

**HOW DOES POSTMODERNIST THEORY INFORM OUR READING OF  
MULDER/KRYCEK SLASH FICTION?**

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the ways in which postmodernist theory informs our reading of online slash fan fiction, focusing on Mulder/Krycek works. It argues that the mechanisms involved in the creation, distribution and interpretation of slash fan fiction constitute postmodernist practice, which can be summed up by Craig Owens' notion of the 'allegorical impulse of postmodernism'.

Drawing on recent scholarship on new media, I first explore the impact of the internet on the writing and dissemination of fan fiction. The new digital platforms and software expand the mechanisms involved in the evolution, form, and distribution of fan fiction works in a manner that reflects postmodernist practice.

Secondly, I address the issues of authorship and originality of fan works in the light of Roland Barthes' notion of the 'death of the author'. Building on Claude Levi-Strauss' concept of bricolage, I investigate the appropriative processes involved in fan fiction.

Finally, I consider the sexual politics of slash fiction, taking as my case study *The X-Files* Mulder/Krycek pairing. The subversive potential of slash and the popular "hurt/comfort" motif are central to the slash fiction's challenge to the sociocultural *status quo*.

**TABLE OF CONTENTS:**

INTRODUCTION.....4

CHAPTER I:  
TECHNOLOGY AND FAN FICTION.....8

CHAPTER II:  
INTERPRETATIVE CONTROL AND APPROPRIATION.....16

CHAPTER III:  
HURT/COMFORT AS A MEANS OF LIBERATING MULDER AND KRYCEK.....21

CONCLUSION.....28

BIBLIOGRAPHY.....33

## INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, the fan fiction writing has drawn increasing attention from the new media and cultural studies scholars.<sup>1</sup> The proliferation of fan fiction writing has elevated the genre to a widespread cultural practice which can give us an invaluable insight into the popular culture's socio-political dynamics and its relationship with and/or dependence on new media. A number of scholars have increasingly argued that fun culture allows us to understand issues that go far beyond popular culture as they give us insight into the mediated nature of our contemporary, global cultural experiences.<sup>2</sup> However, there still seems to be much ambiguity regarding the relation of fan fiction to the more culturally established artistic and literary practices. Indeed whilst researching for this dissertation, I developed a distinct impression that not only is the fan fiction still regarded as a somewhat marginal phenomenon, but so is the scholarship on this topic. Although postmodernist culture and the relevant philosophical writings have left the previously established definitions of art and literature wide-open, there still seems to be a pervasive resistance to accepting new forms of cultural production, including fan fiction and other related genres.

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<sup>1</sup> Amongst the most influential studies, Henry Jenkins' 1992 publication *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture* deserves particular attention, as it made a fundamental contribution to establishing the field of fan fiction studies. In fact, 1991 - 92 were crucial years in the development of the discipline. Constance Penley's 'Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and Popular Culture' sketched out the psychoanalytical framework for slash fiction (Penley 1992) whilst Camille Bacon-Smith's *Enterprising Women* engaged with the gender politics of the female fandoms (Bacon-Smith 1991). Finally, Lisa Lewis's essay anthology offered a collection of new, emerging approaches to fan fiction culture (Lewis 1992). As Jenkins himself pointed out, 2006 – 2007 were also especially important for the development of the field, with two major collections of essays: Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse's *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays* (2006) and Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss and C. Lee Harrington's *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World* (2007). Since 2012, the peer-reviewed *Journal of Fandom Studies* has also provided a lively platform for new scholarship in the field. In 2014 the journal published a special issue dedicated to Jenkins' *Textual Poachers*, in which Lucy Bennett provides a useful overview of the scholarship that has built on Jenkins' framework. (Bennett 2014).

<sup>2</sup> For instance, Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington point out that 'studies of fan audiences help us to understand and meet challenges far beyond the realm of popular culture because they tell us something about the way in which we relate to those around us, as well as the way we read the mediated texts that constitute an ever larger part of our horizon of experience (2007 p. 10).

This thesis will argue that the postmodernist theory provides the most effective model of incorporating fan fiction into the broader cultural framework. I will argue this point by focusing on slash fiction, a sub-genre of fan fiction; specifically, a case study of slash fan fiction entitled “In a Dark Time”, which uses two characters from the popular TV show *The X-Files*: Fox Mulder and Alex Krycek. I will argue that it is, in essence, an extension of what Craig Owens termed the ‘allegorical impulse’ of postmodernism. Whilst building on a number of recent postmodernist and post-structuralist writers, Owens created one of the most inclusive definitions of postmodernism, which not only traced the roots of postmodernism to the inter-war avant-gardes but also anticipated a number of practices, including, as I shall argue, fan fiction writing. Kustritz provides a clear definition of fan fiction, identifying it as “the practice of using characters from a professionally published text (a source product) in an original story” (371). Owens’s explanation of allegory, which, as he convincingly argued, underpins postmodernist art practice, anticipates the nature and mechanisms that take place in fan fiction:

Allegorical imagery is appropriated imagery; the allegorist does not invent images but confiscates them. He lays claim to the culturally significant, poses as its interpreter. And in his hands the image becomes something other (allos =other + agoreuei =to speak). He does not restore an original meaning that may have been lost or obscured; allegory is not hermeneutics. Rather, he adds another meaning to the image. If he adds, however, he does so only to replace: the allegorical meaning supplants an antecedent one; it is a supplement. This is why allegory is condemned, but it is also the source of its theoretical significance. (69)

It is in this light of postmodernist, allegorical practices of appropriation and confiscation as well as other strategies discussed by Owens that fan fiction should be examined. My argument will be threefold; the postmodernist allegorical mechanisms are expanded by the

new digital media and the legal challenges they generate. This in turn points to the ontological questioning and definition of fan fiction as an original work. Finally, the allegorical strategies and the notion of ‘open text’ that fan fiction encapsulates are deployed in slash fan fiction to subvert and rupture the homogeneous and sexually repressive contemporary mainstream culture.

The first chapter will argue that, although fan fiction communities were already well established and developed before the advent of the internet, the new digital media platforms, where most of the current fan fiction takes place, provide new mechanisms of writing and dissemination, thus proliferating the allegorical mechanisms into the digital realm. I will consider how the technological contexts influence the genesis and evolution of source material and fan fiction, respectively. Attention will be paid to the ways in which fandom has been influenced by the emergence of web-based communities and technologies that have facilitated its rise. I will also consider the legal dimension of these developments and the light they might throw on our understanding of fan fiction. Web-based distribution of fan works has provoked legal attacks by creators of the source material and subsequent defences of fan work. These are particularly instructive for this thesis as they articulate the motivations and intentions of creators of programs and their fans. By interrogating the interpretative authority and intentions of both the professional writer and the fan fiction writer, I will show that both are embarking on distinct projects that employ similar materials.

The second chapter will propose that we may most profitably seek to understand what slash is doing, and why that might be meaningful, by reading it through Roland Barthes’ concept of ‘death of the author’ and Claude Lévi-Strauss’ theory of bricolage. In doing so, I will focus on formal elements of slash, which echo those of Owens’s allegorical process -

including, appropriation, collage, palimpsest (later referred to as simulacra), seriality, and hybridisation - and how they acquire theoretical significance, within the wider landscape of postmodernism.

Finally, in chapter three, I will consider the sexually subversive nature of the slash fiction. Fandom's interest in exploring alternative possibilities for the characters from *The X-Files* is perhaps most pronounced in works of slash fiction. This subgenre of fan fiction involves fans taking two same-sex characters from a professionally written TV show or film and writing them into scenarios in which they become romantically and sexually involved. For a casual reader of slash fiction, the sexual content might suggest that it is a form of fantasy, in which the writer's and reader's desires are being served. This thesis will contest this narrow reading, in favor of the view that "the rewriting that occurs in fan-based literature provides an outlet for the most troubling aspects of the canon and, in this way, reflects on the world presented in the show" (Silbergleid 50). The popular "hurt/comfort" motif will be shown to be the primary way in which fan fiction writers can liberate characters from the confinement of their source universes, providing an allegorical basis with which to interpret slash fiction as a postmodern art form.

The thesis will ultimately argue that Mulder/Krycek slash fiction should be considered as culturally significant and distinct works of postmodern practice, rather than as subordinate to or derivative of the source material with which it shares characters and scenarios, as has been suggested by some writers of source material and their legal counsel<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> See [http://fanlore.org/wiki/Professional\\_Author\\_Fanfic\\_Policies](http://fanlore.org/wiki/Professional_Author_Fanfic_Policies)

## CHAPTER 1: TECHNOLOGY AND FAN FICTION

Fan fiction writing dates as far back as the 1920s and the fan clubs and fanzines created in response to the works by Isaac Asimov and Jules Verne (Verba 1). As Joan Marie Verba documented, it flourished in the 1960s through the Star Trek fandom and a series of zines and events organized around it. Thus, fan fiction communities and infrastructure were already well established before the advent of digital media. However, since the rise of affordable computing and the internet, the nature of fandom has changed dramatically. New forms of fan work, such as vidding, rapidly developed (Coppa). The internet also made exchanges between fans much faster as well as expanding the fandom and making it more open to new members (Jenkins). Arguably, technology has allowed fans to interact with their favourite TV shows and films not just as the passive consumers that the industry might prefer, but as active, creative thinkers, who critically assess the development of their favourite characters. Although, notably, criticality is not necessarily guaranteed by participatory forms of entertainment or culture. Indeed, as a number of scholars have shown, it is often deployed as a strategy to eventually disempower the involved audiences. Writing about reality TV, Mark Andrejevic poignantly sums up this process, where ‘the promise of interactivity offers not an escape from reality but an escape into reality’ (8). Furthermore, one could argue that the internet fan fiction writers are, somewhat unwittingly, contributing to the digital economy that exploits free labour whilst being subject to the emerging cybernetic/soft control (Terranova 73-130).

### TECHNOLOGICAL INFLUENCES ON FAN FICTION AND THE CANON

Conceived and written for television in 1993, *The X-Files* rose from a cult TV show to a global phenomenon at a time when web technology was spreading across the globe. New

communication media such as email and cellular phones featured in the programme, while a devoted fan base of so-called “X-Philes” poured over every aspect of the series online, using the same communication methods as their on-screen heroines. Intimately involved in the lives of these characters, fans simulated them, not just by interacting with the same technologies that they saw on-screen, but also through cosplay (the act of dressing up and acting like a character from a fictional universe) and the creation of fan works, including fiction, videos and visual art works. *The X-Files* fandom surged with the arrival of the internet to such an extent that the *New York Times* speculated that “this may have been the first show to find its audience growth tied to the growth of the Internet” (Millman). The internet provided fans with a way of discussing their favourite show that had never been seen before and it was not soon before fans began to migrate their fannish activities online. This migration from print based fandom to the online one is deeply significant to the aesthetic development of fan fiction. Moreover, it introduced an entirely new legal dimension to the world of fan work, especially with regards to fan videos.

According to [fanlore.org](http://fanlore.org), a wiki that “is devoted to preserving the history of transformative fan works and the fandoms from which they have arisen”, there are three “waves” of *X-Files* fandom, each of which emerged on web-based platforms called Usenet, Livejournal, and Tumblr, respectively. Although there were fan magazines which published works of fan fiction, the coincidence of the *X-Files* release and the rise of the internet meant that most fan fiction for that programme was shared online, as evidenced by extensive *X-Files* fan fiction archives such as [gossamer.org](http://gossamer.org) and [ephemeralfic.org](http://ephemeralfic.org). The internet provided new possibilities of a more differentiated and de-centralised approach to sharing fan fiction (Kustritz 372). Without the need to conform to the editorial requirements of a fanzine, fan fiction writers could self-publish and publicise their work through freely accessible email

lists. This meant that specialism in fan fiction could develop at a much quicker pace and rather than excluding the more alternative approaches such as slash fiction (as might be in the case when page space was limited in a fanzine and controlled by an overseeing editor) hosts of fan fiction archives became much more inclusive<sup>4</sup>. This inclusivity allowed for a much quicker evolution of certain genres and the strengthening of fan culture as a whole.

Kustritz notes that “many of the women who write and read slash work in computer-related fields or work as office assistants, positions that give them daily access to a computer” (380). Access to the internet has played a significant role in the development of fan fiction because it enables marginalised individuals to build enduring communities that can connect at the relatively low cost of an internet hook up and personal computer. Furthermore, fan fiction writers take advantage of the democratic and non-hierarchical nature of internet which allows for a wider range of people to influence the development of fan fiction. Not only does the internet provide fans with an opportunity to connect with each other, it also provides web-based blogging platforms such Tumblr and social networking sites through which fan fiction can be created and shared. Much fan fiction is written in response to call outs on dedicated fan f-lists, where fans with similar fandoms congregate in order to share writing, interpretations and challenge each other. A good example of this in *The X-Files* fan lore is the famous eggbeater challenge, in which fans shared texts limited to 500 words in which Mulder/Krycek interact and an eggbeater is involved<sup>5</sup>. At first, this might seem like a humorous exercise, akin to exquisite corpse and other games played by Surrealist writers (Kochhar-Lindgren et al.). However, it also points to the democratisation of creative collaborations that technology has

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<sup>4</sup><http://tooms.gossamer.org/story.html> is a directory of fan fiction writing which allows users to search thematically as well as providing keywords and summaries. The range of tastes and preferences provided for and the volume of fan work listed is well beyond the scope of a printed magazine.

<sup>5</sup> See: <https://archiveofourown.org/works/8698>

afforded fans of fan fiction and aspiring, semi-professional and professional writers. If these kinds of inclusive, open-ended exercises were employed more freely by the creators of *The X-Files*, then perhaps they would create characters that were more like those we find in works of fan fiction. The writers of TV series also work under the pressures of their medium; its industry and the expectations of a broad range of viewers, from casual channel surfers to box-set wielding fans.

In *The X-Files* fan circles, there is an oft-cited phrase used to refer to how the demand on a screenwriter to keep a series gripping in order to maintain viewer numbers affects the writing. It is called the “Chris Carter Effect”. The idea behind this label is that after a certain point in the life of a television series the “over-arching mythology, plot twists and developments become so convoluted that the mysteries can no longer be resolved with any amount of satisfaction” ([fanlore.org](http://fanlore.org)). For one fan, this approach to screenwriting amounted to nothing more than *The X-Files* creator Chris Carter “making shit up, and doing it less and less plausibly as time went on” ([fanlore.org](http://fanlore.org)). Notably, it is not only *The X-Files* that fans find to suffer from this kind of lacklustre, capital-driven writing which saps the characters and narratives of any credibility. Fans of *Lost*, *Twin Peaks*, *Sherlock*, *Heroes*, and *Star Wars* have all complained of the same. This undermining of the integrity of screenwriting raises questions about the extent of freedom that screenwriters have in conceiving characters, and whether, in fact, these characters are more likely to achieve their full potential in the hands of fan writers. Thus, dissatisfaction with the source material might be considered as one of the key motivations to create new fan fiction alternatives.

On the other hand, Fiske argues that, in response to the increasingly sophisticated audiences, television programmes became more playful and textual in their character. He introduces the term “semiotic democracy”, suggesting that television is necessarily involved in the “delegation of production of meanings and pleasures to its viewers” (*Television Culture*

238). For Fiske, rather resonant of Barthes' *Pleasure of the Text*, television opens the discursive practice to the viewer and consequently, provides "pleasure that centres on the power to make meanings rather than on the meaning that are made". Thus, "Television is a 'producerly' medium: the work of the institutional producers of its programs requires the producerly work of its viewers and has only limited control over that work" (Fiske 241). Writing distinctively against the grain of Marxist cultural readings, Fiske denies the possibility of 'mass culture', arguing that by definition, culture cannot be homogeneous and imposed. Instead it is an active and ongoing process: "all the cultural industries can do is produce a repertoire of texts or cultural resources for the various formations of the people to use or reject in the ongoing process of producing their popular culture" (*Understanding Popular Culture* 24-25). This may seem like an unrealistic picture of the average television watcher and Fiske has been criticised for being overly naive and utopian about the role that consumers can play (Lee 61). However, even as commonplace a practice as focus group, in which consumers are invited by producers to watch pilot episodes of forthcoming television shows or discuss the merits of existing ones, indicates that Fiske's observations are not ungrounded. If it is plausible that even the most casual viewer of *The X-Files* plays a role in determining how the characters might be interpreted, then existence of slash fiction writers presents a much clearer case of "semiotic democracy". Fiske's characterisation of TV viewers resonates with the literature surrounding fan fiction. As Kaplan notes in reference to fan fiction, "the environment of fandom is richly interpretive. The analyses thus produced form a dynamic interpretive space in which a multitude of understandings of the source text can form, grow and change" (137).

In this light, it is worth considering another form of sharing fan texts – Tumblr, which offers the possibility to make thematic links between differing interpretations of characters.

On Tumblr, it is possible to tag a piece of text with labels that are then searchable. This means that a fan fiction writer who has a certain interpretation of a character can quickly and easily connect with other writers who share a similar view. This will accelerate the rate at which new interpretations can be tried and tested on the community. The process of communal refinement can lead to a consensus or at least, trends in thinking about the core characters. This is a very clear example of a technologically driven ‘semiotic democracy’, in which fans have equal access to and possibility of creating trends in fan fiction.

Recalling Owens’s list of postmodern practices, it becomes clear how online sites such as Tumblr have facilitated postmodern practices amongst fan fiction writers. Freely available archives of source writing and fan fiction allow for the appropriation of both source characters and other fan fiction works. This appropriation leads to a series of collages and hybridisations; sometimes in the merging of plot lines or characters from unrelated TV shows<sup>6</sup>. The abundance of online information about source programmes such as *The X-Files* allows fan fiction writers to create a convincing palimpsest of the source material. The influence of technology on fan fiction makes it a truly digital culture. The widespread distribution of fan works online has legal implications which provide further useful ways in which to begin thinking about the nature of fan fiction and its relationship to source material.

## LEGAL VIEWS ON FANDOM

As technological advances accelerated the rate of production of fan works and facilitated their distribution and discussion online, an entirely new dimension to fandom

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<sup>6</sup> Crossover is a genre of fanfiction where blending of two distinct universes takes place. This frequently happened with X-Files, as shown by this archive <http://krycek.gossamer.org/crossover.html>

emerged in the form of legal challenges from the professional creators, who feel that fan work is a breach of their copyright. In these legal discussions, the tension between the original creator's rights and those of the fan are revealed. For the purposes of this thesis, it is worth noting how different legal arguments reveal different intentions of both parties. The case of viding, in which fans create new video works by re-editing films or episodes from TV shows, is particularly instructive. Often, vids consist only of source materials, combined in a way that "reflects on the world presented in the show" (Silbergleid 50). With the proliferation of affordable video editing software, the rise of free video hosting websites such as YouTube, Vimeo and social networks that facilitate widespread content sharing, fanvids have become increasingly more visible. The most interesting legal work has been done in defence of those vids that are more explicit in their criticisms of the source material.

The Organisation for Transformative Works (OTW) has been instrumental both in preserving fan works and revealing the attitudes that the creators of source materials have towards fans and their fan works. OTW was founded in part by Rebecca Tushnet, a legal scholar who publishes legal and cultural commentaries based on her experience at the OTW. She found that there is a tendency amongst those who bring legal proceedings against fans "to look for something they didn't understand [in the fan work] and then declare that it didn't have any particular meaning" (Tushnet 5). The legal defence boils down to the author saying "I can't interpret my character differently, therefore a different interpretation of my character can't be made". More often than not, the source creator has more than purely artistic reasons to stick to a single interpretation of a character. For example, they may have the pressure of their channel executive requesting that certain characters be included more, or plot lines be avoided in order to maintain mass appeal to keep ratings and viewer numbers high. Tushnet illustrates this tendency to dismiss fan work in the case of fanvids made by Gianduja Kiss

from clips extracted from James Bond movies. The legal counsel defending the makers of the James Bond films argued that the videos amounted to nothing more than trailers for the film and therefore did not transform the meaning of the source material in the manner required by the law to protect Gianduja from charges of breach of copyright. Tushnet's response was quite simple: Gianduja "was actually mocking Bond's aggressive heterosexuality, something that her fannish audience recognised" (5) but the creators of James Bond could not, as this would amount to a character assassination of their most valuable asset. The creators of the franchise rely on James Bond being an archetype of male heteronormativity which is what defines him and guarantees his mass appeal. To recognise Gianduja's critique would be an admission that their leading man is an outdated stereotype of masculinity that precipitates misogynistic depictions of women. It is therefore important to understand that the dismissal of and challenge to the originality of fan works is often dictated by commercial considerations and the related fear of undermining the authoritative authorship behind branding and franchise.

This chapter introduced fan fiction, particularly *The X-Files* fan fiction, as a digital culture that emerged during the rise of the internet and associated online technologies. This had had a significant impact on the ways in which fan fiction has been written and shared, allowing radically different interpretations of *The X-Files* characters to come to light. As a result, we might consider fan fiction not just as a form of fantasy or play but as a critical and imaginative way of exploring different interpretations of source characters. The legal context raises important issues about the ontology of both source and secondary works and the ownership of their respective meanings.

## CHAPTER 2: INTERPRETATIVE CONTROL AND APPROPRIATION

This section of the thesis will further explore the distinct character of fan fiction through its inherent challenge to the idea of singularity and ‘truth’ of interpretation of any cultural production. Barthes’ “The Death of the Author” will be introduced as a way of showing the vulnerability of claims that there is a single “true” interpretation of a character or a story. Having undermined the source authors’ claim to authority over interpretation of a character , it will then be shown how Lévi-Strauss’ discussion of the “bricoleur” in the context of mythical versus scientific thinking can provide a framework for distinguishing between the project engaged in by the fan fiction writer and that of the source material.

At the heart of fan fiction is the progressive reimagining of the characters and universes that are brought to life by the original author. Even if we take what might be the strongest example of the immutability of the canon - works of literature written by a single author who is isolated from an industry or other influences that might corrupt their singular vision - there is still a case to be made that the characters they produce are not bound to a single interpretation. Barthes’ “The Death of the Author” provides such an avenue along which characters might be liberated from their overlords: “To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing” (147). Barthes notes how “the explanation of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always the voice of a single person, the author 'confiding' in us” (143). By disavowing the reader of interpretation other than which is deemed to be “true” interpretation, a tyranny of meaning is established which, Barthes notes, serves only the critic; he becomes the gatekeeper of meaning, the taste maker in the Humean sense. In order to liberate the text from this tyranny of interpretation, Barthes examines the ways in which texts are produced and

what this implies about the nature of authorship. The author - or “scriptor” to use Barthes’ term - of a text only becomes a writer in the activity of writing the text: “the modern scriptor is born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing, is not the subject with the book as predicate” (145). This is important because it means that the scriptor comes to understand the characters as they are being written, rather than having a complete understanding of them before writing. Potentially, then, the fan fiction writer is engaged in a similar act of getting to know a character through writing them. What makes them different to the screenwriters is that they are writing from a context, within a community that has a very different set of values and therefore can provide different - but none the less plausible - perspectives on the character’s personality.

Barthes goes further in his dismantling of the write’s authority by explicitly stating that the scriptor loses control over his text the moment he stops writing. He writes that only once a text has been read does it become complete: “a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination” (Barthes 148). The scriptor cannot give a text’s its definitive nature. This is only realised by the reader, who for our purposes, means the fan. The text is nothing more than “a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture” (Barthes 146), the recycling of texts, ideas, scenarios and characters that have appeared in previous writers work. Thus, the originality of a work lies in the manner that those quotations are brought together. This is no more than cutting and pasting of a postmodern bricolage.

#### FAN FICTION WRITERS AS BRICOLEURS

At this stage, it is worth considering the project undertaken by fan fiction writers through the lens of the anthropological work of Claude Lévi-Strauss. My recourse to this methodology is influenced by the characterisation of the fan fiction writer offered by Kustritz:

“like a bricoleur, the fan writer gathers sections and segments, archetypes and themes, and then recombines them to make something different” (383). This characterisation of fan fiction writer versus screenwriter has a strong parallel in Lévi-Strauss’ writing on the characterisation of indigenous “magical” thought and that of the natural sciences. Lévi-Strauss’ conclusions are instructive in the way fan fiction writing could be thought about.

Lévi-Strauss is concerned with interrupting the tendency in anthropological writing to characterise indigenous categorisation of, interaction with, and use of the natural world - which he characterises as “magical thought” - as a primitive form of scientific thought: “One deprives oneself of all means of understanding magical thought if one tries to reduce it to a moment or stage in technical and scientific evolution” (8). Instead, he argues that indigenous people are engaged in an entirely different project to a scientist or engineer, that of the bricoleur: “the ‘bricoleur’ is adept at performing a large number of diverse tasks; but, unlike the engineer, he does not subordinate each of them to the availability of raw materials and tools conceived and procured for the purpose of the project” (Lévi-Strauss 11).

As we have seen, there are constraints on the development of a character that is written for television. As such, the screenwriter is engaged in a similar process as that of the scientist. Like the engineer, they have “raw materials and tools” in the form of the characters and scenarios they have created. Furthermore, these tools have been created for the purpose of a project, namely the continuation of a universe, which in the case of *The X-Files* entails the investigation of paranormal activity, government cover ups and so on. Additionally, and no less significantly, these tools are also designed specifically for the purpose of engaging and sustaining an audience, advertising contracts and network dominance. Just as the scientist invents a mist-net to catch a swallow, so a screenwriter weaves a universe to captivate an

audience. For the bricoleur and the fan fiction writer, however, these raw materials are not project orientated. They are not used according to some specific, pre-defined purpose. Instead, their meaning is articulated through their use and their usefulness in whichever way they are deployed: “Such elements are specialised up to a point, sufficiently for the ‘bricoleur’ not to need the equipment and knowledge of all trades and professions, but not enough for each of them to have only one definite and determinate use” (12). Thus, while Barthes liberated the characters from the tyranny of a single narrative arc, Lévi-Strauss identified how a bricoleur’s practice liberates raw materials from a narrow, project orientated destiny.

The raw materials that the fan fiction writer gathers are sophisticated enough that s/he does not need the initial expertise to manufacture them. However, in his/her hands, these materials transcend their initial purpose and are formed to become cultural texts in their own right. Just like the indigenous bricoleurs, the fan fiction writers are engaged in a different project altogether, one that only appears similar in as much as they are using the same materials as the screenwriter. Accordingly, in order to capture the essence of the fan fiction project we might paraphrase a section in which Lévi-Strauss laments the reduction of mythical thought to a stage in the evolution of scientific thought; one deprives oneself of all means of understanding *The X-Files* fan fiction if one tries to reduce it to a moment or stage in *The X-Files*’ evolution (8).

Lévi-Strauss himself makes this bridge between magical thinking and the arts by recognising the “mytho-poetical nature of “bricolage” on the plane of so-called “raw” or “naive” art”. By recognising that technical expertise or indeed the ownership of the raw materials is not a necessary condition for the creation of art works, Lévi-Strauss evokes not just the perennial debate about the status of art made by so called “amateur” or “outsider” artists, but also the work of the Dadaists (11). Like the Dadaists, fan fiction writers are outside

the canon and employing “objets trouvés” in their practice. By redeploying these objects, not only do they imbue them with a new meaning, they also challenge the conventions of the canon which they are distinct from. The pioneering work of Hannah Höch illustrates this point. Her technique was to use cuttings from magazines and newspapers, often of female figures, and assemble them to make humorous, satirical images that commented on the way the female figure was represented in mainstream culture, such as the *Pretty Maiden* from 1920. Like the fan fiction writers, she had no hand in creating the source material, and her deployment of the source material was in no way to do with the project for which the images were originally intended. This accords with Lévi-Strauss’ characterisation of the bricoleur, while the collage and photomontage techniques are recognised as central to the postmodernist practices (Ullmer). These techniques are also central to the project of slash fiction writers. This is especially the case in examples such as “In A Dark Time”, in which the author states her intention to leave the source material completely untouched and skillfully builds her slash pairing from these foundations.

This section has offered arguments as to why fan fiction can be considered distinct, by showing that interpretation should not be considered the sole right of a single author. Through analogy with Lévi-Strauss’ distinction between bricoleurs and engineers, we can further distinguish between the projects of source and fan fiction writers. Consequently, we should approach fan fiction through the post-structuralist and postmodernist framework in order to fully appreciate its cultural status and potential.

### CHAPTER 3: HURT/COMFORT AS A MEANS OF LIBERATING MULDER AND KRYCEK

An internet search suggests that in the entire 202 episodes, there was only one episode that featured a gay character. One possible explanation for this is that, without exception, the creators and executive producers of the series - those who could influence the development of the universe - were heterosexual. It should also be noted that only 2 of the 12 executives on the series were women. This raises the question whether the characters they developed existed within a universe that was biased, or at least determined by the particular worldview of the authors. Jenkins raises the issue of the biases we might have towards fan fiction by recognising how class structures have a strong influence over trends in aesthetic thinking. He writes that those who are privileged and who are born into world that preserves the prevailing taste in art find themselves easily in “a privileged position within the institutional hierarchy and reap the greatest benefits from the educational system, while the tastes of others are seen as ‘uncouth’ and underdeveloped” (Jenkins 16). Their class privilege - which has nothing to do with their creative merits - incubates a default cultural outlook which is rewarded by others in positions of power that share their opinions. As a result, other kinds of taste are marginalised, not because they are aesthetically deficient - if that is even possible - but merely because those who have those tastes might not have the same socio-economic standing. As previously mentioned, there are a great deal of fan fiction writers who are female – a striking contrast to the male dominated executive who oversaw the development of *The X-Files*. This is worth bearing in mind for the forthcoming exploration of trends that exist within slash fan fiction, specifically, Mulder/Krycek slash fiction. Slash fiction’s pairings of otherwise “incompatible” love interests must in some way be related to the characteristics of the writers. This section will draw on the fan fiction characteristics established in the previous chapters, in

order to argue that Mulder/Krycek slash fiction offers an independent, critical commentary on the original *X-Files* universe and by extension, the broader paradigm of mainstream TV.

While it is possible to identify all the writers of the X-Files as being heterosexual and (mainly) male, the same details are not known about the writers of slash fiction, although there seems to be a consensus that the majority of slash fiction writers are female. A key component of slash fiction is taking two same sex characters and exploring how they might relate to each other in a romantic way. These explorations often have a highly sexualised component to them. Indeed, in the short, more experimental works, such as the eggbeater challenge, we find Mulder and Krycek involved in lustful acts of sexual exploration, with an emphasis on visceral descriptions of sex and less attention paid to the characters' emotions. In cases of long form slash fiction, much more time is given to mapping out the characters' interior lives, something that is not possible onscreen as *The X-Files* does not have voice overs for interior monologues. The writers of fan fiction have a means of exploring the private and emotional lives of Mulder and Krycek, which makes the new interpretations of their sexualities more convincing.

This raises the question as to whether it is the gender of slash fiction writers that has led to the emergence of this genre? We might want to adopt broad generalisations that women are by their "nature" more nurturing, more emotionally aware, more concerned with building bridges between people than feuding over their differences. Slash fiction so often involves subtler emotional relationships between characters who are written in a way that suggests they have a more complex emotional life than is evident from reading or watching the source material. Whether or not these generalisations are true of slash fiction writers, it is important to show that slash fiction writers are doing more than simply re-iterating their own taste bias.

Mulder in the source material is a highly focused character, driven by his need to find the truth about paranormal activity and seemingly only capable of maintaining an emotional relationship with his partner Scully, who is an accessory to his obsession. He fulfils his sexual longings by watching pornography and the writers only allow him rare moments of sexual contact throughout the series, always with Scully. Whilst this fairly stereotypical heterosexual male characterisation definitely served the TV series by prolonging what many fans thought was the inevitable union of the two characters, one might question the plausibility of this onscreen relationship. The series creator Chris Carter has spoken out in favour of ‘No Romo’ fan fiction in which Mulder and Scully do not have any kind of relationship but this is not surprising given that such ambiguity is a useful way of prolonging the interest of the viewers. If Carter really intended Mulder to have a broadly speaking sexually unresolved yet emotionally involved relationship, why did it need to be with a woman? He could have achieved this character trait just as effectively if the object of Mulder’s unresolved love was a male partner, especially due to the fact that sexual contact is such a minor part in the Mulder/Scully relationship. It seems likely that he chose a heterosexual partnership because it was closer to his experience and it was part of the broader status quo. Mulder/Krycek slash fiction is distinct in its portrayal of a deep emotional involvement between Mulder and another character.

“In a Dark Time” is a good example of how slash fiction writers give source characters extra dimensions to their personality in ways that do not necessarily reveal a bias. Written by A. Leigh-Anne Childe, who is often cited by other fans as one of the most talented writers of fan fiction, the story emulates vids such as those made by Gianduja by treating the source text in a way that highlights existing qualities rather than imposing new ones on it. In the author’s note, she makes this explicit: “This [story] contains, along with my own original

work, all of the "Sleepless" dialogue, transcribed verbatim and complete save for a very few scenes. [...] Basically, this represents an attempt to expand on 'pre-existing' events and conversations in a logical, continuity-consistent manner...". This commitment to continuity and consistency is noteworthy, especially in the context of *The X-Files* where the "Chris Carter effect" seems to have taken plot lines onto increasingly implausible paths. Childe is aiming to show how her interpretation of the Mulder/Krycek relationship is consistent with what the creators had originally written. This implies a sense of causality; the source material underlines a new interpretation of the Mulder/Krycek relationship that is developed by Childe. Like a perfect allegorist, Childe is not inventing new characters and relationships but confiscating the existing ones. She is 'othering' the relationship that was already within the source material, a kind of queer and queering palimpsest.

In Mulder/Krycek slash fiction this process is evident in the discussion of Unresolved Sexual Tension (UST) between the two characters. Fans genuinely feel that they have perceived a sexual dimension to the Mulder/Krycek relationship even if the creators were not willing to recognise it. Such was the belief in this unexplored dimension of their relationship that the Mulder/Krycek Romantics Association, the original hub for Mulder/Krycek slash fiction operated under the motto "For those who know real UST when they see it!". While the creators had introduced Krycek to the script as Mulder's temporary partner, as the show developed, he became more ambiguous, acting as a spy, an enemy and an informer but also, at times, as an ally who assists Mulder at crucial junctions in the plot. In Childe's piece, we encounter Mulder and Krycek at the beginning of their relationship and therefore there is more room to imagine how their lives might have intertwined.

The main technique that Childe adopts is to portray the inner life of the two characters. In the majority of the story, there is little overtly sexual activity. Instead, she focuses on how the interactions between the pair, including those scripted in the source material, could lead to an erotic relationship. Fans of her work have commented on how believable Mulder is in the fiction and by the point at which Mulder and Krycek engage in sex it definitely feels as if Mulder needs the contact, as if it has been something he has been deprived of. Indeed, this lack of a sexual partner is consistent with how the writers of the original script imagined Mulder. On-screen Mulder's obsession and misanthropic nature reinforces the credibility of his interest in Scully. There is nothing about his belief in the paranormal and desire to uncover a government cover-up that suggests his sexuality has to manifest in a straight relationship. Indeed it is surprising that a television series that is so capable of thinking outside of the box in terms of its subject matter is so limited in terms of its portrayal of sexuality.

When Krycek and Mulder do have sex, the portrayal is one of a deep relief or resolution on the part of Mulder, which is consistent with the overall project of fanworks. In a moment when Mulder and Krycek first kiss, Childe writes: "Still clutching Scully's present in one hand, Mulder tried not to let go of this single, mundane talisman that was tethering him to anything approaching reality". Here, she is indicating how Mulder's character is trapped within the sexuality prescribed to him by the original writers (represented by his clutching onto a reminder of Scully) indicating that this characterisation is a mundane reality, unimaginative, plain reinforcement of the status quo. Mulder is confused and possibly scared about what is happening to him and this moment of clutching to reality as Krycek leads him towards a different possibility is enhanced because we have come to expect Mulder to be the kind of man that would never find himself in this kind of embrace. In this sense, Mulder's

inability to act out his sexuality has so far damaged him - he has been trapped within the confines of the sexuality that the original writers have imposed on him and this has done him damage, a damage which Childe will remedy by using Krycek as the ultimate comfort for Mulder.

#### THE HURT/COMFORT MOTIF

This healing is at the heart of slash fiction. If we take the name itself - “slash” - there is an implication of breaking something, slashing something, assaulting it in some way. Indeed, breaking into the canon, rupturing it, plundering the characters and re-writing them lies at the heart of slash fiction projects. It is through slashing that fans can breathe new life into their characters and “repair the damage” done to them by the mass media (Jenkins 24). The above-cited moment from “In a Dark Time” is allegorical of what so much of fan fiction is about: rescuing *The X-Files* characters from the narrow sexuality that has been prescribed to them by their creators. Accordingly, later on in the piece, we find that Mulder’s anxieties are assuaged sexually through his interactions with Krycek and, as a result, he becomes more open and playful, a more relaxed individual once he is able to break away from the mundane reality of heterosexual life.

This motif appears frequently in slash fiction and is referred to as hurt/comfort. Originally slash fiction would play heavily on the hurt side of the equation and characters would be subjected to brutal sexualised violence with little hope of comfort. It has been noted that this kind of hurt/comfort literature was most prevalent prior to fan fiction migrating to the internet, i.e., before it became a more democratised form of writing and exchanging opinions on the nature of the characters being discussed. For many hurt/comfort writers, the first step is

to open up one of the characters emotionally, to get them to a point when they can be cared for and repaired. And both sides of the equation are just ways of bringing characters together, allowing them to interact with each other emotionally in ways that are not allowed in the universes they were born into.

Hurt/comfort is therefore not just a tool that fan fiction writers use. It is at the heart of the way in which fan fiction distinguishes itself from the source material and becomes a means of transforming the characters in a way that makes fan fiction merit a treatment as its own kind of art form. Without being put in these hurt/comfort scenarios the characters would not have the space in which to respond to each other, in a way other than the “friend/enemy” binaries that are required in order to maintain the narrative superstructure of the source material. Television programmes cannot afford characters this kind of liberty, but rather keep them in narrow trajectories.

This section mapped the differences in the kinds of values held by fan fiction writers and the writers of TV shows such as *The X-Files*. The exchange of fan fiction online has led to the refinement of literary motifs such as hurt/comfort. These motifs are not simply frameworks that guide amateur writers. They are deployed in order to create literary spaces in which source characters can develop in ways that are not made available to them in the source material. Online fandom has allowed for discussion of potential character developments, in a sense, democratising the interpretation of the character. The net result is the emergence of convincingly written fan fiction that aspires to present characters in a new light, without compromising their believability. With these considerations in mind, it is now possible to demonstrate how the properties of slash fan fiction exemplify core characteristics of postmodernist practice.

**CONCLUSION: HOW DOES POSTMODERNIST THEORY TRANSFORM OUR  
READING OF MULDER/KRYCEK SLASH FICTION?**

“That postmodernism is indefinable is a truism” begins the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy’s entry on postmodernism. This thesis will not challenge this by offering a definitive account of the movement/s. Instead, it seeks to determine specific postmodern strategies that are employed in slash fiction. In these final pages, I wish to draw particular attention to the use of simulacra by means of appropriation and collage; the de-aestheticising of the art object through the hybridisation of so-called “high art” professional writing and “low art” amateur writing; the production of critical commentary on both the source material but also the socio-political context that produced this material; and the allegorical qualities of the hurt/comfort motif that is central to the slash fiction genre.

A core element of postmodern theory is that of the simulacrum which was discussed extensively by Gilles Deleuze in his influential work *Difference and Repetition*. In its narrow definition, a simulacrum is a representation of a person or a thing, where the original can no longer be located. Though Deleuze was not the first to consider the philosophical and cultural implications of representations, his formulation of the simulacrum provides a clear way in which representations can be understood not only to be ontologically distinct from their source, but also to provide an avenue by which to challenge any ideal meaning which might have been ascribed to the original. In contrast to Jean Baudrillard, who approached simulacrum as a kind of indictment of contemporary society that replaced reality and meaning with symbols and signs, Deleuze identifies the critical potential of the simulacrum, which is not just a copy but “the act by which the very idea of a model or privileged position is challenged and overturned” (69). In this light, the simulacral representation of the characters

from *The X-Files* in slash fiction has a deeply subversive potential and posits a profound challenge to the dominant mainstream culture. Furthermore, the writers of fan fiction behave as bricoleurs, by adopting a set of already developed tools - the characters and universe of *The X-Files* - which they have had no part in creating. This form of appropriation is also consistent with postmodern techniques of collage, because the source objects - the characters themselves - are, like the figures cut from a magazine advert, divorced from the meanings or interpretations they were intended to carry in the original source context. At the same time, the new contexts of slash fiction generate new tensions and meanings. In order for slash fiction to achieve its purpose of presenting an exploration of the unresolved sexual tension that fans of *The X-Files* have perceived between Mulder and Krycek in the source material, writers must remain faithful to the original in terms of how they represent these characters. They employ simulacra, representations of a reality, in this case, the reality of *The X-Files* universe, which in itself is a cultural construct.

Slash fiction is both deeply rooted in and entirely distinct from the consumerist reality of *The X-Files* in the same way that a collage made from adverts in which women use beauty products is deeply rooted and yet entirely distinct from the reality in which beauty products make women happy. Both use simulacra of their respective realities, which are accurate enough to be believed as such. When a rearrangement takes place such as a slash pairing, the believability of the representations of Mulder and Krycek constitutes a direct challenge to the supremacy of their characterisations in the source material. This is where slash fiction constitutes a postmodern extension of Barthes' elimination of authorial control over interpretation. Slash fiction writers create works which seem as 'real' as the canon but contradict the canon's authority.

According to Owens, Duchamp anticipated the postmodernist hybridisation, by recognising that the “partitioning of the aesthetic field on essentialist grounds” is “hopeless” (75). In other words, the long established hierarchy of tastes and distinction of techniques which partitioned “low brow” cartoon art from “high brow” painting is eliminated in the postmodernist practice. This can be achieved formally, as is the case in Duchamp’s “L.H.O.O.Q” from 1919, in which a cartoon moustache was drawn onto the top lip of a cheap postcard reproduction of the *Mona Lisa*, merging fine art and popular, “low” culture. It can also be achieved by breaking the rules of what is deemed acceptable content for an art work as is the case in Duchamp’s “Fountain” (1917), which presents a functional, industrially produced urinal with no aesthetic merit and scatological connotations as a work of art. Notably, in *Postmodernism and the En-Gendering of Marcel Duchamp*, Jones sees the readymades’ appropriation and displacement as a means of destabilising gender stereotypes and deconstructing sexual difference.

Slash fiction exhibits both of the postmodernist tendencies anticipated by Duchamp, as argued by Owens and Jones. In the first instance, slash fiction involves the merging of professional screen writing with the amateur work. Taking “In a Dark Time” as a key example, the source material, which is at least deemed “high” enough to be broadcast on television, (whether it is high in the classical sense that the *Mona Lisa* is is another question) is left untouched and carefully merged with the work of the amateur. The slash fiction writer’s ability to create a simulacra of the source material is so effective that a hybridisation can take place. Through their own literary skill, slash fiction writers achieve a formal hybridisation of professional and amateur writing, which allows for further content hybridisation. Secondly, as mentioned earlier, *The X-Files* was surprisingly limited in the range of its characters’ sexualities as well as in the portrayal of their sexual life. Indeed, with the exception of

occasional references to Mulder's predilection for pornography, the writers of *The X-Files* never portrayed his sexuality in much depth. Added to this lack of depth, the fact that there is a universal lack of non-heterosexual characters in *The X-Files* seems to indicate that sexuality might have been a taboo for the writers. On the other hand, slash fiction creates a space in which the characters can explore their sexuality in pornographic detail. This is both a hybridisation of erotic writing with professional screen writing and also a hybridisation of the narrow heteronormative world of *The X-Files* with a more sexually diverse world. Furthermore, since majority of the Mulder/Krycek fiction are women, the authors art in fact engaging in the Duchampian play of performing and engendering the other.

In "What is Postmodernism?" Jean-François Lyotard makes a comparison between the work of Proust, who nostalgically reproduces the techniques of the literary tradition that he inherited from Balzac and Flaubert, and Joyce, who breaks from this tradition entirely. He notes that Joyce's postmodernism is evident because "the work he produces is not in principle governed by the re-established rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgement, by applying familiar categories to the text" (Lyotard 81). Joyce achieves this in very sophisticated ways, by experimenting with grammar and vocabulary, disregarding the established rules of writing and embodying this break from tradition in the process of writing itself, not just in the subject matter. In slash fiction, the use of the hurt/comfort motif is how Mulder and Krycek are brought into a space in which their sexuality is explored. The motif is an allegory for the entire slash fiction project of rupturing the canon in order to repair it. I do not suggest any literary similarities between Joyce's writings and the works of slash fiction. Instead, I wish to point to certain mechanisms of writing outside the canon.

Finally, although fan fiction developed before the internet era, it now fully responded to the digital and online platforms. Indeed, this is where it now thrives, making full use of the slashing, montaging and hybridising techniques that these new media offer. As this thesis tried to show, slash fiction should be approached as an ongoing postmodernist practice, which deploys and develops through the latest digital innovations. It fulfils the postmodernist conception of an 'open work', where meaning is constantly generated and never foreclosed. Finally, it provides an invaluable means for ever-broader communities to challenge the sexual politics of mainstream culture.

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#### *Web Links*

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZaB\\_G1WNT70](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZaB_G1WNT70)

<http://fanlore.org>