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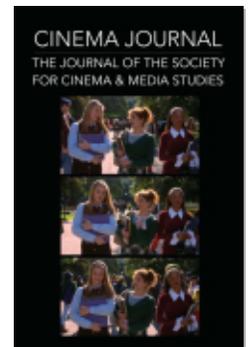
Introduction

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Cinema Journal, 48, Number 4, Summer 2009, pp. 104-107 (Article)

Published by University of Texas Press

DOI: 10.1353/cj.0.0131



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IN FOCUS: Fandom and Feminism

Gender and the Politics of Fan Production

Introduction

by KRISTINA BUSSE

When *Cinema Journal* asked me to provide a possible image for the cover of this issue, several came to mind. Yet trying to find an accessible, representative, legal, high quality picture proved difficult. In fact, my search for such an image metonymically illustrated many of the central concerns addressed in this In Focus. There are many amazing works of fan art and screenshots from fan vids (TV or film clips cut to music), but most of them require at least an understanding of the source text, if not the fannish context, to become comprehensible. Many of these images might not strike a casual reader as feminist because the feminist impetus lies in the way women manipulate and co-opt media representations. In addition, these images draw from copyrighted sources, so that most are on uncertain legal grounds, even as fans and scholars alike argue for their legality on transformative grounds.¹ Finally, the greatest—and possibly most telling—obstacle in obtaining a useful cover image is that of finding a source with sufficiently high resolution. Fannish art is grassroots and amateur, and predigital, third- or fourth-generation sources often produce deteriorated or low-quality images. Trying to showcase fannish creations is thus complicated by the very subcultural constraints that make it worth studying in the first place.

“Fandom and Feminism” offers a fruitful pairing that allows us to consider the work of feminism in popular culture and the role of media texts within feminism. The different contributors in this section all focus on various dimensions of what has been termed *media fandom*. In the late 1960s, a group of science fiction fans started focusing on television and film, foregrounding characters and narratives. These

1 Transformative works take existing artifacts and add to or alter them to create a new message or meaning. Fans circulating fan fiction, fan art, and fan vids rely on the fair use legal protection afforded to transformative works. See Rebecca Tushnet, “User-Generated Discontent: Transformation in Practice,” *Columbia Journal of Law and the Arts* 31 (2008): 101–120, <http://www.tushnet.com/law/usergenerated.pdf>; Sarah Trombley, “Visions and Revisions: Fanvids and Fair Use,” *Cardozo Arts and Entertainment Law Journal* 25 (2008): 647–685, <http://www.cardozoaelj.net/issues/08/Trombley.pdf>. All URLs cited herein were accessed on November 28, 2008.

primarily female fans began creating stories, art, and videos that continued, expanded, and analyzed the narrative universes and transformed the visual stimuli, with *Star Trek* (NBC, 1966–1969), in particular, spurring the imagination.² This particular community, often called media fandom, has been extensively studied and is seen by many creative women fans as their predecessors. These fans feel a deep sense of community and are engaged in a complex subcultural economy—using work time to write about copyrighted characters, teaching one another how to use complex technological equipment to create zines for free, and so on.³

Recent scholarship on media fandom in particular has attempted to take into account the ever-growing diversity of fans and fan works, often focusing on a particular fandom or even a single fan work.⁴ In fact, legitimizing fan works as objects of study in their own right, rather than merely products of an interesting subculture, may be one of the most important shifts in fan studies. Several of the essays presented here do just such close analyses: Francesca Coppa's reading of the Clucking Belles' "Fannish Taxonomy of Hotness" (2005) and Alexis Lothian's reading of Lim's "Us" (2007) both offer analyses of specific fan works even as they connect these to larger concerns. Both of these fan vids address many of the issues raised during my search for a perfect cover image: each draws from a variety of sources that may be familiar to a particular community of media fans but often are more obscure to other TV viewers. Explaining how and why a particular scene resonates for a fan may indeed rely on the shared knowledge of a story, vid, or central fan discussion. Both vids thematize the active viewing and manipulation done by fans. The Clucking Belles' vid foregrounds the repetitive use of tropes that illustrates how many woman fans appropriate and reinterpret these images; Lim's vid actively manipulates the visuals to indicate how fans change and transform the text. "Us" also directly addresses concerns over ownership by manipulating a famous *Batman* screenshot to show Batman gazing up at a copyright symbol.

The story of media fandom is one steeped in economic and gender concerns, from the beginning, when women began creating the narratives commercial media wouldn't offer—dominated as it is by male producers—to the recent founding of the nonprofit advocacy group for fan works, the Organization for Transformative Works: from the first woman asking about Spock's childhood to the current debates about gender

2 The year 1967 saw the first fanzine, *Spockanalia*, with stories, analyses, and drawings; 1972 saw the first specific fan convention; and 1975 saw the first proto-fan vid by Kandy Fong. For a history of early media fandom, see Jacqueline Lichtenberg, Sondra Marshak, and Joan Winston, *"Star Trek" Lives!* (New York: Corgi, 1975), and Joan Marie Verba, *Boldly Writing: A Trekker Fan and Zine History, 1967–1987*, 2nd ed. (Minnetonka, MN: FTL Publications, 1996). For an account of early fannish vidding, see Francesca Coppa, "Women, *Star Trek*, and the Early Development of Fannish Vidding," *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 1, <http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/44>.

3 Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Camille Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992).

4 For more recent studies on fandom that fruitfully expand on the work of the early 1990s, see Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Cornel Sandvoss, *Fans: The Mirror of Consumption* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2005); Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, eds., *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006); Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington, eds., *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World* (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

concerns in fan studies;⁵ and from Coppa's discussion of the revolutionary potential of the VCR in feminist viewing experience to Lothian's analysis of the ways such feminist textual productions instantiate a radical politics of digital reappropriation. Likewise, gender and economics are driving concerns in the conversations between Karen Hellekson, Abigail De Kosnik, Julie Levin Russo, and Lothian on the role of fannish gift culture and the potential values and dangers of convergence culture.⁶ Some scholars posit that today all viewers are interpellated as fans, that they are invited to engage fannishly by creating content and engaging within an imaginary online community. Does this mean that the old subcultural stance of media fandom has become obsolete in the face of a general shift in media consumption? Moreover, if such convergence can allow fans to become parts of the media industry, should fans embrace these options? And how are these economic issues deeply gendered if predominantly female spaces embrace gift cultures while men are more likely to turn their fannish endeavors into for-profit projects?

At the beginning of the first essay, Francesca Coppa invokes the fetish, an object of excess attention and obsession, whether sexual, religious, or economic. Fandom and feminism may indeed be read against a history in which women *are* the fetish, in both the psychosexual and socioeconomic arenas: women (or at least parts of them) have often been fetishistic objects while also adding value to commodities, often without gaining capital themselves. Thus, when Coppa uses the fetish to interrogate women's desire and ability to transform visual texts into meaning-making creations of their own, she hints at the fetish's economic meaning. Underneath her analysis of sexual desire hides a more complex negotiation that touches on visual texts as commodities and cultural value systems.

In subsequent pages the contributors define and describe fandom as a space that ventures to invert subject-object relationships on any number of levels. The most obvious instance in which fans complicate established binary relations is when they return the gaze as they manipulate representations of (and by) men and actively edit in their own desires. At the same time, the authors illustrate how fannish creation and culture attempt to not only invert but also break down clear binaries: writers become readers and readers become writers; texts remain unfinished and become fertile ground for new rewrites; community interaction and creative production become indistinguishable as creative endeavors turn into commentary and criticism into fan works; commercial interests become complicated as a gift economy questions capitalist models of labor and exchange while nonetheless participating in them in various ways.

Fandom is always more complicated than the stories we tell about it, and scholars need to be careful not to create an imaginary feminist idyll. Simply inverting the gaze may keep subject/object relations unquestioned—a concern that has become especially important as queer and trans studies have complicated any naive feminist binaries that may have held sway during early years of media fandom. Likewise, as

5 See the summer 2007 blog debate on gender and fan studies hosted by Henry Jenkins at <http://fandebate.livejournal.com/>.

6 Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: When Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

De Kosnik and Russo illustrate, an unequivocal embrace of noncommodified fan work remains problematic within a world that requires paying the bills. What these essays show, however, is that media fandoms, which may appear parasitical, unimaginative, and juvenile to the uninitiated observer, indeed carry with them endless creative potential. They also contain a complex theoretical promise to interrogate and contribute to areas ranging from feminist media studies and film studies to feminist economics as well as new media studies and cultural theory. *

A Fannish Taxonomy of Hotness

by FRANCESCA COPPA

In “Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator,” Mary Ann Doane claims that it is “extremely difficult, if not impossible” for women to be fetishists, that they do not have the requisite lack.¹ But for many fannish vidders, fetishism is not associated with lack and loss, but with surplus and pleasure. Take, for example, “A Fannish Taxonomy of Hotness (Hot Hot Hot!)” (2005), a fan vid made by the Clucking Belles. This vid invites its female spectator to a veritable orgy of scopophilia and stages, as its playfully scientific name suggests—sufficient emotional and visual distance to qualify as fetishistic. “A Fannish Taxonomy of Hotness” not only tells us about how some women watch television, but it also creates new conditions of possibility that recall other moments of successful female erotic spectatorship. *Vidding*, as an art form made through editing, also complicates the familiar symbolic characterization of women sewing and men cutting. Vidding women *cut*, slicing visual texts into pieces before putting them together again, fetishizing not only body parts and visual tropes, but the frame, the filmic moment, that they pull out of otherwise coherent wholes.

“A Fannish Taxonomy of Hotness” is part of the thirty-year tradition of fannish music video known as vidding. Practiced overwhelmingly by women (as opposed to fan filmmaking, which remains male dominated²), vidding is an art in which clips from television shows and

1 Mary Ann Doane, “Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator,” in *Feminism and Film*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 425.

2 All the *Star Wars* fan films in Henry Jenkins’s “Digital Filmography” were made by men, but there are few male vidders. See Henry Jenkins, “Quentin Tarantino’s *Star Wars*?” in *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*, rev. ed., ed. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 575–576.