mostly regarded as higher and more literate than the object of their criticism, many press critics worked hard to frame *Friday Night Lights* as unlike the "low" genres of football shows and high school dramas. Witness, for instance, Alessandra

Stanley struggling to justify *Friday Night Lights*' inclusion in her decidedly upmarket publication, the *New York Times*:

[*Friday Night Lights* is] not just television great, but great in the way of a poem or painting, great in the way of art with a single obsessive creator who doesn't have to consult with a committee and has months or years to go back and agonize over line breaks and the color red.⁴⁵

Stanley also invokes *Rebel without a Cause* (1955) and *Splendor in the Grass* (1961) as similar (inter)texts, while *Slate*'s Troy Patterson compares the show to *Moby-Dick*,⁴⁶ and Elfman calls it the closest thing network television has to HBO's critical darling *The Wire*.⁴⁷ The intertexts are mobilized to shepherd the would-be audience toward seeing the text as a very certain product: *The Wire*-, *Moby-Dick*-, and poem-like, not *90210*-, *One Tree Hill*-, or ESPN-like.

Ironically, of course, such reviews might have *lost* audiences as well. NBC's loss of NFL broadcast rights had played a key role in their ratings drop in the previous two seasons, and 2006 marked not only *Friday Night Lights*' premier, but the return of the NFL to NBC; thus, the network would no doubt have loved to capitalize on NFL-FNL synergy if possible. Yet when the reviews work so hard to state that the show is *not* a football show, they risk alienating a large segment of the potential audience, and when they similarly try to distance *Friday Night Lights* from high school dramas, they also risk turning off the eighteen to twenty-four demographic, a group that is much beloved by networks. Gilbert and Brian Lowry both almost snidely note that *Friday Night Lights* is the kind of show that middle America longs for—set in a small, God-fearing town, focusing on family relationships—yet never actually watch;⁴⁸ however, most of the reviews (Gilbert's in particular) try to sever ties between a working-class audience and the show by insisting upon its high-culture credentials. Little do they realize that in so doing they may be contributing to the eventual failure of *Friday Night Lights* to reach said audiences. Victoria Johnson has written of the "Heartland myth" that lies at the center of significant discussion about television, whereby "flyover country" is seen as providing "a short-hand cultural common sense framework for 'all-American' identification, redeeming goodness, face-to-face community, sanctity, and emplaced ideals to which a desirous and nostalgic public discourse repeatedly returns," while also functioning "as an object of derision—condemned for its perceived naiveté and lack of mobility as

a site of hopelessly rooted, outdated American past life and values, entrenched political and social conservatism, and bastion of the ‘mass,’ undifferentiated, un-hip people and perspectives.”⁴⁹ NBC was undoubtedly hoping that its show would be received as appealing to the former, uplifting facet of the myth, yet the reviewers seem mindful of the risk that such an image would involve (or even be swallowed by?) the latter facet of the myth, and thus they move quickly to recharacterize it as comfortably hip, gritty, quality fare worthy of an upscale, urban audience.

Admittedly, *Friday Night Lights* is quite boldly innovative at mixing genres, and subsequently succeeded in attracting a (small) high-end audience. All the same, many critics’ odd rhetorical strategy of *excluding* audiences of football and high school dramas is shown to be unnecessary by Alan Sepinwall’s review, a lone exception in my sample that welcomed and embraced the frame of it being a football show, even as Sepinwall shares his press critic colleagues’ enthusiasm for the program. He writes:

The best sports movies and TV shows provide us with a kind of certainty, the knowledge that you’ll get to witness either a clear win (“Hoosiers,” “Major League”) or some kind of moral victory (Rocky going the distance, Rudy getting on the field). So when I say that virtually every development in the “Friday Night Lights” premiere will be telegraphed well in advance, I don’t mean it as a bad thing. The drama is one of the season’s best because it makes you care even when you know something big is coming—and because it finds pleasant little surprises along the way.⁵⁰

To Sepinwall, the show can be a great football show *and* one of the season’s best. It could also be a show that plays to “the Heartland” *and* to an upscale urban audience. Jason Mittell has written of the rocky path that genre hybrids frequently walk, as expectations and codings of each genre might conflict with the prospects for enjoyment and/or understanding of the other.⁵¹ Many critics’ reviews of *Friday Night Lights* expressed anxiety at the prospects for their beloved show to fail, but their subsequent solution was to try to remove the show from its rocky road and place it on what they saw to be a safer road called “quality television.” Ultimately, though, this was an act with significant interpretive ramifications, for it involved framing the show in ways that neglected and/or excluded other potential ways of enjoying it.

Thus, press reviews provide a clear example of how privileged paratexts can work to offset or otherwise revise a marketer’s paratexts and hype. As

this example also shows, and as argued in chapter 3, paratexts can often position a text on value hierarchies. Television critics occupy liminal space in hierarchies of taste, on one hand writing for newspapers and working in the austere tradition of criticism, yet on the other hand writing of the “low” culture form that is television, and frequently consigned to the same section of their newspapers as reports on Britney Spears’s latest antics. In this regard, and as self-appointed taste leaders, they often play a key role in mediating television shows’ standing in hierarchies of taste and value, at a key time in the text’s birth into popular culture. Individual reviews’ powers will of course depend upon the individual reader’s own level of interaction with and regard for other paratexts and the show itself. On one end of a spectrum, we could imagine many readers who have eagerly anticipated a show long before the reviews came in, and who do not care about them; on the other end of this spectrum, we should expect to find some readers who have heard little if anything about the program, who greatly value the critics’ opinions, and perhaps who do not even watch the show, comfortable to let the critics’ opinions at least temporarily substitute for their own. Consequently, realizing the power of reviews to co-create texts does not necessarily allow us as analysts any special predictive powers of how popular culture will receive a text and of what interpretive communities will dominate. Nevertheless, a close analysis of reviews does allow us greater knowledge of the semiotic environment into which new shows arrive, and of the reviews’ role both in creating that environment and in co-creating the text.

A Paratext of Their Own

Chapters 2–4 focused largely on how the entertainment industry can fashion a text at its outskirts, using paratexts to set the parameters of genre, style, address, value, and meaning. In this chapter, however, I hope to have shown that audience members are involved in this fashioning of the text not simply as consumers of text and paratext, but as creators of their own paratexts. The industry usually has considerable interest in trying to set its own textual parameters, and it will at times reinforce this semiotic act with legal ones, literally closing off opportunities for its texts to grow in certain directions. But audience members have a built-in interest in fashioning the text themselves. At a rudimentary—though by no means insignificant—level, the paratext of everyday discussion will forever play a constitutive role in creating the text. How we talk about texts affects how

others talk about and consume them, as was seen in chapter 4. We can also “talk” through more elaborate forms of paratexts, whether they be spoilers, vids, recaps, wikis, reviews, or other viewer-end paratexts such as websites, campaigns, viewing parties, or so on. Some such forms of “talk” will be louder and more readily accessible than others, some directed at small communities of like-minded audiences, some emanating out to the public sphere more generally. The latter may even in due course come to determine the public understanding of a text. Others allow viable alternatives to the public script to emerge, thereby multiplying the text into various versions. All, though, underline the considerable power of viewer-end paratexts to set or change the terms by which we make sense of film and television, and, hence, to add or subtract depth and breadth to a text and its storyworld.