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Television and Fan Heroes as Consumable Products

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Abstract:

Detective television heroes have become products for mass consumption. Especially crime thriller television series catering to violence and crime appeal to the mass. Dexter and Sherlock, the detective vigilante heroes consume crime and violence and in the process they become both consumer and producers to violence. Likewise, the viewers become consumer of violence and crime. Also, in the process of watching the TV series, they create sociological and cultural popular artefacts.

Keywords: Violence, Crime, Consumerism, Popular Culture, Television Series, Fandom.

Showtime's *Dexter* has successfully run eight seasons while BBC One's *Sherlock* has had four seasons. Both the television series have been received positively by viewers globally. What makes both these television series globally popular is that both these series fall under the detective genre. And recently there has been an innumerable number of television series made and aired under the detective genre. And in this genre the element of suspense, thrill and the good detective chasing the bad criminal appeals to the viewers because it gives the viewers a tinge of adrenaline rush. Interestingly, the detective protagonists of these television series, Sherlock and Dexter, are not the stereotypical detectives that one usually sees in a detective television series or movies. Dexter is a serial killer who claims to be a psychopath and Sherlock is a consulting detective and a "high functioning sociopath". These two detectives have won millions of fans. The success of these television series should be attributed to the protagonists with their unusual charisma.

What makes these television series so famous and popular? One of the many reasons is that in a hegemonic society where law and order is above everything and where crime is not tolerated, these television series create protagonists/heroes who love crime. Dexter is a psychopathic serial killer and Sherlock is a crime hungry sociopath. What binds them together is that both are vigilante detectives. Why the need for such detectives who do not conform to the hegemonic law and order of society? It is true that both of them by solving crimes and cases are helping the society free itself of crime and criminals in their own ways. But is not Dexter a criminal himself, his nocturnal job/hobby or passion being of a serial killer?

Is Sherlock free of guilt for being drawn into strange and bizarre criminal cases? Both of them if looked from the point of view of the standard hegemonic society are outlaws and

criminals. But the viewers who watch these television series do not necessarily feel and think that they are criminals, but rather unlikely heroes. The critic Tim Goodman wrote a review article entitled “Killer ‘Dexter’ Slices and Dices Ethics, Humor” for *San Francisco Chronicle* where he states that Dexter, “certainly fits that bill. It forces viewers to buy in or opt out on the whole situational-ethics thing. It makes them cringe by being shown depravity but also entertained because it’s funny, well written and smartly paced” (www.sfgate.com).

Mathew Gilbert wrote a review article for *The Boston Globe* entitled “Hall Endearingly Creepy as ‘Dexter’ Returns for a Fifth Season” where he professes that, “It’s creepy funny which is true to the tone of the show itself. ‘Dexter’ is a masterfully creepy-funny serial-killer series, and it continues to both frighten and amuse as it enters its fifth season on Sunday at 9” (www.boston.com). Not only the reviews are good but there are fan sites for Dexter such as www.fanpop.com/clubs/dexter, www.facebook.com/dexter and sliceoflife.emsportal.info, to name some, where the fans share their opinions and ideas on *Dexter*. These sites serve as platforms where the fans discuss about *Dexter* and where they are connected by their interest and love of this television series. Many of these fans idolize Dexter. He is not only a television hero but a hero to the viewers too.

What makes *Dexter* very popular is that crime and violence are objectified in it. Mike Presdee cites in his book *Cultural Criminology and the Carnival of Crime* that “Crime and Violence have become much objectified and commodified and as such much desired whilst being distributed through various forms of media to be pleurably consumed” (59). For instance, Dexter hunts down serial killers and criminals who have committed gruesome crimes, but by killing them he also commits a criminal act. The series *Dexter* depicts violence and crime at two levels which is paradoxical because Dexter catches and murders/punishes serial killers where the law has failed and this reveals that the protagonist Dexter is intolerant of violence and crime but again in the process of punishing these bad guys he commits homicide which is crime of the highest order.

Though Dexter’s voiceover is used to connect to the viewers and thereby justifying his reason and needs to kill, is it proof and justification enough to kill a human being while the viewers silently sit and watch what he does, sometimes supporting him? *Dexter* condemns but also glorifies crime, homicide and violence; and this paradox perplexes the viewers and the fans. So crime and violence have been objectified at two levels and this objectification somehow gives the viewer a kind of pleasure in watching Dexter committing criminal activities. A sense of justice and injustice are juxtaposed here.

Likewise it is the same for BBC *Sherlock*, even though Sherlock Holmes is already famous but the BBC *Sherlock* Holmes is made famous and popular by the viewers, critics and fans. *Sherlock* too has many fan sites – www.sherlokology.com, 221beyond.com, Sherlock.broadhost.com and www.facebook.com/sherlock are some of the sites where fans from

different parts of the world form a community to discuss their interest on the detective Sherlock. These fan sites are integral in making the BBC Sherlock series popular and a hit.

The creators of BBC Sherlock Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat have designed a new Sherlock who is iconic yet who will breathe the air of contemporary London. And BBC Sherlock is appealing. As critic Rob Owen says in his review article “Tuned In: ‘Sherlock’ Returns to PBS for a Short Season” for Pittsburg Post-Gazette that, “Sherlock’s cheeky sense of humour makes this version of character a delight” (www.post-gazette.com). This new Sherlock caters to the popular taste. In an interview for Aljazeera America conducted by Phil Ittner, he asked the creators Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat on Sherlock Holmes being “such a global phenomenon” and Mark Gatiss replied, “It does go right back to the fact that they are definitive. They’re originals. And I think over the years of so many different films, etc. They’re incredibly icons. They’re so get-able” (america.aljazeera.com). Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s creation Sherlock Holmes has been made into many movies and these movies have managed to win the viewers. And still Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat have made this iconic detective more likeable. His aura is not lost but rather recreated and reinvented to suit the contemporary popular imagination. When Phil Ittner asked the creators “Do you write with the show’s fans in mind?”, Steven Moffat replied, “It’s interesting conjecture that whole thing... about is this just for fans? It’s got some of the highest ratings in the country. There must be an awful lot of them” (america.aljazeera.com).

Sir Conan Doyle’s detective is not forgotten but he is being celebrated still in the 21st century. What makes Sherlock different is like Dexter he too is addicted to crime and weird criminal cases. The irony of these detectives is that they feed on crime to thrive and survive. They are consumers of crime. Sherlock is not a serial killer like Dexter and that is what makes him different from Dexter. While viewers and fans enjoy these two television series and in the process of watching them they are also consuming what is being shown. The viewers and fans are avid and devoted consumers. It is already shown how violence and crime are objectified in Dexter and how the viewers/fans willingly support Dexter in his homicide owing to his omnipresent voiceover which makes the audience not only sympathise but also emphathize with Dexter. Jeff Lindsay has also claimed how someone like Dexter would make life easier for so many people and the fact that Dexter is not there in reality. But the fact is Jeff Lindsay has created a convincing serial killer detective who is brought to life by the viewers and the fans with their extreme dedication to the television series.

While Sherlock is not a serial killer yet he consumes crime that is by solving weird criminal cases he gets satisfaction and respite and he has a strong urge towards crime. The viewers/fans too are consuming the criminal cases along with Sherlock thereby making Sherlock a product of these criminal cases. The viewers/fans not only enjoy and derive pleasure from watching Sherlock solving crimes and defeating criminals but they also have an expectation from him that is an expectation that an ardent consumer anticipates from a good product. The same goes for Dexter.

What is intriguing about Dexter and Sherlock is that they are consumers themselves of other day to day things. For instance, Dexter buys plastic bags and plastic sheets which are necessary tools for his nocturnal occupation as a serial killer that is he wraps his victims with these plastic bags before dumping their mutilated body parts into the open ocean. Not only plastic bags but he also consumes his victims by killing them and by keeping their blood slides as trophy. He commodifies and consumes his victims in this way. He maintains a normal life despite his homicidal instincts. Brian Jarvis says in his article “Monster Inc.: Serial Killers and Consumer Culture” that “Rather than appearing monstrously different, the serial killer displays a likeness that disturbs the dominant culture. The violence of consumerism is similarly hidden beneath a façade of healthy normality” (329). Killing and using plastic bags to remove evidence are his way of consuming because consumed goods do not exist once they are used, Brian Jarvis points out that, “to ‘consume’ is to devour and destroy, to waste and obliterate” (329). In the case of Sherlock, Sherlock consumes crime and violence by solving it. He uses modern technology – smartphones and laptops to solve criminal cases. He is a consumer of modern technology making him technocratic. The moment he finishes solving a case, he yearns for another interesting one which is typical of every consumer. Consumers tend to look and buy products after they have consumed the previous one. Both Dexter and Sherlock are the same, the moment after Dexter kills his victims the next thing he would do is target the next one; likewise Sherlock also looks and targets interesting cases worth solving or consuming. There seems to be a sense of lack in them or in their personalities if they do not consume crime or activities related to it. They are completely dependent on the products of crime.

Dexter and Sherlock share an interesting relation with the viewers and the fans. They are also consumers since almost all of them own television and through it they are able to watch *Dexter* and *Sherlock*. In the eyes of the viewers and the fans, these two detective protagonists are not only the heroes of popular television series but they are also products which they consume whenever they appear on the television sets. Jean Baudrillard highlights in his book *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* that “Consumption is governed by a form of magical thinking; daily life is governed by a mentality based on miraculous thinking, a primitive mentality, in so far as that has been defined as being based on a belief in the omnipotence of thought” (31). The activities of Dexter and Sherlock disrupt the mundane lives of the viewers or the fans, even if for a moment. Jean Baudrillard claims that, “The whole ideology of consumption is there to persuade us that we have entered a new era and that a decisive human ‘Revolution’ separates the painful, heroic Age of Production from the euphoric Age of Consumption where justice is at last done to Man and his desires” (82).

Consumption then is not evil but it is the product of production. Consumption and production are then inseparable. Dexter and Sherlock are products of the entertainment industry and it is only in their consumption by the viewers and the fans that their appealing and desirable personalities will be heightened and accepted. Without consuming a product a consumer will never know or understand its importance and value. The television series which are products of

television offer meaning to the viewers/audience. Jean Baudrillard emphasizes, “What the TV medium conveys by its technical organization is the idea (the ideology) of a world endlessly visualizable, endlessly segmentable and readable in images. It conveys the ideology of the *omnipotence of a system of a reading over a world become a system of signs*. TV images present themselves as the metalanguages of an absent world” (123). Further, television is medium where the mass participates in consumption of visual moving images. And the mass is capable of interpreting and generating meanings out of the television programmes they watch. Dexter and Sherlock too create meanings and ideologies. The two protagonists are not merely heroes of popular television series but their image on the television screen produces meaning and ideology.

Further, the viewers/fans are consumers, but would not there be a moral and ethical problems with them in their appreciation, if not for Sherlock, at least for Dexter. The important point is Dexter is a serial killer. It is true that Dexter could win over the viewers/fans through his voiceover where he lays his true self bare to the viewers/fans? Do the fans/viewers enjoy watching Dexter killing another human being? If they do then what becomes of their ethics and moral values? Considering the reviews, it seems not many have any objection against Dexter and his homicidal activities. Also keeping in mind that a number of fan pages and sites dedicated to Dexter Morgan have graced the internet the viewers/fans seem to admire Dexter. It is undoubtedly true that Dexter kills only serial killers and criminal offenders and this made the viewers/fans support Dexter. But Dexter not only kills his victims, he mutilates them into pieces which is violent and inhuman. Are the viewers/fans also inclined to killing and violence? There seems to be a guilty pleasure in watching Dexter butchering his victims. Keeping in mind the fact that these victims are criminals whom the law has failed to identify and catch, Dexter’s ulterior motive, that is eliminating these criminals from the society, justifies his action. Does his action justify the viewers’ or the fans’ guilty pleasure which they receive after watching Dexter?

Dexter’s voiceover has already been credited for keeping the viewers and the fans on his side. Through his voiceover Dexter also controls the narration of the television series thereby projecting his subjective viewpoint pertaining to his actions, and his subjective approach manipulates the sentiments of the viewers and the fans. His relationship with the viewers and the fans is not only protagonist-audience relationship but they seem to share some emotional connection. Dexter, through his voiceover, is able to gain the sympathy of the viewers and the fans. Since crime and violence are celebrated in *Dexter*, they could be looked from the perspective of Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of carnival. The viewers and the fans too become a part of the carnival in *Dexter*. Consumption is an aspect of carnival.

As Mike Presdee and Gavin Carver state in the chapter entitled “From Carnival to Carnival of Crime” in the book *Cultural Criminology and the Carnival of Crime* that, “Carnival licenses transgression and thus openly defies or mocks the values of the hegemony. The transgressor is thereby put in the position of power as the carnival society replaces the dominant one” (38-39). The viewers and the fans have the legitimate right to enjoy murder, crime and violence which Dexter commits in the television series. Carnival celebrates what is deemed

immoral by the dominant society. It disrupts the hierarchy. The viewers and fans also participate in Dexter's criminal act by rooting for him. There is a definite transgression for accepting and enjoying this crime-inducing show but then this transgression is within the boundaries of their own home.

Crime and violence are glorified in the act of carnival and the viewers and the fans play a pivotal role in it. They accept Dexter and expect him to commit crimes so that they could also revel and enjoy in it. The viewers and the fans give crime and violence a new cultural meaning that is crime and violence are consumable products of the television culture. They have traded their time and money to consume violence and crime. Sherlock however does not connect with the viewers and the fans through voiceover like Dexter. It should be kept in mind that Sherlock is no serial killer like Dexter, and so he does not need to justify his action to the audience. He is definitely a crime addict. But are not the viewers and fans too crime addicts? The viewers and the fans do not expect him to sit and relax. They want him to work on interesting criminal cases.

One of the many reasons why the BBC *Sherlock* has high viewership and fan following could be attributed not only to the actors who play the characters well but also to the interesting criminal cases that Sherlock solves. The viewers too, like Sherlock, are drawn towards crime and violence. Sherlock commodifies and objectifies violence and through Sherlock the viewers and the fans devour crime and violence. The protagonists Dexter and Sherlock are both producers of crime and violence thereby selling and auctioning them to the viewers and the fans. Dexter and Sherlock and the viewers or the fans are part of the consumer society at large, they are inter-related. While Dexter and Sherlock could be looked at as the products of crime and violence the viewers and the fans on the other hand legitimize crime and violence through their constant support of Dexter and Sherlock. Sherlock and Dexter make crime and violence desirable entities. These desirable entities are mediated through the popular medium of television. Mike Presdee suggests that, "When media enter the realm of crime it is the commodification process that is at work with the dynamics of the communications of marketplace being the driving force. Consumption and communication come together to form the engine room of criminalization" (26).

Crime and violence have been commodified and objectified for consumption by the protagonists of these two popular television series but in the process too crime and violence are commodified for the viewers and the fans to consume. So the commodification process is established on two levels. Consumption then becomes a collective and community effort. Jean Baudrillard sums up that, "The truth of consumption is that it is not a function of enjoyment, but a *function of production*, and, hence, like all material production, not an individual function, but an *immediately and totally collective one*" (78). This could be further explained by the fact that crime begets crime in *Dexter*. Dexter's victims are serial killers and they already exploited and produced crime and violence with their gruesome acts and Dexter, in the process of eliminating them, inflicts another form of violence and crime. Further, the viewers and the fans of Dexter consume crime and violence in the leisure of their own home. But are not the viewers and the fans enjoying violence and crime via Dexter? Jean Baudrillard further states that, "Enjoyment would define

consumption for *oneself*, as something autonomous and final. But consumption is never that. Enjoyment is enjoyment for one's own benefit, but consuming is something one never does alone" (78). If this is the case then consumption of violence and crime in *Dexter* and consumption of the television series are collective processes.

The same can be said for *Sherlock* and its viewers and fans. For instance, Sherlock solves cases which are products of crime and after solving a particular case he yearns for another which is also an extension of crime and violence. The viewers and the fans consume Sherlock's cases. The viewers and the fans produce something in return. The end result of this kind of consumption results in production of something.

Fan fictions and fan made videos could be looked as products produced and created by the fans and the viewers after their consumption of these television series. They invest not only their time but their emotions, feelings and sentiments while watching these series. What the fans have created and circulated are end results and products of these popular television series. They have consumed and in the process of their consumption they have also produced something valuable imbued with textual meaning. The popularity of *Dexter* and *Sherlock* have reached so far and wide that the fans have made fan fictions and fan videos of their favourite protagonists. They have exalted and glorified these television heroes with their ardent dedication towards them. But why have they made the fan fictions and fan videos? Have these protagonists become an extension of their reality? Or are these fan fictions and fan videos another set of consumable products? To answer these questions it is imperative to discuss some of the fan fictions and fan videos that the fans have produced and circulated on *Dexter* and *Sherlock*.

Dexter ended its series in Season 8 but one of the fan fiction writers has written on a possible future *Dexter* might have after Season 8 where *Dexter* reunites with his teenage son Harrison Morgan. The fan fiction is entitled *Harrison meets Dexter in Argentina*, written by Q13041. Another fan fiction writer has uploaded and published his/her different and alternate approach on *Dexter's* finale where *Dexter* is shown doing her daily labour as a truck driver. One fine day he receives an email from Hannah where she talks about Harrison and how both of them miss *Dexter*. *Dexter* tried to reply the email but in vain. He has been saving money for Harrison's education which he thinks he will send on his 18th birthday. *Dexter* then dreamt of the possible future he could have only to wake up in disappointment, the fan fiction is entitled *Dexter Happy End* authored by Lorelei Candice Black. These two fan fictions on *Dexter* have been uploaded in the website www.fanfiction.com. The season finale of *Dexter* is open-ended thus making it possible for fans to have their own interpretations. The fans wish to know the possible future *Dexter* might have after Season 8; so fans have constructed and created their versions of *Dexter's* future by taking advantage of the open-endedness of the television series.

A fan fiction entitled *The Mysterious Fan Girl* written by High-Functioning Sociopath SH was uploaded in www.fanfiction.com where the author narrates a particular case wherein a fan sends parcels to *Sherlock*, first a woman's red undergarment, a man's shirt stained with red

lipstick on the collar and then a snow globe wired with a camera. The fan also attaches a note each along with the parcels teasing Sherlock and John too. The narrator/writer of this story tells that the snow globe is still there in the living room of 221 B Baker Street “utterly forgotten”. The mysterious fan girl turns out to be Molly Hooper. There are many fan fictions of *Dexter* and *Sherlock* available online. Henry Jenkins suggests that, “fan culture is nomadic, ever-expanding, seemingly all-encompassing yet, at the same time, permanent, capable of maintaining strong traditions and creating enduring works” (228). Youtube fan-made videos of *Dexter* and *Sherlock* are circulating online. One of the fan made videos entitled *Dexter, The Early Years* shows a fan/actor recreating the first episode of season one. The fan/actor has replicated the scene and the dialogues of season one episode one where the fan/actor is seen cruising the road of Miami looking for his kill/victim. And another fan made video, *Dexter – Something Dark in Me* serves as unforgotten memory of *Dexter* where this particular fan has collected and joined different scenes from the series and made it into a good video with background music. The fan is recreating the memories of *Dexter* into a fan made video. These two videos highlight the fans’ emotional attachment to the series and the protagonist.

Sherlock’s fan made video titled *Sherlock Fan Video (Johnlock)* is an interesting one where the fan/videomaker has taken scenes from the series focusing on Sherlock and John Watson, and their expression and gestures toward each other indicating a possibility of a homoerotic and romantic relation between Sherlock and John Watson. Another interesting video entitled *I am Sherlocked Dance Mob Saint-Petersburg* is doing rounds in the internet. This video recreates one of the scenes from *Sherlock* but what is phenomenal about this video is it is Saint-Petersburg is used as the location equivalent to London and there is a live audience to witness the mob dance dedicated to Sherlock. The fans/actors portraying Sherlock, John Watson, Jim Moriarty and Irene Adler deliver their lines in Russian and after completing each scene they merge with the mob dancers to join in their dance routine. *Sherlock*’s themed music is played in the background. All the mob dancers wear black coloured T-Shirt printed with the phrase “I am Sherlocked”. Henry Jenkins expresses that, “Using home videotape recorders and inexpensive copy-cords, fan artists appropriate “found footage” from broadcast television and re-edit it to express their particular slant on the program, linking series images to music similarly appropriated for television culture” (230).

These fan-made videos of *Dexter* and *Sherlock* are viewed by many. They have captured viewers and fans beyond the television screen. Henry Jenkins points out that, “For the fan, watching the series is the beginning, not the end, of the process of media consumption” (284). Online shopping websites selling *Sherlock* and *Dexter* printed and T-Shirts and clothes with quotes from these series are also doing rounds, www.Lazyninja.com is one such website. Quotations from *Dexter* such as “I am a neat monster” and from *Sherlock*, “I am Sherlocked” and “High Functioning Sociopath” are printed in these T-Shirts. They have a great market place considering the number of people watching and following these television series. Henry Jenkins remarks that:

once television characters enter into a broader circulation, intrude our living room, pervade the fabric of our society, they belong to their audience and not simply to the artists who originated them. Media texts, thus, can and must be remade by their viewers so that potentially significant materials can better speak to the audience's cultural interests and more fully address their desires. (285-286)

The production of the television series *Dexter* and *Sherlock* do not end or stop with the completion of the series. These fans in the process of consumption produce something related and relevant to both the series. It is therefore, safe to say that consumption is an endless process because it is followed by production. Also, the fans in the process of production reveal their artistic side. These fan fictions, fan made videos and T-Shirts represent another aspect of fan culture, these are made for the other fans to read, watch and buy. Fan culture also brings people from all walks of lives where their area of interest is similar to one another thereby sharing a common interest and a common bond. Fans are not the legitimate producers of *Dexter* and *Sherlock* but in the process of making items and products related to *Dexter* and *Sherlock* they for once become a producers of their favourite shows and heroes. Fans, by making fan fictions and fan videos, create an alternate reality of their favorite series. They become authors of their favorite characters.

Fan made videos, fan fictions and fan made T-Shirts are the extension of these television series. These are cultural products and markers and one could say that the show has not ended but it has just begun. *Dexter* and *Sherlock* have been commodified and popularized. They are not just protagonists or heroes but products with artistic and commercial values. They want more of their favourite protagonists and in the process of creating more of these heroes the fans procure and develops artefacts which have material and cultural values. These fan-made artefacts have the potential to generate cultural and sociological meanings and ideas.

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