EASA Media Anthropology Network
E-Seminars Series
29th E-Seminar Discussion

**"Not just spooky: the collaborative aesthetics of
Supernatural fandom on Runet" by**

Dr. Sudha Rajagopalan (Utrecht University)

**Discussant Dr. Catherine Tosenberger
(University of Winnipeg)**

November 17 – December 2 2009

Sigurjón B Hafsteinsson sbh at hi.is
Tue Nov 17 00:08:11 PST 2009

Dear All
I'd like to welcome you to our 29th EASA media anthropology e-seminar. The seminar will run on this mailing list for two weeks from now until Tuesday December 1. The working paper, by Dr. Sudha Rajagopalan (Utrecht University) is titled: "Not just spooky: the collaborative aesthetics of Supernatural fandom on Runet" is available at
http://www.media-anthropology.net/workingpapers.htm.

Dr. Sudha Rajagopalan received a PhD in Russian history at Indiana University, Bloomington. She is currently affiliated with the Media Studies Group in the Institute for Culture and History at Utrecht University. She also blogs for the Russian Cyberspace research group that is concerned with Russian internet studies. Her publications include Indian Films in Soviet Cinemas: The Culture of Movie-Going after Stalin (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2009 (See:
http://www.iupress.indiana.edu/catalog/product_info.php?products_id=93190)).
Further background information is available at:
http://www.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/russ-cyb/project/en/contact.htm#Sudha

Our discussant is Dr. Catherine Tosenberger who is assistant professor at the University of Winnipeg, Canada. She has done research on Harry Potter and Potter fanfiction and the way young people get involved in participatory fandom on the Internet. She is a guest editor of a special issue of the fandom studies journal Transformative Works and Cultures, concerning the television series Supernatural (2005-present). Recent publications include: "'The Epic Love Story of Sam and Dean': Supernatural, Queer Readings, and the Romance of Incestuous Fanfiction." Transformative Works and Cultures (2008) 1.1 (see:
http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/30/36)
and "'Oh my God, the Fanfiction!' Dumbledore's Outing and the Online
Harry Potter Fandom".

How the e-semianar works: Today or tomorrow (Wednesday) Catherine will be posting her comments directly to the list, after which Sudha will respond. The discussion will then be open to all.

Please bear in mind that these sessions can only work if we have wide and sustained participation, so all contributions are very welcome (short or long comments and/or questions).

To post, please write directly to medianthro at easaonline.org, i.e. not to me. Thanking our presenter and discussant for their efforts, it's over to Catherine now!

All the best, Sigurjon.

Catherine Tosenberger c.tosenberger at uwinnipeg.ca
Tue Nov 17 07:41:45 PST 2009

2

Comment by Catherine Tosenberger on Sudha Rajagopalan's "Not just spooky: The collaborative aesthetics of Supernatural fandom on Runet"

This is an interesting paper, and sets up some great possibilities for further research. As a folklorist, I am fascinated by depictions of folklore within popular culture, and the way fans negotiate these depictions through their own belief systems. This essay continues in the tradition of Mikel J. Koven's great article, "Have I got a monster for you!": Some thoughts on the Golem, The X-Files, and the Jewish horror movie," by discussing the ways in which fans respond to – and correct! – folklore presented on a television series. The author does a nice job of showing fans discussing and responding to the folklore on the series through their own lenses of knowledge and belief. This is a common, and understudied, practice throughout the Supernatural fandom.

However, I feel like the author has missed a major opportunity. The vast majority of fandom studies concerns English-language fan responses to English-language shows; fannish responses of non-English speakers, including Russians, have been neglected. Supernatural, as a show about American folklore – one that, as Julia M. Wright puts it, celebrates "immers[ion] in the local, not the multinational-driven culture of brand recognition and globalized consumerism" (Wright 2008: para. 15). Given this, the author has a unique opportunity to discuss how Russian fans, specifically, respond to Supernatural's depictions of American folklore and urban legends through the lens of their own Russian folk context. How do Russian fans respond to folklore and mythology presented on the show – and how does this differ from that of American fans? As it is, the author has given no indication as to why Russian fans, specifically, are under consideration, and how their cultural and geographic location affects their readings of the show. How do Russian fans bring their own culture-specific knowledge to bear on their interpretations of the show?

The conclusions the author draws about the way fans discuss the series, while very useful, could be applied to any group of fans in any locality. While the author discusses legends a bit – and reference to Elliott Oring's immensely important essay on folk narratives would help clarify terms – there is no attempt to link the American legends depicted on the show to forms found in Russia. How do Russian fans negotiate American legends such as Bloody Mary? The author discusses several fan remarks concerning the Bloody Mary ritual, but gives no indication whether this custom is practiced in Russia – surely that would affect Russian fans' understandings of the viability or wisdom of performing the ritual. A recent episode of the series featured a Leshy, a Russian forest spirit (in the show, the spirit originated in the Balkans) as the villain: how did Russian fans respond to this depiction of Russian folk beliefs?

Further, the show's depiction of Christianity is heavily influenced by Catholicism – not least because in the Anglo-American horror tradition, the accoutrements of Catholic Christianity are presented as being the most efficacious (not to mention picturesque) antidote to evil, even though Protestant denominations are more dominant in Anglo-American culture. How does this affect how Russian fans, who are coming from a context wherein Orthodox Christianity is dominant, articulate the theological and metaphysical issues raised on the show? The author also tosses around the word "Gothic" a lot, without ever fully explaining what is meant; the

Russian literary Gothic developed along somewhat different lines than the British, and I would be interested to see, again, how this affects Russian fans' understandings of the series.

Another issue is that the author chooses only to focus solely upon analytical responses to the series. While this is fine, I think a mention of the vast amount of creative material produced by Supernatural fans would be in order here, since fans also use fan fiction, fan vids, etc., to comment on the folklore of the show. In the show, main characters Sam and Dean Winchester roam America hunting ghosts and monsters; American Supernatural fans often research their own local folklore and use it in their fiction. Many fan stories feature Sam and Dean investigating crybaby bridges in Ohio, haunted inns in Massachusetts, or hoodoo practices in Mississippi; many also draw upon the folklore of their own ethnic communities. How do fans in Russia use folklore creatively in their responses to the show?

On that note, I strongly disagree with the author's statement that "online fandom is not different from offline fandom" (2). The source for this claim is Sam Ford's article on soap fandoms; while the Internet may not have radically changed soap fandoms – which are traditionally quite low on creative fannish production – it has had an enormous influence upon the functioning of other media fandoms. Henry Jenkins (Convergence Culture), and myself ("Homosexuality at the Online Hogwarts"), among many others, have discussed the ways in which the nature of online discourse has changed and shaped fandom interaction. The Internet has greatly affected the production and distribution of fannish responses, allowing far greater numbers of people, especially young people, to engage in participatory fandom, then ever before. Fan creative production, such as vidding and fan fiction, in particular, has been affected. In addition, Supernatural began airing in Russia a year after its North American debut; do fans use the Internet to catch up with the series, or do they confine their discussions to those episodes that have been aired on television in Russia?

I appreciated the author's distinction between different fan sites and the different communities that surround them; however, I felt this could be articulated more clearly. In English-language Supernatural fandom, for example, Television Without Pity is a vastly different space than Livejournal. Since Livejournal is owned by a Russian company, and has a large Russian-language contingent among its users, I would be interested in some discussion of Russian Supernatural fans on Livejournal.

In conclusion, I think this is an excellent start, but I'd love to see a study of Russian Supernatural fandom that is more clearly situated within a Russian cultural context, and how this affects fannish responses to the show.

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Sudha sudha.rajagopalan at gmail.com
Wed Nov 18 02:10:51 PST 2009

Response to Catherine Tosenberger:

I appreciate the discussant's questions and address these below:

"the author has given no indication as to why Russian fans, specifically, are under consideration"

This paper is a small part of a larger study of the use of the internet in Russia as a ritual performative space, devoted to engaging with all kinds of supernatural fictional and reality shows. *Supernatural*, being one of the most popular shows on Russian television, warranted a study of its fandoms. Perhaps an outline of the larger study should have been included with this working paper to give readers that context, legitimizing the choice of topic.

How is their engagement with the show specifically Russian?

The assumption that a 'unique opportunity' to discuss the influence of the Russian context on fan readings of *Supernatural* has been squandered is premature. The fans in this community simply do not display a uniquely Russian response to the folklore in the show. Expecting fans in Russia to display a culture-specific reading assumes a static localized imagination, where fans are expected to always read foreign TV shows as 'other' and compare and juxtapose the local with that foreign. In the case of global media and their reception, this essentialist approach is often untenable because fans in very diverse societies regularly co-opt entire vocabularies and frames of reference from the source culture in their intensive consumption practices. Transnational audiences are also good at going beyond the culture-specific narrative of a show to address larger questions. Here, the fans do not attempt to match every 'American' representation of the paranormal with every local manifestation of the occult, but instead strive to transcend those specific provenances to pose questions about the 'reality' discourse in general. One might call this a supranational imagination. *This is certainly not to suggest that readings never bear local influences*; rather, what I'm suggesting is that fans may not respond in anticipated ways in every context. The Russianness of fans' engagement may be more obvious in some instances and less obvious in others; if my research does not locate cultural specificities in fan analyses of *

5

Supernatural*, it does not preclude finding cultural specificities in how fans engage with 'paranormal' reality shows in Russia, for instance.

*"there is no attempt to link the American legends depicted on the show to forms found in Russia." *

The absence of findings in that regard does not mean there was no quest to find the ways in which these fans may make linkages between what they watch and their local beliefs. In response to an email I sent to several respondents with this specific question, fans communicated to me that while they related to the ideas of the legends and the ways in which these made them speculate about myth and reality, they did not actively attempt to find Russian parallels or comparable legends. They were curious about American urban legends and fascinated by the possibilities they suggested, in general, about the boundaries between myth and reality (This may be different in other fan communities centred around the genre of the supernatural.)

Only occasionally is there an attempt to link televisual legends with local beliefs. There is one instance cited in this paper that suggests a culture-specific interpretation, even if I have not dwelt on its 'Russianness.' When talking about the Bloody Mary legend, while they do not suggest that there is a Russian version of the legends, fans discuss that this would explain the local Russian belief that has people covering their mirrors after a death has occurred. Clearly, they see folkloric beliefs as being part of a cultural continuum, without considering as necessary a conscious attempt to juxtapose the Russian against the American. The episode with the *leshi* that the discussant mentions was downloaded and watched by fans only a couple of weeks ago; discussions in the forum reveal not a single reference to the legend's Slavic provenance, but are instead dominated by views on the strong element of humour in the show and the brothers' mutual relationship. Perhaps the episode's comical take on the spirit and its manifestation as Paris Hilton robs the fans of an opportunity to engage with the folklore seriously, but at this point this is pure speculation.

The attempts to test the textual authenticity of biblical representations aside, fans in this community do not read *Supernatural* literally as a show about American folklore; rather, they extrapolate from it and discuss its fundamental assumptions about the parameters of possibility.

Russian readings of the Catholic underpinnings of the show :

The discussant's expectation here is that Russian fans must show an 'orthodox' reading of Catholic references, when in fact all of us as audiences (particularly in societies accustomed to media from different countries) invariably read cultural artefacts through *multiple cultural prisms*. I am neither Anglo-Saxon nor Catholic and when I watch the Supernatural, I am not ever engaged in the process of comparing representations of the Catholic faith with my own personal beliefs. I am, for the duration of the show, part of the interpretive community for whose entertainment the show is meant, and I watch the show positioned within its cultural paradigm.

Fans in this community show remarkable familiarity with the catholic accoutrements of the show, partly through their intensive exposure to Anglo-American television but

also through subsequent searches for information on the internet for supplementary information. There is a very post-modernist interest in a variety of belief systems, seeing these as complementary and not foreign or mutually exclusive. Again, at no point in their posts do they suggest that their own beliefs are different from those foregrounded in the show. Rather, they discuss all the theological points in a metaphysical and abstract manner, with no reference to specific churches. So any attempt at finding the Russian essence of their theological readings meets with little success. The only fleeting reference to the Russian context is their appreciation of the discussion of whether or not there is a god or a higher power in the episode 'Houses of the Holy.' One fan writes after this episode that such televisual discussions are fascinating to watch considering the absence of public discussions of this sort in the Soviet era. This post does not, however, lead to further discussion.

*Views on online fandom and offline fandom: *

I write that online fandom is not different from offline fandom, but then add *specifically* that online fandom both enhances and makes more accessible offline fan practices. Fan fiction is not a product of the internet age; it precedes it, but its presence is now enhanced and its practice helped immensely by digital technology. In that, then, we are in agreement with each other.

Analytical posts vs. other creative practices within the fandom, and a deeper exploration of differences between various Supernatural fandoms:

I agree that fan fiction and fan art are areas well-worthy of further exploration and if this had been a project only about *Supernatural*, I might have the opportunity to look at the range of this fandom's practices and compare it with other fan communities for the same show.

However, this paper is one part of a very large work, and *Supernatural* is only one of several shows of that genre that Russian fans follow. The rest of my work will be about how various communities use Runet as a liminal space where boundaries between truth and myth can be transgressed. If fan fiction and fan art are pertinent to that discussion, it would give me enormous pleasure to be able to include them in my study.

I hope these answers adequately address the questions raised. The question of how the local and the transnational intersect is a complex one and I thank Dr. Tosenberger for enabling its discussion. Although I cannot speak of Russia-specific findings in this particular case, I realize that it would be useful to explicitly address the issue nevertheless. I look forward to the comments that will follow.

Sudha Rajagopalan

Sigurjón B Hafsteinsson sbh at hi.is
Wed Nov 18 02:20:08 PST 2009

Thanks to Sudha for her response!

The floor is now open to all - to send in short/long comments and/or questions.

All the best, Sigurjon.

Adi Kuntsman [adi.kuntsman at manchester.ac.uk](mailto:adi.kuntsman@manchester.ac.uk)
Thu Nov 19 01:47:14 PST 2009

Dear all,

Here are some of my thoughts; firstly, my response to Catherine and Sudha's debate on the 'Russianness' of fans; and secondly, some questions regarding the work of emotions and affect.

1. The question of 'Russianness' of the fans

To begin with, I would like to follow up Catherine's question regarding how is the fan's engagement specifically Russian, and Sudha's response about not fixing the fans in their culture and locality I agree with Sugha that the expectation of Russian-speaking Internet users to always display and act upon their 'culture' is problematic on many levels. As I researcher of Russian-language Internet myself, I am, too, often confronted with expectations to address the 'Russianness' of my material. Not only that this expectation minoritises and others the non-English-speaking users, fixing them in their otherness, it also presents a homogeneous vision of Russianness. And, since I am researching Russian-speaking diasporic subjects, I have to remind my readers that many subjects of my study are not Russian at all.

In other words, Sugha's response leads us, quite rightly, to a much broader debate regarding non-English Internets in the environment, dominated by English-language use and research. It also leads us to broader debates on culture, identity and belonging.

Having said that, I think Catherine brings up a very important point, something that troubled me, too, when I was reading Sudha's paper, and it is the lack of context. Russian or not, we learn very little about the fans themselves - their age, class, background, interests, education etc etc. This is true for every research (otherwise, indeed, we might ask, what is so special/interesting about *this* site and *these* fans, that justifies research), but is particularly important when discussing 'subcultural identity' (p.6), 'positions of critical distance from knowledge', 'skilful negotiation of reality and myth' (p. 7), 'cultural language and epistemic systems' (p.8) etc. Who are these fans? Are they teenagers? University students? Middle-age housewives? A mixture of all these, or none of the above? Elaborating on these questions will both give us the much needed understanding of the context, specificity, particularity of this fan community, *and* take us away from the fixed notions of culture. For 'Russian Internet fandom' as a phenomenon is most certainly far from homogeneous.We may find that age matters more that geographic and cultural location in fandom cultures; or that class and education are the main factor in shaping fan's behaviour - in Russia as well as in the US or UK or elsewhere. (As a suggestion, the notion of what is considered a 'low-brow response' (p.8) is worth a more careful analysis - I think it

might reveal a lot in terms of class and aesthetic hierarchies, leading to a more culture-and place- specific analysis of class, too).

2. On a different matter altogether I would like to think further about the work of affect and emotions in on-line environments.

Section II, Horror Disembodied, addresses the feeling of fear and the ways it is discussed on-line. I was particularly intrigued by Sudha's suggestion that 'To imagine and speculate with dread about legends coming true is a pleasure particularly enhanced in an online forum because fans enjoy being talked into or out of that fear.' (p. 9) There are two affective formations here, that are worth further analysis: fear and pleasure.

Can we think about emotions as a way of binding a fan community together? (see for example on p. 10 about apologetic comments on fear that them become more confident as the feeling is shared with others).

How do these emotions work on-line - is the fan site merely a place to meet and 'talk about it'? Or are these texts in themselves performative? And where should we locate emotions - within the subject? In the texts? In cyberspace?

And - is horror really 'disembodied'? After all, emotions are closely linked to the body, even when they are mediated by television or cyberspace. Can we maybe think of a different, mediated embodiment?

all best
Adi

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Sudha sudha.rajagopalan at gmail.com
Thu Nov 19 03:33:48 PST 2009

Adi, thanks very much!

1) I can see how an understanding of their class, age etc would be absolutely essential in contextualizing their participation. I readily accept this point.

The neglect of this consideration has to do with two factors: one, that the paper was originally meant for a talk and I expected the context to be something that could come up for discussion after the talk (but that's not your problem) and 2) my work falls

somewhere between fandom studies and the sociology of pop culture, and fandom studies privileges a close reading of fan participation and pays little attention to sociological questions (Catherine can correct me if I'm wrong). Nevertheless, point well taken.

Anyway, to answer your question: The 25,000 members are between 16 and 35. Of course, the number of actual active users is only about 50-70. I can tell from their own declarations that they are both university students as well as young professionals, for the most part. This was also made clear to me in my initial emails to a bunch of administrators running different fan communities, because they replied recommending one or the other site based on the education quotient of that site's members. In other words, the class-based aesthetic hierarchy they nurture was articulated to me when they suggested which fan sites had better educated and therefore 'culturally discerning' fans. This they did so that my choice of website to study would be 'adequately informed'. Nevertheless, paradoxically, their subcultural identity is formed through their articulation of their opposition to that other cultural hierarchy that is centred on 'knowing.' So this actually demonstrates that the 'sub-cultural' identity is a slippery slope and very much context-dependent.

2. I love your second point because this is exactly what I find my work moving towards (kind of continuing from and building on my past work on Soviet reception of Indian cinema): a broader look at the emotions of pleasure, fear and grief, as I consider not only fan sites for paranormal fictional shows but also reality shows with psychics where participants have no problem using the show's sites to discuss all kinds of very personal issues of grief and guilt.

"Can we think about emotions as a way of binding a fan community together? "

We can think of emotions as binding a fan community together but I don't think participants ever lose sight of the tacit aesthetic regime that regulates such expressions. So yes, to answer your next question, I think the expressions of fear are very much performative, as I discuss in the paper.

"And where should we locate emotions - within the subject? In the texts? In cyberspace?"

I would say, all of the above. It is the combination of the subject and his/her interactions, the text and the medium that enables a certain kind of expression of fear, pleasure etc. online.

"And - is horror really 'disembodied'? After all, emotions are closely linked to the body, even when they are mediated by television or cyberspace. Can we maybe think of a different, mediated embodiment?"

I understand your point but it seems to me that particularly because of the performance of the expression of fear and horror in a given online forum, that affect is never completely disengaged from the cognitive response. So perhaps the initial response during the viewing is closely linked to the body, but it seems to me that in the process of translation, transmission and eventual performance that the fear is just as much a cognitive response as it is an affective response. So I think it is

disembodied (or partially disembodied) because the aesthetic regime of the fan forum demands that its participants 'rationally' articulate their fear, translate it into something that can be dissected and understood. Does that make sense?
Sudha

Adi Kuntsman adi.kuntsman at manchester.ac.uk
Thu Nov 19 04:10:20 PST 2009

Hi Sudha,

Thanks so much for this, really enjoyed your response. Few small points in response - and then I shall give way to other participants :)

1) regarding 'culturally discerning' which is then translated into 'adequately informed'. THIS seems to me as something Russian, this notion of kulturnost', roughly translated as being cultured, but also meaning well brought up, educated, well mannered. A recognisable stance of educated arrogance (I am reluctant to say 'middle-class' as the class systems work differently in different places), which has its specific history and manifestation everywhere, Russa/Soviet/post-Soviet society including.

I wonder if this differs from other (western?) perceptions of fandom, where it is seen more of a youth culture, and a pop (read 'low-brow') culture that is seen as an opposition to -and not part of- high cultural practices.

2) regarding emotions and embodiment: embodiment and cognition are not opposed to each other; for many scholars of emotions pleasure or fear, as much as they have to do with knowledges, cognition etc, are also - and maybe, first and foremost, embodied. I am thinking of Sara Ahmed's "The Cultural Politics of Emotion" (2004) here, for example. She has a very interesting chapter on fear there. Also, there is the distinction between 'emotion' and 'affect': Brian Massumi, for example, sees the later as pre-cognitive, pre-linguistic, as a form of energy that has to do with the body but not with language of cognition, which are the domain of emotion.

And yes, it is really interesting to see Internet cultures as spaces of performative emotions; or discussion of fear, grief, happyness etc. What I am especially interested in is what is specific (or different) about digital cultures in this, as opposed to other manifestations of public feelings and collective performance of emotions. I think the role of technology and mediation has to be unpacked and not taken for granted. A shameless moment of (very relevant!) self promotion: I am organising a conference exactly on this: *Affective fabrics of digital cultures: feelings, technologies, politics* http://www.socialsciences.manchester.ac.uk/ricc/events/digital_affect/index.html

Adi

Sudha sudha.rajagopalan at gmail.com
Thu Nov 19 04:22:14 PST 2009

1. yes, kulturnost' reveals their Russianness. In fact one of the points I wanted to make in response to Catherine and then it got edited out (by me) because I had already said so much was that often the fan text in itself has nothing uniquely Russian about it, but it is the discursive context within which it occurs that is distinctive. In that regard, it is the way fans talk about fandom that can be revealingly 'Russian'.

2. Thanks for enlightening me on the affect and cognition-emotion points. That's really interesting. I have so far used emotions and affect interchangeably.

3. Yes, we should not restrict our understanding of the role of the internet in enabling public expressions of emotion to simply its digital ubiquity. How to go beyond this is something I'm trying to grapple with.

Sudha

Postill, John J.Postill at shu.ac.uk
Sun Nov 22 08:58:08 PST 2009

Reading Sudha's paper on Russian fan forums I was intrigued by the frequent mention of forum threads and their dynamics, politics, etc.

I was wondering, Sudha, if you could say a bit more about the specific affordances (i.e. constraints and possibilities) of threads in this particular case study. If I can add a general remark, it seems to me that in Internet Studies we haven't yet paid enough attention to threads as medium-specific objects of study in their own right.

John
Dr John Postill
Sheffield Hallam University
Sheffield, UK

Sudha sudha.rajagopalan at gmail.com
Mon Nov 23 06:24:16 PST 2009

Thanks for the question, John!

Yes, I think threads and their politics fly in the face of earlier, romanticized visions of fan communities as harmonious places, where everyone's always in agreement about everything. If they are harmonious, it is often because fans (on the site under consideration in this paper) consciously follow codes of behaviour and use the titles of threads and the question or initial post that opens the thread as a guideline for what may or may not be relished in that flow of comments.

While each fan community (and I mean community in the sense of fan site/forum) differs from the other in terms of its mattering maps – allowing discussions of the occult or not. for instance - in this particular fan site, threads act as niches that demarcate forms of engagement within one forum.

For instance, the threads that discuss episodes discourage posts that dwell on the physical attributes of its actors, seeing these as frivolous observations. Then, the threads about the episodes are not supposed to be used for the exchange of 'factual information' about the spirit world ; if someone posts about the origin of vampires here, the admin promptly moves it to a thread more suited to that purpose.

There is an expectation that threads must be cohesive discussion spaces, where no interruption and no deviations from the issue can be allowed' The admin writes 'this is 'offtop'', as in 'off topic'. Where in offline spaces, we would just say 'okay, that's nice, and now let's go back to what we were talking about...', in forums, admins can simply move your comment to a space 'more appropriate.' I think topics of threads go a long way in determining the nature of discussion on this site and also prevent the tone of discussion from getting acrimonious. As my one example of the poll demonstrates, there is no room for fans who are not in any way fascinated with the subject of the mystical universe to be in that thread. Of course, they can go so far as to say 'I don't know what to think' , but they never say 'I don't believe in this claptrap'....and if the occasional sceptic does post such a comment, they're usually drowned out by a sea of other voices in the forum and then, presumably, they slink out of the 'room'. They are a community in that they are willing to engage with the show as televisual entertainment and are not averse to extra-textual discussions of the supernatural, but there clearly prevails a sense of an appropriate time and space for different kinds of reactions to the show.

I agree that threads are medium-specific objects of study in their own right, because although there are broad criteria that make these fans function as a community, there are clearly tacit assumptions that not everyone in the community will always be interested in engaging with the show in the same way; stringent 'thread rules' allow for that possibility. By confining your form of involvement to a thread that accommodates it, you respect the administrators' position and the boundaries they'd like to maintain within the forum.

On an aside, I have to add that the admins on this site are a lot stricter than on non-Russian fan sites I've been on. To revert to the earlier discussion on Russianness, one could perhaps argue that this fastidious attention for language use and social etiquette is very 'Russian' (part of the great value attached to 'kul'turnost' or being 'culturally refined' that Adi mentioned earlier). If that is the case, it would reinforce my earlier point that while fan texts are not typically Russian, how fans talk about fandom and its rules of engagement often can be).

Sudha

Sigurjón B Hafsteinsson sbh at hi.is
Tue Nov 24 09:38:51 PST 2009

Dear All

We are currently running our 29th EASA media anthropology e-seminar. The seminar ends next Tuesday, December 2.

We are discussing the working paper by Dr. Sudha Rajagopalan titled: "Not just spooky: the collaborative aesthetics of Supernatural fandom on Runet."

The paper is available at
http://www.media-anthropology.net/workingpapers.htm.

Comments and discussion so far is available at the list-archives.

Please bear in mind that these sessions can only work if we have wide and sustained participation, so all contributions are very welcome (short or long comments and/or questions).

All the best, Sigurjon.

Julian Hopkins j at julianhopkins.net
Wed Nov 25 02:32:06 PST 2009

Thanks Sudha for the interesting paper.

I'm interested in "Runet (the Russian□language internet)" - is this a specific domain, or is the 'Russian-language internet' something that is spoken about amongst Russians as a more-or-less bounded zone where only Russians interact?

Are there any overlaps with nationalistic and/or governmental/political discourses regarding Russian national culture?

Thanks,
Julian
++++++++++
Blog: www.julianhopkins.net

Sudha sudha.rajagopalan at gmail.com
Wed Nov 25 03:08:37 PST 2009

Thanks, Julian.

Runet is common currency among users of the Russian-language internet; it refers to a space where not only Russians in Russia but also Russian-speaking former Soviets, as well as the Russian diaspora interact. This fan forum, for instance, has Russian speakers in Russia, Ukrainians, as well as Russians living in Kazakhstan (Russia's 'new abroad') as members.

As for overlaps with government/political discourses regarding Russian national culture - perhaps you could be more specific? Are you asking whether Runet is seen as a politically bounded space by the Russian state, a vehicle for the formation of a 'national culture' so to speak?

14

Sudha

KATRIEN PYPE k.pype at bham.ac.uk
Wed Nov 25 04:59:00 PST 2009

Dear Sudha,
Thank you for an exciting paper!

While reading your text, and also while going through the e-discussion, the following reflections popped up:

1. Several questions have been raised about the 'Russianness' of the fans' comments and their online performances - this topic is of utmost concern since you mention how online fans relate fictional events, characters and props to their own lifeworld - my question turns the gaze to the US: you are describing the reception of American TV series (Supernatural, and also the X Files). What is the discourse about the US that is employed in these e-conversations? Which image of 'Americanness' emerges in the discussions that are triggered by visitors of a Russian fansite watching US occult melodramas? Or, in other words: Where is the Other finally? In the occult world or in the US? (related to this: Are Russian occult melodramatic texts less or more popular than the American ones? Do they trigger similar online comments, or is their impact less relevant?)

2. Your focus on the online comments as both text and performance made me think about 'online style and aesthetics'. I am curious to learn in how far online fans 'embody' or 'become' part of the imagined occult. Do you think that an 'occult online style and aesthetics' exists? I am thinking about particular avatars, nick names, font used, lay-out of posts, colour and so on ...

Best,
Katrien

Sudha sudha.rajagopalan at gmail.com
Wed Nov 25 06:11:31 PST 2009

Thanks, Katrien!

"1. Where is the Other finally? In the occult world or in the US? (related to this: Are Russian occult melodramatic texts less or more popular than the American ones? Do they trigger similar online comments, or is their impact less relevant?)"

The other is very much the occult world; as I was saying in earlier comments, these fans extrapolate larger questions about truth and myth from the series and discuss those. They do not read the show as a showcase of American folklore; they read it as a show that draws their attention to questions that supersede their specific cultural manifestations - is there a spirit world? can you say you're afraid of it? how do you deal with it etc. America is not the Other, the spirit world is the Other that they are

15

curious about and that they find tantalizing to engage with, playfully or seriously. The point I make in my paper when I talk about the borders of the source text shifting within each fandom refers precisely to this idea; because for these fans 'Supernatural' is only incidentally an American occult melodrama and is much more than simply an American series in their contemplative threads about the supernatural as a symbolic universe.

While there is no Russian fictional occult show at present on tv (that I know about), what is enormously popular is a reality show where mediums/psychics compete with one another to help people get in touch with dead loved ones. And yes, the forums for this show have very similar discussion threads which I will be including in my research. Again, they use these threads to ask 'is this real? can one connect with departed souls?' and these threads become spaces for unrelated outpourings of grief over impending divorces etc. Again, pointing to the shifting borders of the source text when fans get their hands on it...

Because my work is concerned with how fans use media texts to challenge epistemic boundaries and to talk in a very general sense about the parameters of possibility, the threads and forums I look at are not spaces where America as the Other figures in any way. The point of the threads is much more ambitious - going beyond cultural specificities to metaphysical questions.

If one's goal is to locate discussions of the US, then these do not occur in the occult threads but every now and then in the episode threads – for instance, portrayals of inter-racial relationships in the show are generally not appreciated (although fans are quick to add that they're not racist!) and such portrayals are viewed as symptomatic of American political correctness (as though it were an affliction of sorts). But these are a different form of engagement within the fandom. If my work were purely about reception as constituting a spectrum of fan practices related to the show, then I would turn my attention to episodic discussions, and also fan translations of the show etc and would no doubt find patterns of a very 'Russian' form of engagement and their very specific ways of looking at America.

"2. Your focus on the online comments as both text and performance made me think about 'online style and aesthetics'. I am curious to learn in how far online fans 'embody' or 'become' part of the imagined occult. Do you think that an 'occult online style and aesthetics' exists? I am thinking about particular avatars, nick names, font used, lay-out of posts, colour and so on ..."

This is a GREAT question and one I hadn't thought about beyond the posts. I think an occult style and aesthetics can be said to exist, perhaps more so in some fandoms than in others. In this fandom, yes, some fans have spirit names as nick names and occult figures as avatars. They also have some of the Latin chants in the series as their signature. It would be *very*interesting to look at the ways in which fans further 'embody' the universe they engage with. This is something I should pay more heed to, so thank you for drawing my attention to it!

Sudha

Sudha sudha.rajagopalan at gmail.com
Wed Nov 25 07:31:09 PST 2009

Julian, thanks for this question. There is a very explicit cultural discourse about Runet, about the internet's particular suitedness to Russian society - namely, the collective and collaborative nature of online interaction as well as a more flexible approach to intellectual property rights, being among the foremost so-called 'Russian' attributes of the net. These are traits inherent to the internet that correspond to characteristics that Russians believe they already embody.

I do know that in certain spaces such as political blogs there is a very explicit discourse about 'trends on Runet', 'prevalent ideologies on Runet' (particularly in situations that pit Russia against the rest, such as the Russo-Georgian war etc). Thus, those who write about post-Soviet cultural spaces and those of us academics who study Russian new media are more likely to speak about it as though it were a bounded space with specific characteristics, distinctive features etc.

In fact, however, it brings together diverse groups of people, much too scattered all over the world for it to be promoted as a specific site bearing specific national characteristics. Second-generation Russians living in America also surf Runet; they cannot be expected to bring the same cultural repertoire to bear on their internet use as their counterparts living in Russia. So I guess the answer is that there is a sense among many users of the Runet that theirs is a culturally-bounded space, but whether one can view it as such is a question that begs further inquiry, given the vastness of Russia, its near abroad (inhabited by russian speakers) and its diaspora.

Sudha

Erkan Saka sakaerka at gmail.com
Thu Nov 26 04:17:44 PST 2009

There are already great issues discussed. Let me shift the focus a little bit or just something I am curious and thinking about.

Sudha, could you discuss a little bit more about particular knowledge productions in fandom circles. Pierre Levy's work and its sort of adaptation to web scenes by Prof. Henry Jenkins already noted and I am very excited about that line of work (collective intelligence etc) that will become the theme of a course of mine next semester) : It is sort of given that collective work of knowledge production is good and these knowledges that go beyond "rational" or "academic"/ that violate the older boundaries of knowledge in bringing together fiction, legend, scientific data/ actually do something good. But how could we define more the positivity attributed to these knowledges? Wikipedia line of work can be understood easier but fandom knowledge production? To make it more concrete, what does the Runet experience actually contributes knowledge-wise by mixing different sources of information most of whom are not accepted as "scientific" at all?

I hope I am clear enough and I ask myself these questions a lot recently to make up my own mind and this seems to be a good moment to discuss together.

Much love from Istanbul,
Erkan

Sudha sudha.rajagopalan at gmail.com
Fri Nov 27 00:08:31 PST 2009

Thanks very much, Erkan. Sorry for the delayed reply. I had to wait until I had a moment to write a considered response to your question - a question that speaks to the main point of my paper.

Your question has got me thinking...must there always be positive values attributed to collective knowledge production? Do I suggest there is something necessarily good or positive about the fact that fans share these other forms of knowledge? Maybe I do unconsciously.

In any case, I think by creating new channels of knowledge production and communication (whether in fan communities or other online spaces), there is a certain democratization of the culture of knowing, and maybe this is a more pronounced development in some discursive contexts than in others. For me, these communities and the way they subtly challenge dominant knowledge systems are significant because they function in a media space in Russia that we're frequently told is de-politicized.

Yet, in their fan activity they are very political. In all kinds of television fan sites, online audiences are always talking about not being told everything, about not believing the official version of events, about there being more to the world than one is told of...like elsewhere, they are a public that readily believe in their versions' 'undeniable plausibility', as Peter Knight calls it. This has a lot to do with the parallel processes of greater control over information dissemination on the one hand, and an abundance of data on the internet to which they have unfettered access....in the interstices of these two phenomena, there is plenty of room to wonder about the things they have no certain knowledge about and to look for alternative sources of information. So I guess their functioning as knowledge communities is particular significant given the larger context of knowledge production in which they act; fan sites are dismissed as being entertainment oriented, but relishing entertainment does not preclude political discussion.

I don't know if this answers your question completely but perhaps it's pushed the discussion of your point along a bit. I'm very interested in what you think, and thanks again for addressing the heart of the paper!

Sudha

Sudha sudha.rajagopalan at gmail.com
Fri Nov 27 00:18:39 PST 2009

That's very interesting. I don't know of an equivalent in the Indian context, for instance. We don't speak of the Indian blogosphere as being something culturally distinctive, although it is deeply engaged with the public sphere and the enormous diaspora participates actively in it. On the other hand, offline in India there is a very real sense of 'netizens' being a class apart - sometimes this is said with mockery, as though these people on the net have discovered political and civic engagement now that they don't need to get their hands dirty offline. So while I don't see a nationally-bound Indian cyberspace, offline it is seen as a privileged, bounded space, even class. But I'm speaking as an Indian rather than a scholar of Indian cyberculture! Perhaps someone else on the list could jump in and address this fascinating question.

Thanks!

Sudha

Sigurjón B Hafsteinsson [sbh at hi.is](sbh at hi.is)
Tue Dec 1 02:28:09 PST 2009

Dear All

Our 29th EASA media anthropology e-seminar has come to an end. I want to thank Dr. Sudha Rajagopalan for presenting her working paper " Not just spooky: the collaborative aesthetics of Supernatural fandom on Runet" and Dr. Catherine Tosenberger for acting as a discussant. I also want to stress thanks to those who participated in the discussion during the seminar!

Transcript of the seminar will be available on the website within few days.

All the best, Sigurjon.