

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.

movies are set to music to make an argument or tell a story. The song is used as an interpretive lens; the music and lyrics tell us how to understand what we see.³ The vid makes a seemingly simple argument; it sets images from a wide-ranging number of popular movies and television shows to Buster Poindexter's dance hit "Hot Hot Hot." Both song and images play with what it means to be "hot": the Clucking Belles not only label various images as hot but also articulate the feelings they induce in the spectator—these visuals make *us* hot. In its original context, the song describes and gives voice to partygoers on a dance floor: "People in the party—hot hot hot." In "A Fannish Taxonomy of Hotness," the "party" becomes the broad spectrum of polymorphously perverse images offered up by the media, and the "dance floor" is the vid itself: a place where people from different backgrounds can meet and move to the beat. The vidders create this metaphorical dance party by editing images together in rhythm, paying close attention to frame composition and internal movement, so that characters from different television shows and films all seem to be at the same party and dancing together. The Clucking Belles are able to edit these discrete characters into a single party because so many films and television shows feature scenes in which characters go to clubs, dance, or drink; the clichéd nature of much mass media imagery means that a good vidder can slide easily between one visual narrative and another.

But while the Clucking Belles create a rhythmic montage of beautiful people, "A Fannish Taxonomy of Hotness" isn't about people; it's about tropes. Scenes of people dancing give way to more metaphorical kinds of dancing: montages of men showing at each other, montages of swordplay, montages wherein characters defy the laws of gravity by floating in midair or swinging from ropes. In the swordplay section, the vidders cut from sword fighting in *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* (syndicated [USA Network], 1995–1999) to Jackie Chan making a nearly identical move in *Shanghai Knights* (David Dobkin, 2003), and then to swordplay in *The Princess Bride* (Rob Reiner, 1987), *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World* (Peter Weir, 2003), *Highlander* (syndicated, 1992–1998; film dir. Russell Mulcahey, 1986), *Star Trek* (NBC, 1966–1969), *Xena* (syndicated [USA Network], 1995–2001), *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (Peter Jackson, 2003), and others. Much circling, leaping, and twirling of swords is on display; sword fighting is obviously a form of dance. Less obviously, perhaps, the Clucking Belles re-read the trope wherein one man grabs another by the lapels and shoves him up against a wall; now it looks like a form of close dancing as intimate as the tango. The clichés of mass media are reinscribed, and appreciated, as erotic choreography.

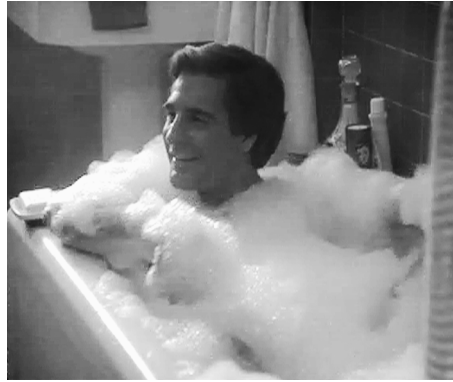
Other media tropes are brought within the fannish taxonomy as well, with each trope's near-identical performance by a series of actors only serving to reinscribe its formal quality as a gesture. The Clucking Belles catalog scenes of various characters touching the brims of their hats, lighting their cigars, and whipping off their eyeglasses. Seeing them one after the other means that the trope visually trumps any individual character or actor, which runs counter to the idea that female fans only identify with or desire particular actors or characters as whole and rounded representations. Here

3 For example, the first known VCR vid, made in 1980 by Kendra Hunter and Diana Barbour, sets a single, wavering image from *Starsky and Hutch* to a song by The Who, "Behind Blue Eyes."

we notice only parts—swords, hats, cigars, eyeglasses—the fetish gear of television and film. Black leather coats: Spike from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (WB, 1997–2001; UPN, 2001–2003) has one, Neo and Trinity from *The Matrix* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 1999) do too, as do *Farscape*'s (Sci Fi Channel, 1999–2003) Aeryn Sun and John Crichton. We see tight black T-shirts and togas. Straitjackets are popular on television, if not in hospitals; similarly, characters in prison tend to be found literally behind bars. Other montages in the vid focus on skin shots: the hero gratuitously taking off his shirt or, better yet, his pants; the (often comic) episode in which a main character is ambushed naked in the bathtub (Figures 1–3).

The vid builds to a narrative and sexual climax. The end of the song features a frenzied call and response (“How you feeling?” “Hot, hot, hot!”) while we see a montage of characters hung in chains and whipped—a pure erotic spectacle of beaten and bruised men (Figures 4–6).⁴ In each individual storyline, the moment of beating is one of intense drama, but taken together—when the viewer can't help but realize how many mainstream television shows and movies regularly feature scenes that look a lot like bondage and domination—the inherent kinkiness of plain old broadcast television becomes evident.

This is the vid's point. It is staging a way of watching television familiar to most female fans and to all fan vidders: a selective seeing, or seeing



Figures 1–3. Bathtub imagery is strikingly similar across a range of texts (*Quantum Leap* [NBC, 1989–1993]; *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* [WB, 1997–2001; UPN, 2001–2003]; *Due South* [CTV and CBS, 1994–1999]) used in the Clucking Belles' fan vid, “A Fannish Taxonomy of Hotness (Hot Hot Hot!)” (2005).

4 They also evoke the potential identificatory figure of “The Wounded Man.” See Christine Gledhill, “Women Reading Men,” in *Me Jane: Masculinity, Movies, and Women*, ed. Pat Kirkham and Janet Thunen (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 87.



Figures 4–6. Vidders target the recurring sadomasochism of mass culture (*Blake's 7* [BBC1, 1978–1981]; *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* [WB, 1997–2001; UPN, 2001–2003]; *The Count of Monte Cristo* [Buena Vista, 2002]).

in parts. Film editing was historically open to women, as it was thought to be related to sewing,⁵ but this emphasis on bringing things together may blind us to another important part of vidding: clip selection, which is isolating particular images and movements and cutting them from the whole. VCR vidders, who began vidding when home recording equipment became popular in the early 1980s, had a surplus of images from which to choose: as much videotape as they and their friends could record from broadcast television. Today's vidders have all the power of computer editing software and the picture quality of DVDs and high-definition digital AVI files. These vidders see parts—tropes, movements, frames—within larger narratives that are presented to them as unified and complete, and they reassemble them into coherent wholes of their own devising. Their vids reappropriate objects and turn them into sites of pleasure and surplus. This surplus is not just psychic but economic. Vidding is a nonprofit activity partly because there's no scarcity: the same footage can be used to make thousands of different vids.

All vidding requires obsessive rewatching as well as the ability to invest certain moments with meaning and separate these parts from the whole.

In “Pressure” (1990), three vidders collectively known as Sterling Eiolan and the Odd Woman Out made a metavid of themselves vidding: selecting and evaluating clips from their vast collection of VHS cassettes. We watch them searching for, finding, and rewatching specific moments, timing sequences with a stopwatch, then judging each clip with a thumbs-up or thumbs-down (Figure 7).

While the ability to stop, rewind, and rewatch is essential for vidders, this is merely an extension of normative television viewing practices among female fans. While male fans have a reputation as collectors—comic books, action figures, information

5 Michael Ondaatje, *The Conversations: Walter Murch and the Art of Editing Film* (New York: Knopf, 2002).



Figure 7. Vidders time clips in the metavid “Pressure” (1990), by Sterling Eoilan and the Odd Woman Out.

and other trivia—female fans collect images, VHS cassettes, and DVDs, just as they historically collected fan magazines, autographs, and still shots. It is common in fan communities for fans to create and share online galleries of screencaps—often referred to as “picspam”—which isolate particular frames of a favorite television show. These still shots typically feature the show’s “BSO” (“beloved sex object” or “bright shiny object,” depending on the community). BSOs include beloved, sexually objectified, and typically male characters like Fox Mulder of *The X-Files* (FOX, 1993–2002) or *Supernatural*’s (WB, 2005–2006; CW, 2006–present) Dean Winchester. Just as the Clucking Belles cut up and edited sexy tropes together in “A Fannish Taxonomy of Hotness,” picspams can be dedicated to a BSO’s particular body parts. Arms, necks, mouths, and bellies are popular visual subjects. Computers make creating and sharing picspam easy, but the power to pause, to stop time, and to frame one’s own still shots came with the rise of the VCR.

The VCR is crucially important to the history of fandom and in the development of a female gaze that is, arguably, specific to vidding and the use of the VCR.⁶ The

6 Although scholars have examined television’s domestication of the viewing experience (Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992]) and the way that VCRs enabled women to time shift their viewing (Anne Gray, “Behind Closed Doors: Video Recorders in the Home,” in *Media Studies: A Reader*, ed. Paul Marris and Sue Thornham [New York: New York University Press, 2000], 524–535), insufficient attention has been paid to the filmmaking powers that the VCR bestows. For histories of female fannishness, see Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Susan Torrey Barstow, “‘Hedda is all of us’: Late Victorian Women at the Matinee,” *Victorian Studies* 43, no. 3 (Spring 2001): 387–411; Miriam Hansen, “Pleasure, Ambivalence, Identification: Valentino and Female Spectatorship,” in Kaplan, *Feminism and Film*, 226–252; and Barbara Ehrenreich, Elizabeth Hess, and Gloria Jacobs, “Beatlemania: Girls Just Want to Have Fun,” in *The Adoring Audience*, ed. Lisa A. Lewis (London: Routledge, 1992), 84–106.

VCR enabled women to stop and look—really look—at an image in the safety of domestic space. It also allowed women to pick and choose images and repeat the experience of those images. (The ability to look frankly, safely, and openly at the bodies of others and to repeat that viewing experience as often as they like recalls other historical moments of successful female spectatorship.) Indeed, as thrilling as “live” television watching is for the fannish female spectator, it is nothing compared to the pleasures of the VCR. As Dutch vidder Mary Crawford explains: “At home I would have my dad sitting at my shoulder, hmfing disapprovingly whenever I watched something I liked. Once I had my own student place, my own TV and my own VCR, I was QUEEN.”⁷ VCRs gave women the ability to pause and rewind within programs, changing the temporality within a given narrative, as well as the ability to time shift more broadly, thus beginning the long death of communal television watching within the family. This is often framed as something regrettable, but as Mary Crawford’s experience indicates, certain kinds of spectatorship are impossible with patriarchy at one’s elbow.

Technology has enabled the female gaze by giving women the same sort of control over visual media that they previously had over only a much older storytelling technology—the book. Years before the VCR, Isaac Asimov described the book as “the perfect entertainment cassette,” noting, “We could imagine a cassette that is always in perfect adjustment; that starts automatically when you look at it, that stops automatically when you cease to look at it; that can play forward or backward, quickly or slowly, by skips or with repetitions, entirely at your pleasure.”⁸ We might revisit recent scholarship linking reading for pleasure and masturbation and consider reading and vidding as parallel elements in a history of female fetishism to be uncovered.⁹ As Janice Radway noted in *Reading the Romance*, her foundational ethnography of women readers, one of the most provocative things about the woman who reads is how her gaze is turned away from her real husband, lover, or children,¹⁰ but we have perhaps never properly asked ourselves what the reading woman is actually gazing at. Media fan fiction blurs the lines between text, body, and image in fascinating ways; I have argued in previous work that women use fan fiction to direct bodies in performance, typically the bodies of familiar, and fetishized, male actors. But women had access to the tools of writing before those of filmmaking; now, women are demonstrating this same agency vis-à-vis the image.¹¹

The advent of home filmmaking technology has allowed women to look, judge, select, edit, and manipulate images without any of the physical or social dangers historically connected to the female gaze. Vidders then share their work with other female

7 Mary Crawford, personal communication, October 4, 2008.

8 Isaac Asimov, quoted by Harlan Ellison in “Revealed at Last! What Killed the Dinosaurs! And You Don’t Look So Terrific Yourself,” in *Sleepless Nights in the Procrustean Bed: Essays by Harlan Ellison*, ed. Marty Clark (San Bernardino, CA: Borgo Press, 1984), 51–52.

9 See, for example, Thomas Walter Laqueur, *Solitary Sex* (Cambridge, MA: Zone Books, 2003).

10 Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

11 Francesca Coppa, “Media Fan Fiction as Theatrical Performance,” in *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*, ed. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006), 225–244.

spectators, whether on the big screen at fannish conventions like MediaWest, Escapade, and Vividcon, or by distributing them to female-dominated fan communities online. In either case, their audience is specifically constituted of women who have come together, not just as fans of the visual source texts, but as fans of the vidders and of vidding itself—this particular way of seeing. Julie Levin Russo suggests that “A Fannish Taxonomy of Hotness” should be read as an allegory for female fans themselves: “I think part of what [this vid is] saying in creating this largely joyous collection (there’s a lot of dancing in this vid) is: ‘Look how much fun we’re having—we’re really hot!’”¹² But if female fans are hot, they’re hot in the sense of being turned on, and the fun they’re having is explicitly the fun of watching, not of being watched. Fan activities such as vidding may be crucial to theorizing the social conditions necessary for female fetishism and the safe expression of female desire. *

12 Julie Levin Russo, notes on Media Fetish: The Vidshow, August 22, 2008, <http://cyborgize.livejournal.com/24374.html>. Accessed November 28, 2008.

A Fannish Field of Value: Online Fan Gift Culture

by KAREN HELLEKSON

To the uninitiated outsider, media fandom as it’s currently practiced online in blog spaces such as LiveJournal makes little sense: strange jargon with unclear acronyms and lots of punctuation sits next to YouTube or Imeem video embeddings. Perhaps a post announces part 18 of a long piece of fan fiction. In the comments someone has left the writer a gift: a manipulated image of her two favorite characters cleverly sized so she can upload it into the blog software interface and immediately start putting it up next to her name as an avatar to represent her. Someone else writes a short fic in response and hotlinks to it: “Come over here and look!” she invites. A third person uses the story as a pretext to write a detailed episode review to illustrate the show’s shortcomings.

To engage is to click, read, comment, write, make up a song and sing it; to hotlink, to create a video, to be invited to move on, to come over here or go over there—to become part of a larger metatext, the off-putting jargon and the unspoken rules meaning that only *this* group of *that* people can negotiate the terrain. Within this circle of