**Slash fiction; an active fandom in the current Television series context**

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## Introduction

Scholars have been studying the impact of the media in our society since its appearance and its democratization over the last 50 years. Far from a naive attempt to review the implications of the media, this article focuses on a specific phenomenon as a consequence of the viewers' new position. As a matter of fact, since the first theories, which understood the audience as a passive addressee, new approaches have emerged that express the present role of the audience as being one which represents an active community of media interpreters. Viewers and readers have abandoned conformist passivity to become co-authors in the last decades because they are no longer content with the mere consumption of texts presented by the authors; the audience does not consider and venerate said texts as irrefutable, but they propose alternate versions instead.

One of the current examples of the paradigm shift in the addressee's role is the activity developed by the large fandom community, which creates new stories as alternate versions from the canon TV series or films. In addition to the escape from daily routine which TV series meant for the first spectators, who lived those experiences vicariously, the most devoted followers from some decades ago started to play out 'what-if' scenarios, and imagine how the story would develop in hypothetical cases; "the would-be readers themselves became the producers of what they wanted, at first because that was the only way to get it and later because they found the act of producing it pleased them for its own sake" (Pugh, 2005: 218). After years of prolific printed production, the made-up stories which once filled in the "fanzines" were brought to the web, and writers started to publish online, such that a growth took place alongside the popularization of the Internet. Among the varied manifestations of fan fiction, slash fiction stands out not as much for its numerous followers but rather for the controversy which it generates. In fact, whereas slash represents a small percentage of the fan fiction production, it is the genre which attracts more attention from scholars and academics (Pugh, 2005: 91).

In general terms, slash fiction is a subgenre of fan fiction that illustrates eroticism and romanticism among characters of the same sex, found most notably in films and television shows. Fan fiction is a derivative work under United States copyright law. According to the United States copyright office, "A «derivative work», that is, a work that is based on (or derived from) one or more already existing works, is copyrightable if it includes what the copyright law calls an «original work of authorship»". However, the implications of this phenomenon go further and are subject to debate, as Anne M. Kustritz claims when defining it as "A slippery signifier alternately used as a verb, noun or adjective, "slash" communicates a bundle of interconnected meanings, at once describing a community, a personal identity, a textual genre, and an active reception activity" (2007: 2). Slash fiction is, consequently, a complex phenomenon involving several issues which

cannot be reduced to legal terms.

## The new role of the reader as an interpreter

Given this gained authority of the addressee, one of slash fiction's dimensions, which is worthy to point out, is its active community of writers. Still, the fandom writers' activity should be framed within a broader context in order to understand its further implications. One of the experts who discuss the social consequences of such change is Zygmunt Bauman, who sets the metamorphosis of the reader in the context of post-modernity. According to Bauman, not only did the post-modern era shift the social order, affecting several spheres, but it also modified the spirit of the time, as well as the intellectual arena. The experts, who traditionally monopolized the authority status, are now relegated to a subordinate position, due to the rise of plurality as valid criteria for judgement. Bauman uses metaphorical names to label the role of the old elite, called legislators, and the readers, named interpreters, and he highlights the emergence of many signs that reveal the gradual replacement of the former by the latter (1987: 125). Furthermore, he insists in the importance of a pluralism of interpretations, values and experiences as an alternative to the authority of the legislators, who remained in control of the area of taste and artistic judgement during modernity. Although Bauman is firstly referring to the artistic field, he also points out the importance of the mass media culture in shaping a new source of judgers. The last consequence of this revolution is that the discussion is not limited to the experts anymore, but it involves the society as a whole. In fact, Bauman highlights the notion of community as "the central concept of the self-consciously post-modern philosophy and social science. It has come to replace reason and universal truth, and the one method leading to both" (1987: 145). The notion of community will be a central idea to explain the implications of slash fiction in this account, and it is also a crucial notion in Stanley Fish's theory.

Fish talks about the interpretive communities as a determinant factor in the meaning making process. He states that meanings are not fixed; they are rather a social construction which depends on the cultural assumptions and conventions established by the community within a specific context. Therefore, its members' interpretation of a text is shaped by the specific fashion in which that community reads a text and takes the meanings from it. These approaches open a new perspective from which to understand and study the role of the reader and his interpretation. As Fish states, "no reading, however outlandish it might appear, is inherently an impossible one" (1987: 347). According to his assertion, slash fiction would be one of the possible readings of a given media text.

Thus, fan fiction is to be understood as one of the signs highlighted by Bauman about the increasing substitution of the legislators by the interpreters in a pop-cultural context.

## Fan fiction as a new arena for interpreters

Generally, it is said that fan fiction writers started to write because they wanted 'more from' or 'more of' the original story and they were willing to explore alternative endings or plots, as remarked by Pugh (2005: 19). This way, they invented what they did not get from the official

versions, while giving birth to a new phenomenon. According to the author, the wish of knowing more about a story which has became familiar to the addressee, even if he accepts the canon ending, or the curiosity of exploring alternative scenarios is a common thing for men and his need of narratives; moreover, it is said to be one of the founding reasons for fanfiction writing. Pugh assimilates the fanfiction writers to the Ancient Greek dramatists, who used the characters from myths in their plays, or to medieval artists who turned to the Bible figures when writing morality tales, since they all stem from the canon and present re-written stories under a new interpretation (2005: 69). In fact the author defends fanfiction writer's talent, although they are working with existing characters, since "for them, these characters have become archetypes, part of a myth-kitty on which they draw as writers have for centuries on myth, legend and folk tale" (2005: 134).

Initially, fanfiction was developed within fanzines but their small scale production limited what was available to the public. The appearance and democratization of the Internet provided the writers with cheaper possibilities to publish, get their works read by a large public, and create larger communities. It meant a huge revolution, since not only does the Internet allow more accessibility to the stories, but it also gives the possibility of interaction between the writers and the readers of fanfiction in general, and slash in particular. This way, the writers have the chance of receiving instant feedback from the readers and improve their works by learning from their fans' advice. Thus, the process is a continual reinterpretation of the media texts, in which every writer contributes in a way to enlarge the experience that the primary text caused on them. In this sense, Jenkins insists in the idea of fandom as a participatory community, since he defines it in social terms, as "spectators who transform the experience of watching television into a rich and complex participatory culture" (1992: 23). This concept connects with Fish's ideas about the community of interpreters and its shared ways of encoding a specific text. In fact, the importance of the collaborative work within the community is expressed in the success/fail of the fanfiction story depending on the fulfilment of certain premises, such as not altering the character's personality. In fact, writers "do speak and think of 'our characters', a shared resource that the whole community of that fandom feels it knows and cares about" (Pough, 2005: 67).

Actually, this factor seems to be the most important aspect of fanfiction production. Despite the increase of sequels, pre-sequels (speculating how the circumstances get to be the way they are), AU (Alternate Universes) which refers to 'what if' scenarios that are deviated from the canon, etc., there are still some basic principles, such as the importance of maintaining the character's essence, which need to be followed: "the one aspect of canon that is not usually up for alteration is the nature of the characters. To some fanfic readers, these are the most important aspect of their fanfic universe and of any story set in it" (Pugh, 2005: 65).

**Slash fiction as a subversive genre**

Slash fiction started in the 1970's, when some female spectators of the television show *Star Trek* began to write stories based on the main male characters, Kirk and Spock. The first slash story, which appeared in 1974 ('A fragment out of time'), insinuated a relationship beyond friendship

between the main characters of the successful TV show. In fact, the genre takes its name from the graphic symbol which usually was used to refer the pair made by these two characters in the first fan stories that appeared in that decade suggesting a relationship between them. It was the practice in that time among fan writers to list the name or initials of the characters of the story so that the readers could identify them easily. If the initials were linked by a forward slash (/), it would indicate that there was a sexual relationship between them. Thus, since it was used to link Spock and Kirk romantically, "the forward slash between them came to mean specifically stories which focused on m/m relationships" (Pugh, 2005: 91).

The usual question of why do women choose male characters as the protagonists of their romance stories, as it will be discussed later, may find an answer in the beginnings of the genre, as remarked by Pugh. Since there were no interesting main female characters within the TV shows from the 60's and 70's (i.e. *The professionals*, *Starsky&Hutch*) slash fiction writers focused on the more developed male characters (i.e. Bodie and Doyle, Solo and Illya, Blake and Avon), and created emotional stories between them. Thus, their goal when writing said stories "was to ratchet up the emotional charge of the canon and to make their heroes more interesting by increasing their vulnerability and opening them to their own, often very closed-off, feelings" (Pugh, 2005: 93). Although writers from the 60's, 70's and early 80's had limited power in shaping the plots as they do nowadays, there was a change concerning the inclusion of more active women as well as more emotional men among the protagonists of the next series from now and then. Yet such an evolution was also due to social trends. The audience's opinion started to be considered an influential factor to be taken into account, as pointed out by Pugh: "if there was awareness that audiences wanted stronger female characters and more emotionally vulnerable male ones, then the audience, as well as the official writers, directors and actors, had played some part in shaping those characters" (2005: 21).

Since that moment, the genre has evolved so that it presents a myriad of possibilities in several aspects, from the wide range of television shows and films which serve as a starting point (*Harry Potter, Smallville, Supernatural, Terminator, V, X-files, X-men*), to a continuum in the plot, which runs from explicit sexual encounters to idealistic romantic stories. Moreover, although it initially was limited to male couples, there are also stories which portray female characters involved in this kind of relationship. As a matter of fact, that's one of the subgenres, called *femslash*, among the several ones that have developed from the original stories (i.e. the *chanslash*, depicts relationships where underage characters are involved and the *real person slash* goes further in creating a slash story with a real celebrity). Moreover, there are further categories within the genre which indicate other aspects, such as the extent to which both writers and readers whether prioritize the importance of the sexual encounter or the pair itself. This way, the label "ATG" (Any two guys), refers to those stories which are mostly focused on the sex rather than on the characters; on the contrary, "OTP" (One True pairing) stands for those who consider a specific couple as unique, and do not want to pair those characters with someone else (Pugh, 2005: 110-111). Therefore, there are concerns from both sides, and, according to Pugh, readers and

writers express their fears about slash becoming over-sexual, which would lead to a repetitive and monotonous genre, as well as becoming too emotional and sentimental.

There are some new paths that are being taken by the latest slash fictions stories. Presently, there is a debate over the ease with which female slash fiction is included as well as the slash stories which take main characters who are already gay in the canon (e.g. the characters of the TV show *Queer as folk*). At first sight, both aspects do not seem to be very problematic as long as the stories fulfil the conditions to be considered slash. It is to say that the slash fiction still ought to show the vulnerability of men concerning their feelings and emotions towards a homosexual relationship, which would be somehow suggested in the canon. However, there is little consensus about these aspects and slash writers, as well as readers, express different opinions in this regard. Therefore, "the two themes that seem to emerge over and over when slash writers discuss slash are the importance of extending the canon, of exploring what was "visible but withheld", and the extent to which, however explicit physically explicit slash may get, its core is emotion" (Pugh, 2005: 100).

### *Slash Fiction based on current TV shows*

Despite the fact that it was conceived several decades ago, slash fiction is an active genre within the spectrum of fandom production today. Therefore, it is not strange to find an increasing number of stories (which coexists with those depicting old TV shows) whose main characters are the protagonists of the current series that are seen in TV every day, such as *Lost, Mad Men, Supernatural, CSI, Smallville, Bones, Dexter, Doctor Who, House, The Mentalist, Nip/Tuck*, etc.

Some of the websites, such as fanfiction.net, include several genres which take a myriad of media texts (i.e. comics, films, books, or even cartoons) as their primary sources, while others are specifically focused on slash fiction, like slashfiction.net; moreover, it is possible to find certain sites which focus on a specific TV show and gather every kind of fandom production which is based on it, like lostfic.com, which welcomes any genre about the series *Lost* (ABC) or 'CSI Forensics. From out of the lab', which includes more genres besides slash. In general, these websites are open arenas which publish any story freely, although there are some restrictions concerning the use of underage or real characters.

When visiting some of these websites hosted by slash fiction fandom, it is easy to distinguish different ways of classifying the contents in order to provide the reader with a clear and organized map of the available offering. Whereas the level of organization varies from one site to another, the stories are usually ordered in different categories such as pairings, chapters, title, name of the author, or by sex rating (including an adult content alert on some occasions). In fact, as mentioned before, some sites establish certain conditions which must be met in order to participate within their community, such as the prohibition of publishing underage stories or real person fiction, which includes stories with the real TV show actors. The stories vary in length and intensity, but they are commonly defined by the depiction of a homoerotic relationship. Thus, when looking for a fanfic story about *Smallville* (CW Network) we find pairings such as Clark/Lex,

or writers who explore the hypothetical relationship between Doctor House and his medicine colleagues, such as Foreman or Wilson (Fox), as well as between the characters of *Bones* (Fox) Zach Addy/Seeley Booth, or Tony Soprano/Matt Bevilaqua from *The Sopranos* (HBO).

One of the most interesting and enriching aspects of accessing the stories online is the feedback, since not only do the websites provide the reader with the chance to peruse the different comments which are posted by the rest of members of the community, but they also allow one to participate with his or her own impressions and opinions. Despite the fact that some fanfiction websites require a registration, they generally offer easy and available ways to take part within the community as both readers and writers.

Finally, it is important to highlight the considerable number of websites which also, or exclusively, include stories between female characters, such as Calleigh/Natalia, from *CSI Miami* (CBS), Bree Van deKamp/Lynette Scavo from *Desperate Housewives* (ABC), or the four protagonists of *Sex and the City* (HBO). Thus, taking into account the increasing slash production which takes women as their main characters, it is deduced that femslash is a significant subgenre within the slash fiction fandom. Moreover, there are also cases where the characters from different TV shows are brought together in the same story in order to create a relationship between them, so that it is possible to find couples like Lex (*Smallville*)/Jason (*O.C.*), or even from several resources such as films and books; this is the so-called crossover genre, which implies the interaction of two characters from different media texts. Another outstanding case is the prolific production about the series *Supernatural* (Warner Bros). Stories based on the two characters, Sam and Dean Winchester, go beyond the depiction of ordinary male erotica, since they are brothers, so they are actually recreating a brotherly incest relationship.

### *Slash fiction as an Internet phenomenon*

As it has been shown, slash fiction is a spreading phenomenon within the Internet; hence there is a countless number of websites devoted to the exchange and publication of slash stories. In addition, the arrival of the Internet was also revolutionary in terms of belonging to the fan community, since it provided the fans with the opportunity to access unlimited resources and to join a fandom "without the limitations of a word-to-mouth initiation process" (Kustritz, 2007: 18). As any community, fandoms have an organized structure as well as a certain number of conventions in becoming a member. Moreover, they also share certain codes and discursive rules which illustrate again Fish's notion about the interpretive communities, where "the meanings it (the self) confers on texts are not its own but have their source in the interpretive community (or communities) of which it is a function" (1980: 335). This way, the fact of belonging to a fandom modifies the manner in which its members interact with the media text, and the meanings they get from it. One decade ago, Howard Rheingold already accounted the growing importance of online communities when saying that "millions of people on every continent also participate in the computer-mediated social groups known as virtual communities, and this population is growing fast" (1999: 273).

While feedback has been a feature of fanfiction since it took off (there were letters of comment within the fanzines or discussions in the conventions), it experienced a revolution with the Internet because it offered a free and instant way of participating and giving a response to the writers, plus it gathered a larger audience which would not be possible on a printed fanzine basis. Furthermore, the Internet also let them be aware of the large number of people who were also interested in it, creating a sense of belonging; "the community has always been worldwide, but now that was clear to those who had never suspected it" (Pugh, 2005: 118). Consequently, some fans criticize the decrease of quality and thoroughness in some stories which are published online (the large number of material submitted makes it difficult for the editors to control it); however, these sites offer multiple and diverse possibilities. Amateur writers, who value peer review, take advantage of "a supportive writing community" (2005: 124) which offers feedback and advice. Moreover, such interaction and exchange also provide with opportunities for collaboration and new ideas for stories, as pointed out by Pugh.

Nevertheless, the Internet also has more advantages; as a free speech space, it is open to discussion and multiple interpretations. The Internet offers more accessible channels of participation and increases the possibilities of presenting an alternative point of view from the official perspective represented by the canon. This potentiality has been remarked by some experts, when talking about the net, as a democratic tool in the public sphere. An example is Dahlgren (2009), who defines the Internet as a civic phenomenon which is collaboratively constructed as an open source by promoting visibility for the dominant discourse, but also for its critics to be heard.

In much the same way, some authors such as Sonia K. Katyal, remark its nature as an alternative tool for minority groups, who have been traditionally excluded from the dominant discourse, as a place to express and contribute to the cultural arena by recoding existing texts. This is especially significant since, according to the author, the intellectual property law promotes some authors within the mainstream and silences other voices which belong to minor groups, such as women:

> In cyberspace, by creating spaces for the "outsider", we have enabled the creation of a world of informal markets and amateur communities that create cultural resources, illustrating how women's access to technology can radically change the future of the production of intellectual property. Further, the world of cyberspace also demonstrates the establishment of a world that transcends the structures of everyday identities, particularly where gender and sexual identity are concerned (2006: 468).

Taking this into account, it is noticeable that slash fiction is a phenomenon which prompts controversial responses due to its revolutionary character. In this sense, Bacon-Smith (1992) reports that slash fiction is one of the genres which is considered to be more dangerous within the community. Thus, the majority of women write under pseudonyms because they are afraid of suffering reprisal if their work is known outside the fandom, –at least, it used to be the norm in the past; Meyer and Tucker claim that due to the popularity of social networking, fandom is not related anymore to anonymity, since fans seek for visibility in those spaces (2007). In any

case, the diversity of identities is also seen as a game, as Jenkins states: "the selection of a pseudonym involves the construction of an alternative identity", which is part of the pleasure that slash fiction implies "in breaking with traditional feminine roles" (1992: 201).

### *Controversial issues about slash fiction*

Jenkins states that slash fiction stories present a formulaic structure where several stages from the initial partnership to the sexual encounter can be distinguished (1997: 206-219). In other words, there are four movements from the homosocial to the homoerotical desire: *the initial relationship*, *masculine dystopia*, *confession* and *masculine utopia*. The first phase is characterized by an ideal partnership where, however, pals present some unexpressed feelings in such a way that, in the second movement, the previous smooth communication is affected by a tense atmosphere. Usually, one of the characters, which is aware of his feelings for the other, hides said feelings fearing that his partner does not feel the same, but they are implicitly shown in non-verbal communication, until the *confession*, which seems to be the only solution for such a tense situation. Thus, when the partnership between the characters seems to break down, a declaration from one of them is welcomed by the other one who also shares similar feelings, reaching the last step: *masculine utopia* which stands for the sexual encounter between the bodies. Given this, it can be said that "the eroticism in slash is an erotics of emotional release and mutual acceptance; an acceptance of self's, and acceptance of one's partner" (Jenkins, 1997: 215).

Given this unusual depiction of male characters within the literature or visual narratives universe, some concerns about the representation of male sexuality are pointed out by several authors who bring out concepts such as androgyny; in this sense, Jenkins states that "androgyny, at least as the concept is embodied within slash, does not mean a 'loss of masculinity' so much as it means an opening of new possibilities within the homosocial continuum" (1997: 218). The truth is that, while the manhood of the main characters is never questioned, issues of commitment and emotions are controversial since they are treated in much the same way as they appear in traditional female's fiction, as shown in *Reading the Romance* from Janice Radway (1984). Hence, it is logical to understand that the erotic component of the stories which involve male characters is understood as the defining feature of slash fiction, having provoked so much debate within the academic world. Katyal suggests that the most fascinating aspect of slash fiction might be the fact that stories usually involve male sexual and emotional relationships which are written by (mostly) heterosexual women (2006: 493). According to the conclusions of Bacon Smith, who conducted a study based on the attendees to an American convention two decades ago, the profile of slash fiction writers and readers was a white-middle class woman in her thirties, generally single and heterosexual, with university education. The range of slash fiction writers has become wider since then, so that it includes heterogeneous groups nowadays. Nevertheless, although the authors of slash fiction come from different backgrounds, the standard slash writer is still defined as a heterosexual or lesbian/bisexual woman who, generally, writes for personal and creativity purposes.

What is clear is that the fact of describing a relationship between two men is a revelation against the traditional gender models imposed by main-stream discourses. Slash fiction transgresses the norms since it questions the traditional concepts of gender: "slash opens a safe although not uncontested space for the construction and articulation of a range of multifaceted sexualities, including those given little or no legitimacy by dominant culture" (Kustritz, 2007: 54). By proposing a love story between men, the authors of slash fiction reverse the prevailing male role, since men are portrayed as more sensitive and emotional. Several theories try to give an account about the reason why these women choose male couples to construct erotic relationships instead of female ones (although *femslash* is becoming increasingly popular). Some of them focus on the idea of constructing a relationship that starts from a more equal position than the traditional male/female one, since women find difficulties in creating a reliable active female heroine according to the models depicted in the shows they love. Moreover, they also point out the importance of showing equal relationships, where signs of dominance and power are diluted; that is why slash writers try to avoid sex scenes with explicit penetration: "either the characters will make love in ways other than penetrative or alternate the roles" (Pugh, 2005: 110). In this sense, there are male slash fiction readers who reject the way in which sex is described in the stories, because men do not talk or express emotions in that explicit way. However, as pointed out by Pugh "a slashed hero has more to do with what the writers wish men were like than with what they know men are like" (2005: 102). Conversely, Bacon notes that a slash writer "can imagine an equal relationship or she may even envision an unequal one without revealing her personal need to feel dominant or submissive in a relationship" (1992: 246).

Slash writers admit to having several motivations to write, but "few if any mention political imperatives as the driving force of their creative work" (Kustritz, 2007: 252). Something that Pugh argues when talking about *femslash*; "there is much more f/f slash (femslash) about now than there used to be, and while one reason for that is the advent of more interesting female canon characters, (e.g. in the Buffyverese) it certainly has a socio-political agenda as well" (Pugh, 2005: 109). According to some authors like Bacon-Smith, female writers may also be motivated by solidarity with the gay community, since women also belong to a subordinate sexual group, outside the mainstream; "hetererosexual women, like lesbian and gay men, are constrained to silence by Western masculine culture" (1992: 247). In much the same way, Lackner, Lucas, and Reid criticize, from a queer perspective, the common depiction of slash fiction as stories about gay men written by straight women. This way, they advocate for a more complex reading of the phenomenon, as noted by Meyer and Tucker: "by resituating the practice of writing slash fiction as queer, the authors challenge the heterosexual/homosexual binary implicit in contemporary definitions of slash fiction" (2007: 109).

Seeing this, it is difficult to determine why slash writers are drawn to this genre and why there exists such a volume of literature about this aspect. Some of them write as way of exploring their feelings about men, while others are attracted to the idea of making up stories where both

characters treat each other as equals. Furthermore, Pugh also points out some other reasons that lead writers to develop such stories; on the one hand, some claim that the idea of two good-looking men having a relationship appeals to some women in the same way that the opposite situation attracts men's attention. On the other hand, while some gay slash writers would write for ideological reasons, some others just want to explore those 'what-if' scenarios. Pugh concludes that

> In the beginning the idea of the genre was precisely to unlock closed, inhibited male characters into what the fanfic writers felt they had it in them to be. Now that TV canons are catching up with them in that respect, the writers have gone on to use it for other purposes, notably reclaiming some territory for diversity and demonstrating that the world is more various than TV producers think" (2005: 113-114).

Therefore, it seems that there is no consensus about the motives of slash writers when creating their stories, because it responds to a multiple as well as complex reality; however it is usually connected with sexual motives. In this sense, some authors like Jenkins denounce the excessive attention paid to the sexual component of said narratives:

> while character sexuality constitutes one of the most striking characteristics of slash, and most slash fans concede that erotic pleasure is central to their interest in the genre, it seems false to define this genre exclusively in terms of its representation of sexuality. Slash is not so much a genre about sex as it is a genre about the limitations of traditional masculinity and about reconfiguring male identity (1997: 191).

## Readers as producers of new media texts

Nevertheless, given the notions remarked at the beginning of the article, what makes slash fiction an interesting phenomenon is the fact that the notions of the author and the reader tend to mingle: "the boundaries among reader/writer become blurred" (Jenkins, 1992: 75). Thus, there is a shift concerning the role of the reader; while he used to be conceived as a consumer, or viewer, he is now understood as a critic or reviewer, since he has different tools, such as the blogs on the net, to both publish new stories or to respond to those created by other members of the community.

The spectators of the television shows negotiate new meanings, as an active audience who offers alternative interpretations of an existing text, as it comes from their interaction with these television programs. This performance reinforces what Umberto Eco states: "the reader as an active principal of interpretation is a part of the picture of the generative process of the text" (1981: 4). According to his theory, the pop culture texts can be understood as *closed texts*, whose author has an average addressee in mind, since they are open to any possible read, interpretation and coding. However, according to Eco, these texts can give rise to unexpected interpretations. To illustrate this, he refers to his ideological read of Superman as just one of the possible interpretations that can emerge from the readers, any of them completely valid (1981: 9). This is the same concept that appears in Barthes' contribution from the reader-response

criticism, which gives priority to the reader and his experience over the author. He talks about the *readerly text*, that requires the involvement of an active reader, in which "the networks are many and interact, without any of them being able to surpass the rest, [...] it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one" (1975: 5). According to his view, the primary television shows or films would be readerly texts from which a different fashion of codings can arise, providing new interpretations that are turned into new texts by a dynamic community of viewers.

Other authors focus on the commercial dimension of the phenomenon. As pointed out by Shefrin, active fans are considered as a very specific type of audience, different from the rest of media consumers: "For such fans, the act of watching a particular film or playing a certain video game can comprise an experiential unit that is interconnected to an expansive multi-textual environment—one which may encompass magazines, books, collectibles, interactive media, online clubs, conferences, and role-playing events" (2004: 273).  These fans become interpreters since they take the components which constitute the narrative imaginary and they transform it with personal expressions such as drawing, poetry, music, photographs, narratives, which confronts the dominant discourses presented by the powerful media producers. Therefore, "participatory fandom is the enemy of media companies. The battle-lines are drawn over the issues of copyright and intellectual property law" (Shefrin, 2004: 273).

However, the main idea is that interpreters appropriate the characters of the different TV series and explore alternative dimensions, while they try to "construct their own community within the context of what many observers have described as a postmodern era; it documents a group insistent on making meaning from materials others have characterized as trivial and worthless" (Jenkins, 1992: 3).

## Conclusion

Slash fiction can be understood as one of the examples within current society that reverse the traditional notions of writers/readers by diluting the authority of legislators and proposing a multiplicity of alternative interpretations that coexist and enrich the popular constructions within a community. In fact, as emancipated readers, they claim their right to rework the popular texts, since the idea of a unique, exclusive version is not longer valid. In this sense, Pugh points out two of the basic premises of fan fiction; "the beliefs that (a) fictional characters and universes can transcend both their original context and their creator and (b) the said creator cannot claim to know everything about them" (2005: 222). In fact, slash fiction stories are also objects of critique within their community, since they are also open to different interpretations, as the canon text from which they stem from. Fanfiction stories are mostly developed in an online setting – a new space, under constant change and revision, which is created in behalf of the alternative and non-dominant discourses, and which gives an opinion to everyone, gathering people from different backgrounds and interests. This dynamics give the opportunity to new writers who enrich the text and it finally results into an improved literacy. Self-empowerment, which provides the fanfiction

writers with the willingness to re-write the stories, explores new scenarios and expresses its opinion and plays an important role in the process.

As it has been argued in the article, slash fiction presents several progressive elements, such as the advocacy for more equal relationships, a transgressor representation of gender and sexual identities, and a critique of traditional masculinity. However, the fact that its writers and readers also accept many main-stream representations within the commercial TV series, suggests that slash should be understood as a negotiation rather than a break with the mass media productions (Jenkins, 1997: 219-220).

In addition, the gained agency of the readers/spectators/interpreters in creating new media texts, which represent the diversity of valid meanings that can be drawn from the popular culture, seems to keep on increasing due to the impact of the new technologies, the growing production of Television series and new concepts within society. And this is a revolution in terms of communication which needs to be studied in depth, since slash fiction creates "public spaces for collective dreaming" (Kustritz, 2007: 79).

In conclusion, fandom can be understood as "an institution of theory and criticism, a semistructured space where competing interpretations of common texts are proposed, debated and negotiated and where the readers speculate about the nature of the mass media and their own relationship to it (Jenkins, 1992:86).

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