Historical Binge-Watching: Marathon Viewing on Videotape

E. Charlotte Stevens

Birmingham City University

In: *Binge-Watching and Contemporary Television Research*, ed. Mareike Jenner. Edinburgh University Press, pp. 23-39.

In September 2019, *The Guardian* covered news of the launch of the Disney+ streaming service by asking whether 'the age of bingewatching may finally be over' (Heritage 2019). This followed the announcement that the service would release episodes weekly, rather than a full season at a time. Aside from the fact that weekly episodes have been part of radio broadcasting since the 1920s, notable here is the presentation of binge-watching as industry-led, and not an audience-led practice. As this chapter points out, television audiences have been recording weekly episodes to (binge-)watch at their own convenience since the 1970s when VCRs entered the domestic market (Gauntlett and Hill 1999; Gray 1992; Newman 2014). The archived fan letters I consulted for this chapter arguably date the start of 'the age of bingewatching' to 1979 at the latest, many decades before 'the Netflix model' which supposedly initiated this period (Heritage 2019). Furthermore, Disney+'s weekly episodes will presumably accumulate to allow catch-up viewing once word-of-mouth builds around each new series. What makes a television series bingeable is perhaps not how it is broadcast or released, or its inherent narrative properties, but how its audience chooses to consume it.

This chapter looks back to television's network era, and analyses how compressed or 'marathon' viewing events were narrativised for fellow fans. It presents findings arising from archival research into fans' accounts of watching off-air television recordings, as found in early-1980s letterzines about series such as *Star Trek* (NBC, 1967–9), *Starsky & Hutch* (ABC, 1975–9) and *Simon & Simon* (CBS, 1981–9). The discussions in media fandom

letterzines capture a time when multi-channel broadcasting and video recorders offered a challenge to how television was watched before DVD box sets delivered full seasons of TV to consumers (Brunsdon 2010; Kompare 2016; Williams 2015), and prior to the digital platforms and VOD capabilities associated with binge-watching (Jenner 2017; Jenner 2018; Mikos 2016). The letterzines also capture a predominantly female perspective, as media fandom is generally understood to be a gendered space; the typically female names of the letter-writers bears this out. My purpose is to recover some of those contemporary conversations about watching television alone, with friends, and in fan convention programming organised around group viewings of off-air recordings.

Therefore, in this chapter, I explore how methods of watching television were discussed by female television audiences before 'binge-watching' became mainstream. Convention reports and letters of comment (LOCs) in the letterzines include lists of episodes watched, contextual information and discussion of reactions to key moments. Exploring these primary documents allows access to fans' accounts of watching several episodes of a series in a shared space over a limited time. This is not always a binge-watch of sequential episodes, but a 'marathon' (Bacon-Smith 1992; Perks 2015) of re-watching on videotape. This chapter works through how fans narrativise their non-broadcast viewing at fan conventions and at home, with particular attention paid to the language used to discuss their activity and to signal their participation in the wider fan community.

By the mid-1970s, domestic videotape technology allowed audiences to record programmes off the air to watch later (time-shifting) and to rent or buy pre-recorded video cassettes. The story of historical binge-watching starts with VCRs, which enabled time-shifting and behaviour that expanded the definition of 'watching television'. In Jason Jacobs's words, the VCR was 'the earliest domestic weapon against the interruption and chronological authority of the broadcast schedule' (2011, 259). Recent work on audiences'

use of television (Bury 2017; Perks 2015) reminds us that early fan studies scholarship describes marathon viewing practices enabled by VCRs. When presented with copies of an entire season or series, then as now, viewers take advantage of the freedom from a weekly broadcast schedule to watch in 'short bursts of compressed multiple-episode viewing' (Bacon-Smith 1992, 130). One key example is Henry Jenkins's experience of watching *Blake's 7* (BBC1, 1978–81) at a rate of 'as many as three or four episodes in a row' (1992, 73) across a couple of weeks of intensive consumption. Another is a brief mention in Mary Ellen Brown's work about soap opera fans, one of whom makes an off-hand mention of taking 'the day off' to watch 'two tapes' of episodes recorded by a friend (1994, 108). Descriptions like this are familiar today, particularly in how we watch to catch up on a show that others have recommended.

Cassandra Amesley argued that fans watching TV together leads to discussion while watching, from which arise agreed interpretations and meanings specific to each group of fans, where 'meaning is not so much negotiated between text and audience as it is *among* audience members and text' (1989, 337, emphasis in original). The letterzines created an interpretive community, which involves sharing descriptions of conversations had while watching with friends in one's home. In the 1980s letterzines discussed here, the regularity with which videotape and re-viewing practices are mentioned bears out Jenkins's assertion that sharing videotape is 'a central ritual of fandom' that makes it a 'distinctive community' (1992, 51). With this chapter, I am reaching back to archival sources originating in the sorts of communities that Amesley (1989), Jenkins and Bacon-Smith (1992) describe in their work. Amid the discussions of series themselves – which established an interpretive community – are fans' accounts of videotape, group viewing and experiences of television consumption beyond a broadcast schedule. Vitally, the fans contributing to letterzines not only talked about the shows they watched but *how* they watched these series.

<A>METHOD

In this research, I consulted two archives among the respectable number of science fiction collections and archives around the world (Latham et al. 2010). The first was the Merril Collection of Science Fiction, Speculation & Fantasy, which is a special collection of the Toronto Public Library (Canada) and is not digitised. Their fanzine holdings are indexed in two card catalogue drawers, and are mostly examples of science fiction amateur press association (APA) publications (see Hartwell 1984, 160-9; Latham 2006; Lymn 2018) but also include some media fandom letterzines. An average APA zine would contain articles, news items, fiction and a section for letters of comment (LOCs). In contrast, letterzines are almost entirely LOCs: reader contributions that address individuals or the broader readership, respond to prompts from zine editors and otherwise participate in an ongoing conversation with fellow fans. The second archive I consulted was the Cushing Memorial Library and Archives at Texas A&M University (USA), where two collections, The Media Fanzine Collection and The Sandy Hereld Memorial Digitized Media Fanzine Collection, hold a significant number of digitised media fanzines, including some letterzines amongst the fanfiction zines.

This project began with a day at the Merril Collection, where I was guided more by curiosity than by any specific project, but with the time to browse the fanzine index and get a sense of their print-only holdings. It was fortunate that the first item in the S section – where I expected to find zines about *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* – was an index card for *S&H Letterzine* (1979–83, also known as *S and H*; 'S and H' 2016), a fanzine dedicated to the action/detective show *Starsky & Hutch*. While this might be a surprising holding for a science fiction and fantasy collection, the fannish women who may have met because of a shared love for *Star Trek* or *Star Wars* also enjoyed media in other genres, and were similarly

productive in producing zines around those other sources as well. For clarity of in-text citation, I have assigned abbreviations to each letter cited: for example, the first *S&H* letter becomes SH1, and so forth. A table with full references is provided at the end of the chapter (Table 2.1).

The media letterzines are reflections on fan practice written by women active in what became known as 'media' fandom, so named to signal their difference from male (and misogynist) fans of *literary* science fiction who looked down on those who embraced *Star Trek* and other television science fiction (Coppa 2006). I found evidence of this attitude throughout the general APA zines, for example, a disparaging reference to 'Star Drek' (HTT1 1984, 105) or lamentations that a convention video room was empty but 'about 20 people [were] watching the pathetic *Babylon 5* in the fan lounge' (TASF1 1994, 7). I had hoped *S&H* might discuss making song tapes, variously spelled 'songtapes' (Penley 1991, 145) or 'song-tapes' (Gillilan 1999, 42) which were my primary research focus (Stevens 2017; Stevens 2020), because the zine was started by the innovators of that form (Coppa 2009, 108 n3). Instead, the zines contained tantalising mentions of what might now be called binge-watching. Based on these findings, I reached out to Cushing Memorial Library and Archives to access their digital collection, and also returned to the Merril Collection in early 2019 for more in-depth research. When the dust settled, I had research copies of nearly fifty individual zine titles, often with multiple issues. These zines largely reflect an American experience, though there are occasional contributions from Canadian, British and Australian fans.

Most of my examples in this chapter come from three of those fifty titles, published between 1982 and 1986, which focus on two different shows: the *Starsky & Hutch* letterzines *S&H* and its successor *Between Friends* (1984–5), and the *Simon & Simon* letterzine *Details at 11* (1983–7). The *Starsky & Hutch* letterzines respond to a series that had finished airing, with reruns and videotape recordings the only way to watch. In contrast, *Simon & Simon* was

broadcast and syndicated as the zine was in publication, meaning *Details at 11* documents how fans of an ongoing television series in the 1980s discussed the object of their fandom as the show was airing. Also, *Simon & Simon* began just as VCRs started to penetrate the home market, meaning that *Details at 11* documents how this group of fans integrated the new capacity for in-home off-air recording into their viewing practice. Descriptions of how and where fans went about watching these series are woven throughout these letters.

Letterzines were routinely signed with full name and mailing address to facilitate individual communication. Whereas today fans know each other through screen names and pseudonyms, this use of so-called 'wallet names' (Busse 2018, 11) raises an ethical issue about citation, which is also reflected in the complexities of copyright and metadata in archiving fanworks as fans may not consent to having their identities attached to their work (Brett 2013; see also Lee 2011). In writing up my findings, I have followed a convention in fan studies of protecting the identities of individuals who may not have imagined their works being used in this way. I borrow Jenkins's (1992) approach of identifying fans by their initials, in what I hope is a middle ground between adequate historical citation and the ethical considerations of fan studies research. Therefore, as part of a larger project based in these letterzines, in this chapter I am taking the opportunity to examine the contemporary discussions fans had around pre-digital non-broadcast ways of consuming television episodes.

<A>CONVENTION VIEWING

Film and video screenings have long been one of the many kinds of programming at fan conventions, with films and television episodes being shown alongside other programming such as panel discussions, workshops, special guest Q&A sessions, awards presentations, masquerades, and so forth. Marathon screenings can take place as part of the scheduled

programming, sometimes running twenty or even twenty-four hours. One such track at an event from 1979 is memorialised in a poem detailing the convention's history: 'Well the video room, it ran all night - we watched with bleary eyes' (SH1 1982, 40). In this instance, the exact screening list is not provided, presumably because its readers had been there themselves, or would know which episodes the fan community valued and could imagine the schedule and the experience.

However, some convention reports do list the episodes watched, alongside commentary about attendees' reactions. One report from a UK-based fan, written about a *Starsky & Hutch* convention held in Wales (SH2 1982), seems to signal to the zine's primarily American readership that the British fans were watching key episodes and enjoying them in an appropriate manner. The report names eight specific *Starsky & Hutch* episodes screened over a weekend between blooper reels and interviews, with other programming including a charity auction of fan art and other paraphernalia. The letter-writer notes the screenings were curtailed on the Friday evening by mutual agreement after screening the third-season episode 'Murder Ward', since 'all 39 of us were glazed around the eyes---either from the Starsky-in-bondage scene or from sheer exhaustion' (SH2 1982, 38). The weekend's programming also included one episode, 'The Fix', that was new to the majority of attendees (and 'it had an electrifying effect on the audience', SH2 1982, 38) due to it having been banned by the BBC. It seems the episode was not shown in the UK until 1999; for these fans in 1982, the group screening offered a rare opportunity to complete their first-hand experience of the series. This convention appears to have been motivated in part by a desire to consume as many hours of video on a good-quality copy as possible, the better to participate in the interpretive community arising through discussion of the episodes. Therefore, demonstrating a familiarity with episode titles is more than just an effective

shorthand to note what was watched, it is an articulation of participation in transatlantic fandom.

Other convention marathons were organised around an actor rather than a series, in which the marathon event used stardom (rather than a programme) as a focal point. For example, the Third Leonard Nimoy Convention was devoted to discussing Nimoy's career and appeal, and significantly, to watching the *Star Trek* actor in his other roles. The convention report in an issue of the zine *Communicator* describes it thus: 'the main interest centred on the video room where, from 3pm on Friday until 2:30am on Monday, videos and films were show in an impressive flow, pausing only for meals and sleep' (CM1 1984, 21). This weekend was oriented around consuming new, rare, and familiar performances in a variety of formats (some in 'glorious tech[nicolor]' and others in 'crackling, flickering b&w'; CM1 1984, 21) covering non-*Trek* performances across Nimoy's career. The weekend's final event was a cut-down version of the 10-hour *Marco Polo* series (NBC/RAI, 1982), 'which featured a ferociously aristocratic & dangerous Achmet, Lord of the Armies who had the audience wilting in their seats' (CM1 1984, 21). It is notable that this desire for the actor on screen is presented without guilt or shame, and indeed ends with a plea for a repeat screening at a future event, were there to be one.

Marathons would also happen outside of the schedule, as fans brought personal tape collections and VCRs to set up in hotel rooms; for example, letters often note a named fan attended 'with her VCR and most of her tapes' (DAE1 1985, 53). This would occasionally divert attention from scheduled events: one report laments low attendance at panels one afternoon, but an editorial intervention in the letter confesses that attendees had actually been watching 'song tapes' (later known as fanvids, a kind of found footage music video) with the zine's editors in their hotel room (SH3 1982, 8). There were a variety of motivations for these peripheral screenings: the pleasure of watching television with friends, sharing better-quality

recordings with those who had poorer-quality tape (Bacon-Smith 1992), and to show episodes to potential recruits for an existing fandom. A domestic iteration of a recruitment party is described by Jenkins (1992, 73). However, given that American zines discussed court cases in which rights-holders asserted their copyright to off-air recordings (CL1 1982, 2), a small fan-run convention might reasonably provide a space for attendees to bring their own kit and share tapes outside of scheduled programming (SH4 1982, 8), and thus allow the convention to avoid liability for any licensing fees that might otherwise be payable.

Whether part of the official schedule or not, convention viewing practices offer a different model to domestic marathon viewing. To attend a fan convention, a fan must take time away from home and/or work commitments and travel some distance to a hotel in order to spend time with fellow fans in pursuit of their fandom. As one con report puts it, the ideal convention is a group of friends 'just getting off on getting together' (SH3 1982, 8), regardless of programming, where one may leave 'short of sleep, with sore bottoms and square eyes but relaxed and happy with pleasant memories to last the long, cold, conless winter' (CM1 1984, 21). The fan convention is a structured interruption from daily routine, albeit without much rest, with one fan reflecting that '[p]art of being in fandom just naturally means you have to learn to live on less sleep than "normal" people do' (BF1 1985, 23). Instead of guilt or remorse at their marathon, fans report 'the long hours gabbing and watching tapes' (BF1 1985, 23) as a marker of a successful event. Frustratingly, this latter example does not list the contents of those tapes or shape of the conversation, suggesting that the letter-writer presumes her readers would already have a sense of the kind of material screened or topics discussed. However, that comment does offer clear evidence of the performance of an interpretive community, one centred around marathon viewing and fellowship, enabled by videotape.

<A>AWAY FROM THE CONVENTION: DOMESTIC MARATHONS WITH FRIENDS

Beyond the programmed disruptions of convention viewing, zine LOCs discuss videotape marathons in domestic settings. There is a striking contrast between the language used in describing watching many episodes of television alone, or in a group. Alone, as described below, there is a tendency toward more negative framings; however, when with others, this activity is much more positive or even boastful. The affordances of videotape might enable an evening of champagne and 'episode after episode' of *Simon & Simon* (DAE2 1983, 3), as one's introduction to the fandom. In later issues of *Details at 11*, fans describe this activity as being 'Simonized' (DAE3 1984, 9), a phrase with a typically fannish semi-ironic cast.

A marathon with friends can be prompted by revisiting favourite episodes, such as a fan's '8,000 calorie video parties', so named for the abundance of 'good food' on offer, wherein 'you watch STAR TREK episodes for six hours or until your eyes quit' (IS1 1979, 13). These 1970s parties are the earliest mention of a television marathon in my sample, which alone would make it a notable comment to highlight: evidently, the 'era of bingewatching' (Heritage 2019) began over forty years ago. However, I also want to draw attention to the twinned excesses of television and food, with both consumed in abundance. In contrast to a 'binge', this description evokes satisfaction, or satiation, rather than shame or guilt at overdoing either kinds of consumption (see also Brunsdon 2010). Indeed, the language shifts between compliments and self-aware teasing, with the letter-writer lauding her host's 'beautiful home' and the delight of 'meet[ing] other normal people like yourself' in *Star Trek* fandom (IS1 1979, 13).

As a whole, domestic viewing is framed as positive and celebratory, with fans positioning the act of watching with friends as a key social activity. In another case that may be familiar to a contemporary reader, one letter-writer thanks friends for visiting for a marathon, as it provided a rare excuse for her to re-watch her taped episodes (DAE4 1985).

This is particularly poignant as this is the same letter-writer who, two years earlier, had celebrated being newly 'blessed (cursed?) with a VCR' (DAE5 1983). Evidently her leisure time had not allowed as many chances to explore her hobby as she had wished. Letter-writers publicly thank and acknowledge fellow fans who have lent tapes to enable catch-up viewing or a return to episodes not seen since broadcast; in both convention and domestic group marathons, the activity compensates for a scarcity, be it of tapes or of a community with which to watch.

Somewhat less ambiguous is a LOC co-written by five fans which endeavours to list all moments in *Starsky & Hutch* where the leads are barefoot. Rather than re-watching every episode, they confess they wrote from a prompt list of episode titles, 'with an occasional run to the television to verify a fact', and accompanied by 'several bottles of champagne' (SH5 1982, 9). The tongue-in-cheek framing in this LOC positions this discussion as research, aimed at answering a previous LOC's question on the topic with accuracy and objectivity. While this is not a *viewing* marathon, it is time taken with friends for sustained engagement with a television text, with a licence to appreciate (or, to fetishise) the actors on display. Indeed, the commentary that runs throughout the LOC makes the letter-writers' desiring gaze very clear. What is significant here is that these fans, armed with their 1980s video technology, gather without the excuse of a fan convention to enact a kind of marathon in relation to a series that had finished production, but which was still present for them because of the enduring fan community and the affordances of videotape.

<A>WATCHING ALONE: PERFORMING A SHARED ADDICTION

When fans describe their individual consumption of television, away from conventions or other social events, the metaphors used in the letterzines turn pathological. This highlights tensions in how fans narrativise their relationship with television at a time when it became

possible to choose to watch many episodes in a row, outside of a broadcast schedule. It also suggests the letterzines are a space of fannish discussion in which individuals perform their participation in a community through the language of a shared addiction to television series. The level of elevated language is not unusual for media fandom; for example, in fans' descriptions of their 'poor quality video taped episodes which we guard with our lives' (SH6 1982, 15), or in the explicit framing of their relationship with zines as 'my primary addiction, even though I am lusting after a VCR' (BF4 1985, 11). Indeed, videotape is the mechanism through which the addiction is realised, occasionally to the exclusion of watching full episodes. One *Simon & Simon* fan notes that she copies favourite parts of episodes on to a separate tape, which she used 'for a quick fix' (DAE6 1985, 7).[1]

As Charlotte Brunsdon has pointed out, 'addiction metaphors […] have always been used to characterize the consumption of television drama' (2010, 65), as for example when soap fans refer to a morning spent watching taped episodes as an 'overdose' (Brown 1994, 108), and the letterzines bear this out in fan usage. The earliest such comment in my sample is of 'withdrawal symptoms' following the six-hour *Star Trek* party mentioned above (IS1 1979, 13), where the success of the event is measured in terms of its hangover. Since I am working from written text alone, rather than interviews, I can only speculate about motivations for this framing. It may be that these fans are humorously reclaiming a persistent pathologising of fans and of the female television audience by using hyperbolic language. They may be giving voice to an internalised sense of shame (Busse 2013; Zubernis and Larsen 2012), or the excesses are being used to mask or defray guilt (Perks 2015).

Universal Translator (1980–86), a cross-fandom catalogue of fanzines, contains personal ads from fans asking for help from the community to feed their addiction. Across the zines, the word 'desperate' crops up regularly when fans are seeking off-air recordings, as when one is 'desperate for good copies' of *Simon & Simon* after buying a VCR (UT1 1986,

38), and another is ‘desperate’ (UT2 1986, 45) for select episodes of *Shadow Chasers* (ABC, 1985–6) that were only broadcast on American overseas military networks (‘*Shadow Chasers*’ 2019). Desperation may be apt, as a fan presumably would only place an ad and appeal to the community once she had exhausted her existing networks. Declarations of desperation are not limited to videotape: fans were occasionally ‘frantic’ for a particular zine back issue (UT3 1983, 35), or ‘desperate’ for a missing piece of a licensed board game (UT4 1983, 29). However, across the zines there is a regular link made between access to videotape and the implied viewing marathon to follow; for example, when the editors of *S&H* report that their tapes of second-season *Starsky & Hutch* episodes were returned with a ‘frantic’ note asking for the third season, with their correspondent confessing, ‘I’m in desperate need of a fix’ (SH7 1982, 2). This could also manifest through desire for the technology itself, which was quickly becoming central to this expression of fandom: a fan writes that a previous LOC ‘triggered me yet again on a “craving” for a VCR. I’m going nutso, trying to get involved in Professionals [ITV, 1977–83] fandom without one’ (BF4 1985, 11).

Rather than ‘marathon’, or the much later ‘binge’, several *Starsky & Hutch* fans use ‘overdose’, abbreviated to OD, to frame the experience of watching many taped episodes:

> I think eighty-seven episodes over one weekend sounds like an O.D. When did you sleep? Well, of course you didn’t. Wait a minute -- eighty-seven? Oh, it was a three-day weekend… (SH8 1982, 2)

> My husband bought us a VCR for Christmas and I’ve been ODing on [redacted]’s tapes ever since. (SH9 1983, 10)

> Right off, I want to make a public thank-you to [redacted] for all her time and patience in copying off thirteen of my favorite S&H shows and sending same to me. I have been OD'ing on the tapes ever since. (BF2 1985, 15)

This usage galvanises the language of addiction, desperation, and wanting a fix. In two of the above examples, the letter-writers are reflecting on how the consummated anticipation for tapes or a VCR lead to an outcome of excessive consumption. This echoes Mareike Jenner's speculation about later binge-watching, namely that the long wait and high cost of a DVD box set means that 'watching the whole box set in only one or two sittings might also contribute to a feeling of excess' (2017, 308). The videotape overdose comes about at the end of a kind of scarcity, in which the access to an abundant resource is evidently overwhelming. One *Between Friends* contributor uses the word 'mainlining' to describe watching a lot of episodes and then jokes about not being able to find the word in the dictionary to know whether to hyphenate it (BF3 1985, 29). It is interesting to note that these are not marathons to be trained for, with achievement commended, but an addiction, communicated through a (boastful) confession to fellow addicts. Speaking from my own experience, in online fan communities in the 1990s/2000s I did see 'OD' and 'mainline' used in this way, but these seem to have dropped off as 'binge' entered mainstream usage.

This first decade of discussion of videotaped television is rife with an elevated language that reads as self-deprecatingly confessional or outright pathological. I was hard-pressed to find mention of solo videotape marathoning that did not have some performance of membership in a community of fellow addicts, playfully excusing their excessive consumption in these terms.

<A>Labour, leisure, and LOCs

In this final section, I focus on two compelling phrases used by fans to describe their practice, that together highlight a contradiction in what it means to participate in media fandom. The tension here is between thinking of fandom as a hobby, and recognising the effort, time and money that goes into the parallel culture industry of fandom (Penley 1991): editing and publishing fanzines, organising conventions and writing LOCs for publication. The functioning of fandom depends on productive fans (Fiske 1992; Hills 2013), as Derek Kompare puts it, 'to produce, reproduce, curate and distribute those materials. Without that labor there would be no fandom' (2018, 108). To reiterate: the leisure time of fandom is underpinned by a considerable amount of fannish labour. LOCs will regularly make references to canon details – dialogue, costuming, narrative points – which have been fact-checked through re-watching episodes on videotape, occasionally in a marathon. The very detailed LOCs enact the labour of fandom, as they are based on repeat viewings of a text to verify elements of the canon and report these discoveries back to the community of zine readers. The level of detail is offered in a format that is useful for fans without the time or capacity to do this research themselves.

Excitingly, given the purpose of this collection, one LOC from 1985 does use the word 'binge' to refer to a compressed engagement with media. This is the only such instance in my sample, though it refers to binge-reading rather than binge-watching. Rather than watching television, the context of the comment concerns the effort needed to complete a fan awards ballot, with the letter-writer re-reading many fanzines to make her choice: 'yes, "binge" could describe what followed. Or constructive indulgence?' (BF5 1985, 10). The phrase 'constructive indulgence' rather wonderfully exposes some of the tensions around time, labour and shame with regard to fannish leisure activities, including watching television and related activities.

In this instance, the pleasure of re-reading back issues is framed as an indulgence, and by implication an unnecessary activity presumably because the zines have already been read once, and there are 'better' uses of this fan's time than revisiting older fanworks. Doing the work of reading to fill out the ballot, again presumably, might be otherwise directed toward more 'useful' activity: reading new zines, writing a letter of comment for inclusion in a future zine, or even non-fannish domestic or leisure activity that might occupy one's time outside paid employment. The modifier 'constructive' is fascinating since this active participation in a fan community – a pleasurable leisure activity – appears to be excused because it has some value. The indulgence is not just for one's own benefit, or put another way, the 'binge' is not an 'involuntary, non-cerebral reaction to the medium' (Brunsdon 2010, 65), but is instead a useful pursuit that helps this letter-writer make an informed decision when filling out her ballot. She is, in a sense, indulging in the practice of fannish good citizenship. The use of 'binge' here elides the work that goes into making a fandom happen.

A second instance of the tension between labour and leisure in fandom is in the 'exquisite torture' of watching every episode of *Starsky & Hutch* over a weekend (SH10 1982, 13), a comment that introduces a five-page concordance of facts about Hutch derived from a meticulous re-watching of the series. As leisure activity, this is exquisite because it is the chance to spend time with something with which you have a strong affective connection; as labour it is torture for the volume of material to review, its variable interest, the bodily discomfort of sitting to watch so much and the time pressure to complete the task. The footnotes across this LOC reference episode titles and dialogue, as well as an unproduced script for the series (of the sort which would be auctioned at a convention). One footnote also references a single-page 'biography' of Hutch from an earlier issue, contributed by another fan (SH11 1982, 3); this concordance expands and annotates that previous contribution. However, and as discussed above, a viewing marathon is not necessary for research: the

group that contributed the champagne-fuelled barefoot concordance mentioned above (SH5 1982), which included the author of SH10, demurred that they did not have time to review all the episodes and instead worked from memory. Presumably, however, this was not memory formed in a single viewing, but was knowledge built up through enough repeat viewings that an actual re-watch would be redundant.

These performances of verification signal the letter-writers' competence and available leisure time to perform this labour, but also provide a record and reference point for other fans who offer their own analyses and reflections on elements of the series, or simply use the descriptions as a proxy for revising the episodes themselves. These also appear to be valuable reference points for fanfiction writers who want to verify that their characterisation and background details stay within the parameters of the canon. These activities are an 'indulgence' in that immersing oneself in a fannish activity takes away from other tasks that one might be doing, but 'constructive' in that they contribute to a community that only exists through production of commentaries and paratexts, and through participation in activities such as awards. These productive marathons are excused by the letter-writers as being for the benefit of the community, where the language used enacts an ambivalence around the shame and pleasure of contributing fannish labour.

<A>CONCLUSION

One of the most striking parts of this research, speaking for myself, has been how familiar I find these fans' descriptions of their viewing practice. Current fannish binge-watching still involves visiting a friend to spend a day (or more!) watching recorded episodes, for the pleasure of watching together and for the purpose of sharing favourite series with a fresh pair of eyes. While videotape collections have become scarce, streaming libraries complement fans' own digital collections. Far from being an artefact of the analogue age, peripheral

screenings happen at conventions today, with fans arriving equipped to use time between (or alongside, or after) a scheduled programming track for social watching. Over the years this has involved bringing audio/video cables from home to use the hotel room television as a laptop's external monitor, plugging an external hard drive directly into the USB port on the television, and – lately – going wireless by using a streaming device such as Roku or Chromecast. There is an absolute continuity of experience between the ways of watching television on videotape described in the letterzines and current strategies of taking advantage of being in the same location and using available spaces and technologies to watch television together.

The contents of letterzines occasionally describe watching together in person, as discussed in this chapter, but the majority of the letters work to create a shared community, with fans initiating and continuing conversations about what they were (re-)watching on their own. Currently, social media allows fans to watch together in real time or at a delay, via public live-tweeting (Pittman and Tefertiller 2015; Stewart 2019), through direct messaging to a friend who is currently offline, or by contributing to conversations on sites such as Reddit (Bury, this volume). The asynchronous affordance of live-tweeting enables fans to write a thread while watching several episodes of a series, both to document a minute-by-minute experience for a live audience responding in real time and to leave a record of their unfolding experience for fellow fans to engage with after the fact. These Twitter threads, as an iteration of conversations on internet message boards and live-blogging, echo the back-and-forth of the LOCs in letterzines in the ways that Twitter users comment on a thread through replies and quote-Tweets.

This chapter provides a brief but significant overview of some of the discussions around marathon viewing of television episodes enabled by videotape in the first decade of domestic VCRs. While none of this activity was called 'binge-watching', proximate modes of

watching were described by fans in the late 1970s, through letters of comment in contemporary fannish letterzines. With a few exceptions (e.g. Gillilan 1998, 1999), letterzines are an untapped resource for television and fandom historians. Therefore, this chapter is an examination of what I read in these collections, and also a call for more attention to be paid to this documentation. As a research method, reading fans' letters about their engagement with television texts enables access to discussions of textual elements – narrative, characterisation, performance – and also the contexts in which fans watched the episodes themselves. The fans who contributed to letterzines have left many conversations about their viewing practice, their experience of fandom and the pleasures they found in these varied storyworlds. My analysis of fannish viewing at conventions and in domestic spaces reveals not just evidence of historical marathon viewing, but also the texture of language used to recount these activities to the wider fandom community.

Acknowledgements

My thanks to the staff at the Merril Collection and at the Cushing Memorial Library and Archives, for in-person and digital support. This work was supported by the Birmingham Centre for Media and Cultural Research, and through Birmingham City University's Go Global fund. Finally, my thanks to Anita Slater, who provided valuable research assistance.

Table of letters

CMLA: Cushing Memorial Library and Archives, Texas A&M University

MCSFSF: Merril Collection of Science Fiction, Speculation & Fantasy, Toronto Public Library

Key	Reference
BF1	MJB (1985) Letter of comment. *Between Friends* 9 (May), pp. 23-25. CMLA. <http://hdl.handle.net/1969.1/159440>
BF2	CLB (1985) Letter of comment. *Between Friends* 7 (January), pp. 15-17. CMLA. <http://hdl.handle.net/1969.1/159438>

BF3	NG (1985) Letter of comment. *Between Friends* 9 (May), pp. 28-31. CMLA. <http://hdl.handle.net/1969.1/159440>
BF4	AT (1985) Letter of comment. *Between Friends* 8 (March), pp. 11-12. CMLA. <http://hdl.handle.net/1969.1/159439>
BF5	TD (1985) Letter of comment. *Between Friends* 11 (September), pp. 8-10. CMLA. <http://hdl.handle.net/1969.1/159436>
CL1	REG (1982) Editorial. *Comlink* 7, p. 2. MCSFSF.
CM1	RW (1984) 'CONVENTION REPORT: THE THIRD LEONARD NIMOY CONVENTION.' *Communicator* 15 (January), p. 21. MCSFSF.
DAE1	MLC (circa 1985) Letter of comment. *Details at 11* 10, pp. 52-3. CMLA. Media Fanzine Collection, id. 00/C000150
DAE2	CS (circa 1983) Editorial. *Details at 11* 1, p. 3. CMLA. Media Fanzine Collection, id. 00/C000150
DAE3	CJ (circa 1984) Letter of comment. *Details at 11* 6, pp. 9-17. CMLA. Media Fanzine Collection, id. 00/C000150
DAE4	RK (circa 1985) Letter of comment. *Details at 11* 10, pp. 52-53. CMLA. Media Fanzine Collection, id. 00/C000150
DAE5	RK (circa 1983) Letter of comment. *Details at 11* 1, p. 6. CMLA. Media Fanzine Collection, id. 00/C000150
DAE6	BKA (circa 1985) Letter of comment. *Details at 11* 10, pp. 7-10. CMLA. Media Fanzine Collection, id. 00/C000150
HTT1	IC (1984) Letter of comment. *Holier Than Thou* 20, p. 105. MCSFSF.
IS1	AC (1979) 'Ann's Last Words.' *Interstat* 16 (February), p. 13. CMLA. <http://hdl.handle.net/1969.1/153044>
SH1	BoPeep (December 1982) 'HOW DOTH OUR LITTLE ZEBRA CON or Look Back In Confusion or Look Forward In Confusion'. *S&H* 37, p. 40. MCSFSF.
SH2	TB (April 1982) 'DOBEYCON 3 – 'OFFICIAL' REPORT', *S&H* 32, p. 38. MCSFSF.
SH3	KB (December 1982) Letter of comment. *S&H* 37, pp. 8-10. MCSFSF.
SH4	KB (June 1982) Letter of comment. *S&H* 33/34, pp. 7-8. MCSFSF.
SH5	NH, CS, SO, DB, and KH (October 1982) *S&H* 36, pp. 9-10. MCSFSF.
SH6	BS (April 1982) Letter of comment. *S&H* 32, pp. 15-16. MCSFSF.
SH7	DB and KH (June 1982) Editorial. *S&H* 33/34, pp. 2 and 56. MCSFSF.
SH8	TB (October 1982) *S&H* 36, pp. 2-3. MCSFSF.
SH9	RK (January 1983) Letter of comment. *S&H* 38, p. 10-11. MCSFSF.

SH10	KH (September 1982) Letter of comment. *S&H* 35, pp. 13-17) MCSFSF.
SH11	MR (June 1982) Letter of comment. *S&H* 33/34, p. 3. MCSFSF.
TASF1	CM (1994) 'Constantinople '94'. *Thyme: The Australasian SF News Magazine* 97, pp. 6-9. MCSFSF.
UT1	SL (1986) Advertisement in 'The Saurian Grapevine'. *Universal Translator* 31, pp. 36-39. MCSFSF.
UT2	LF (1986) Advertisement in 'The Saurian Grapevine'. *Universal Translator* 32, pp. 44-46. MCSFSF.
UT3	Letterpress (1983) Advertisement in 'The Saurian Grapevine'. *Universal Translator* 18, p. 35. MCSFSF.
UT4	JP (1983) Advertisement in 'The Saurian Grapevine'. *Universal Translator* 16, p. 29. MCSFSF.

NOTE

1 An editorial insertion mid-LOC points out that this tape of so-called 'most memorable moments' is close to being a 'song tape' (fanvid) and all it lacks is an appropriate soundtrack (DAE6 1985: 7).

References

Amesley, C. (1989). 'How to Watch *Star Trek*'. *Cultural Studies* 3(3): 323–39.

Bacon-Smith, C. (1992). *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

'Between Friends (Starsky and Hutch zine)' (2019). *Fanlore.org*. 18 February 2019. Retrieved from: <https://fanlore.org/wiki/Between_Friends_(Starsky_and_Hutch_zine)> (last accessed 22 August 2019).

Brett, J. (2013). 'Preserving the Image of Fandom: The Sandy Hereld Digitized Media Fanzine Collection at Texas A&M University', *Texas Digital Library*. 28 June 2013. Retrieved from: <https://tdl-ir.tdl.org/handle/2249.1/64291> (last accessed 23 August 2019).

Brown, M. E. (1994). *Soap Opera and Women's Talk: The Pleasure of Resistance*. London: Sage Publications.

Brunsdon, C. (2010). 'Bingeing on Boxsets: The National and the Digital in Television Crime Drama'. In J. Gripsrud (ed.), *Relocating Television: Television in the Digital Context*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, pp. 63–75.

Bury, R. (2017). *Television 2.0: Viewer and Fan Engagement with Digital TV*. New York: Peter Lang.

Bury, R. (2020). '"A small Christmas for me": A Study of Binge-Watching and Fan Engagement on Reddit'. In M. Jenner (ed.), *Binge-Watching and Contemporary Television Research*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 40-58.

Busse, K. (2013). ‘Geek Hierarchies, Boundary Policing and the Gendering of the Good Fan’. *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies* 10(1): 73–91.

Busse, K. (2018). ‘The Ethics of Studying Online Fandom’. In M. A. Click and S. Scott (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Media Fandom*. New York and Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, pp. 9–17.

Coppa, F. (2006). ‘A Brief History of Media Fandom’. In K. Hellekson and K. Busse (eds), *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., pp. 44–60.

Coppa, F. (2009). ‘A Fannish Taxonomy of Hotness’. *Cinema Journal* 48(4): 107–13.

‘Details at 11’ (2019). *Fanlore.org*. 16 July 2009. Retrieved from: <https://fanlore.org/wiki/Details_at_11> (last accessed 22 August 2019).

Fiske, J. (1992). ‘The Cultural Economy of Fandom’. In L. A. Lewis (ed.), *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 30–49.

Gauntlett, D. and A. Hill (1999). *TV Living: Television, Culture and Everyday Life*. London: Routledge.

Gillilan, C. (1998). ‘*WAR OF THE WORLDS*: Richard Chaves, Paul Ironhorse, and the Female Fan Community’. In C. Harris and A. Alexander (eds), *Theorizing Fandom: Fans, Subculture and Identity*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, pp. 131–52.

Gillilan, C. (1999). *Zine Fans, Zine Fiction, Zine Fandom: Exchanging the Mundane for a Woman-Centred World*. PhD Thesis, University of Colorado.

Gray, A. (1992). *Video Playtime: The Gendering of a Leisure Technology*. London: Routledge.

Hartwell, D. (1984). *Age of Wonders: Exploring the World of Science Fiction*. New York: Walker and Company.

Heritage, S. (2019). 'Make them wait! Why the age of bingewatching may finally be over'. *The Guardian*. 2 September 2019. Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2019/sep/02/why-the-age-of-bingewatching-may-be-over-disney-plus-netflix> (last accessed 3 September 2019).

Hills, M. (2013). 'Fiske's "Textual Productivity" and Digital Fandom: Web 2.0 Democratization Versus Fan Distinction?'. *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies* 10(1): 130–53.

Jacobs, J. (2011). 'Television, Interrupted: Pollution or Aesthetic?'. In J. Bennett and N. Strange (eds), *Television as Digital Media*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, pp. 255–80.

Jenkins, H. (1992). *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. London: Routledge.

Jenner, M. (2017). 'Binge-Watching: Video-On-Demand, Quality TV and Mainstreaming Fandom'. *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 20(3): 304–20.

Jenner, M. (2018). *Netflix and the Re-invention of Television*. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.

Kompare, D. (2018). 'Fan Curators and Gateways into Fandom'. In M. A. Click and S. Scott (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Media Fandom*. New York and Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, pp. 107–13.

Kompare, D. (2016). 'Publishing Flow: DVD Box Sets and the Reconception of Television', *Television & New Media*, 7(4): 335–360.

Latham, R. (2006). '*New Worlds* and the New Wave in Fandom: Fan Culture and the Reshaping of Science Fiction in the Sixties'. *Extrapolation* 47(2): 296–315.

Latham, R., M. Conway, L. Yaszek, W. W. Wilson, J. Brett, C. McKitterick, K. Beckler, P. Weaver, G. Bundy, K. Quinlivan, M. Combs, N. Down., T. M. Whitehead, T. Samuelson, C. Coker, M. Brodsky, S. Hilder, M. Boyd, L. Toolis, A. Sawyer, M. Bonacker, M. Barceló, P. T. Gyger, and J-M. Margot (2010). 'SFS Showcase: Library Collections and Archives of SF and Related Materials'. *Science Fiction Studies* 37(2): 161–90.

Lee, R. Y. (2011). 'Textual Evidence of Fandom Activities: The Fanzine Holdings at UC Riverside's Eaton Collection'. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 6, no page. Retrieved from: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2011.0271> (last accessed 23 April 2018).

Lymn, J. (2018). 'Looking in on a Special Collection: Science Fiction Fanzines at Murdoch University Library', *Australasian Journal of Popular Culture* 7(1): pp. 23–39.

Mikos, L. (2016). 'Digital Media Platforms and the Use of TV Content: Binge Watching and Video-on-Demand in Germany'. *Media and Communication* 4(3): 154–61.

Newman, M. Z. (2014). *Video Revolutions: On the History of a Medium*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Penley, C. (1991). 'Brownian Motion: Women, Tactics, and Technology'. In C. Penley and A. Ross (eds), *Technoculture*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 135–61.

Perks, L. G. (2015). *Media Marathoning: Immersions in Morality*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

Pittman, M. and A. C. Tefertiller (2015). 'With or Without You: Connected Viewing and Co-viewing Twitter Activity for Traditional Appointment and Asynchronous Broadcast Television Models'. *First Monday* 20(7): no page.

'S and H (Starsky and Hutch letterzine)' (2016). *Fanlore.org*. 23 August 2016. Retrieved from: <https://fanlore.org/wiki/S_and_H_(Starsky_and_Hutch_letterzine)> (last accessed 22 August 2019).

'*Shadow Chasers*' (2019). *Wikipedia.com*. 28 June 2019. Retrieved from: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shadow_Chasers> (last accessed 29 August 2019).

Stevens, E. C. (2020). *Fanvids: Television, Women, and Home Media Re-Use*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

Stevens, E. C. (2017). 'On Vidding: The Home Media Archive and Vernacular Historiography'. In J. Wroot and A. Willis (eds), *Cult Media: Re-packaged, Re-released and Restored*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 143–59.

Stewart, M. (2019). 'Live tweeting, Reality TV and the Nation'. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, online first, 1–16.

'Universal Translator' (2019). *Fanlore.org*. 10 September 2019. Retrieved from: <https://fanlore.org/wiki/Universal_Translator> (last accessed 3 December 2019).

Williams, R. (2015). *Post-Object Fandom: Television, Identity and Self-narrative*. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

Zubernis, L. and K. Larsen (2012). *Fandom at the Crossroads: Celebration, Shame and Fan/Producer Relationships*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

TV

Blake's 7 (1978–82), UK, BBC1

Marco Polo (1982) USA/Italy: NBC/RAI

Professionals, The (1977–83), UK: ITV

Shadow Chasers (1985–6), USA: ABC

Simon & Simon (1981–9), USA: CBS

Star Trek (1967–9), USA: NBC

Starsky & Hutch (1975–9), USA: ABC