

Alaina Christensen: Opening the Hellmouth: Studying Pop Culture in the Academy

Autoethnography gifts the scholar a moment to reflect on personal experience within the social, cultural, and political environment of their field. This essay utilizes that moment to explore the specific crises of confidence in studying pop culture within the academy. I wrote my Master's thesis on popular vampire texts, including *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Twilight*, and subsequently spent nine months defending my choice to do so to everyone from my department chair to my own mother. In discussing the constitution of the self, Jean Baudrillard writes, "at bottom individuals know themselves (if they do not feel themselves), to be judged by their objects, to be judged according to their objects, and each at bottom submits to this judgment." The object that constituted my academic self was and is vampire fiction. True to Baudrillard's description, I have felt and/or been judged by others and by myself on the basis of that source material. By participating in academia, I have also been complicit in the very power structure that denies value to my research. Autoethnography provides the means to reflect on fan-scholars' unique relationship to the texts they study. And, by continuing to examine these so-called 'low-culture' texts, fan-scholars like myself have the opportunity to reappropriate academic and cultural value for these materials and to new ends. The enormous cross-audience appeal of Joss Whedon in particular makes the Whedonverse a useful case study for such endeavors, while other texts like *Twilight* provide a counterpoint – and a challenge with which to proceed.

Baudrillard, Jean. *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*. Trans. Charles Levin. St. Louis: Telos Press. 1981. Print. p. 40.