

Fantastic: Exploring the Intermedial Productivity of the Fangirl

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Abstract

Fandoms serve as a rich site to examine intermedial play in modern culture, with fans engaging with and creating new, media-hybrid products that honour, subvert, and/or expand source material. While the body serves as both site and tool for this work, such productivity is only considered valuable and legitimate if conducted by a certain type of body – one detached from emotion and non-threatening to white, heteronormative, ableist, patriarchal society. The fangirl has long been condemned as a bad cultural producer with bad taste, too emotional to engage with or create worthwhile products. However, I argue that the fangirl's productivity challenges the assumed hierarchical divide between logic and emotion that dominates Western theory. Using my own affected responses as a starting point and focusing on fan edits, choreography videos, and concert films in the BTS and Taylor Swift fandoms, I combine personal experiences of fandom with academic research to examine the impact intermedial play has on the fangirl as both consumer and creator. My approach applies recent intermedial theory to current fan studies research and feminist analysis in order to understand the 21st century viewer from a more encompassing, multimedia perspective. Additionally, this autoethnographic method demonstrates the value (and presence) of affect in academic work first-hand. This exploration ultimately concludes that the fangirl actively uses affect in fan productivity to articulate identity and build community and thus demonstrates the value of emotion and affect in rational thought as it is a fundamentally embodied process.

Keywords: Fandom, Intermediality, Fan Productivity, Affect, Fan Studies, Media Studies

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Introduction

“Welcome to convergence culture,” Henry Jenkins proclaimed in his 2006 book, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, where content flows across media systems that are constantly intersecting, combining, and co-existing in everchanging relationships (p. 2). This fluidity is not new; throughout history, the content we consume has repeatedly been influenced, inspired, adapted, and replicated in and by various modes of creative expression. What the digital age *has* done, however, is brought these changing medial relationships to the forefront of our attention, from TikTok dance trends that popularise songs, famous fanfiction narratives becoming best-selling novels, and even video diaries documenting the construction of intricate cosplay costumes. Products and practices that combine media not only draw in audiences from various spheres to ensure maximum profit but also allow viewers to actively participate in and generate culture. Nowhere is this more evident than in fandom, where fans engage with their chosen source material across a wide range of media. Yet fandom is also a site of creation, with fans producing works that blur medial boundaries to reimagine, extend, pay tribute to, and/or subvert that source material. Such creative engagement, Jenkins claims, demonstrates how consumers extract information from the “media flow” and actively use it to understand the world around them and negotiate their place in it (p. 3).

I explore what Nicolle Lamerichs calls productive fandom. More specifically, I investigate how the fangirl, a fan who is often ridiculed and dismissed, actively uses intermediality to assert herself in dominant culture. Exploring the intermedial nature of fan productivity, the affective power of fan works, and the role emotion and affect plays in articulating identity and building community through such work, I will demonstrate how the fangirl’s work reveals the value of emotion in rational thought by highlighting it as a fundamentally embodied process. Combining my own affected responses with intermedial theory, fan studies research, and feminist analysis, I will expose the value of intermedial play as a tool that helps make sense of daily life.

Intermediality

In *Productive Fandom: Intermediality and Affective Reception in Fan Cultures*, Nicolle Lamerichs (2018) examines the intermedial nature of fan productivity. Lamerichs defines intermediality as “a transfer or combination of form and/or content that relates an individual media text to other media texts of the same or a different medium” (p. 21). Examining content this way, she claims, is essential as content does not exist “in isolation but rather in relation to other media”, with interactions between media “historically ingrained in the practice of art” (p. 23). She notes that intermediality is best understood as an umbrella term – a way of looking at media that emphasises “exchanges within and between media in the broadest sense...and the complex ways in which one medium summons or includes another” (p. 22). I have adopted this understanding of intermediality as it encapsulates the various ways fan productivity crosses medial boundaries, such as cases when multiple mediums are present yet remain distinct, cases when media depend on each other to construct a piece, and/or instances of content and aesthetic conventions transferring across media (Lamerichs, pp. 23-24). This broader understanding also allows me to begin exploring fandom as a phenomenon and space reliant on such medial play. Lamerichs discusses how fans engage with the content they love by playing with “existing symbols, plotlines, characters, and settings” across media and generate new medial relationships (pp. 13-14). Such work does not merely borrow material for reiteration but creates *new* products as fans “actively work

with the blanks in the source text that spark their imagination” (Lamerichs, p. 17). A creative act, fan productivity sees fans reimagine source content and create new products that mix and exist *between* media. Fan productivity, therefore, is intermedial both as a process *and* in the resulting hybrid products.

Vidding

One example of such productivity is vidding. In *Vidding: A History*, Francesca Coppa (2022) describes vidding as the editing of screen footage to music, resulting in “a new multimedia object that tells a story, creates an interpretation, stages an argument, and/or produces a feeling” (pp. 23-24). Here, music serves as the video’s “code and key...[where] all the information in a song—lyrics, melody, beat, tempo, instrumentation...[creates] aesthetic and narrative patterns in the footage” (Coppa, p. 24). As she eloquently puts it, “the ear tells the eye what to see” (p. 24). Vidding thus demonstrates how fans create meaning *through* intermedial play, mixing music with moving image to open the source material to new interpretations and expanding avenues for creative expression.

Vidding is particularly interesting as it rejects the priority typically given to text over image. In “The Ecstatic Embrace of Verbal and Visual”, Anne Keefe (2011) examines the text/image relationship in ekphrasis. Ekphrasis, she explains, is “a verbal representation of a visual representation” (p. 135). In “Ekphrasis and the Other”, W. J. T Mitchell (1994) describes ekphrasis as “an attempt to repress or ‘take dominion’ over language’s graphic Other” (p. 173). Deeming it an ‘othering’ practice, he explains how ekphrasis privileges the verbal over the visual, reinscribing hierarchical structures where the active, masculine verbal gives voice to the passive, feminine visual (Mitchell, 1994). Keefe explains how understandings of ekphrasis have adhered to this idea, subsequently reasserting that the verbal and the visual are separate categories of communication and completely ignoring the influence the visual has on the verbal “in language, sound, form, and voice” (p. 135). As such, she demands a re-examination of the verbal/visual exchange, calling for it to instead be understood as a mutual influence that serves to form a hybrid product (Keefe, 2011). “[B]orrowing methods and formal qualities from each art”, she states, ekphrasis allow writer and reader to move between “modes of experience”, rupturing boundaries between text and image to create intermedial spaces that can be ‘lived in’ rather than just ‘looked at’ (p. 136). Ekphrastic works thus go *beyond* a transfer of aesthetic conventions with text and image influencing each other and fusing to create a product *between* media.

While lyrics play a role in establishing tone or imagery, they are only one aspect of vidding. Showcasing lyrics in a vid is not required or necessary, nor are they even present at all in some cases (i.e. the song used may be instrumental). A song’s tone, rhythm, pitch, and associations with other media are equally important when editing images and clips together. It is by using *all* these elements that the creator produces a work that conveys certain emotions, ideas, narratives, points of view, or arguments. In this way, vidding is an ekphrastic format that pushes Keefe’s examination even further, using the verbal, visual, and audible to allow creator and consumer to exist in a space where one not merely gets to look at content but live and feel it. Vidding then, is not only an example of how fan productivity can be intermedial, with fans combining media to create something new, but also demonstrates how such work pushes back against the way we have traditionally viewed media and its boundaries.

Vidding is not a recent phenomenon, yet the rise of social media platforms has made such productivity more visible. Look up a film you saw recently on Instagram or Youtube and you'll likely find at least one (if not hundreds) of fan-made videos emphasising certain narrative lines or character relationships present in the film. What has remained consistent about vidding is that it is an embodied practice. As is the case with all types of fan productivity, fan-made content needs to be physically created. Someone's hand needs to type a spin off narrative, move the mouse to edit clips, or hold the paintbrush. Even when intermediary tools are used to help create their vision, one still needs to physically input a certain amount of information to generate the desired outcome. Fan productivity is embodied practice because the works are not removed from the body but actively tied to it.

Dance

One fan practice that best demonstrates this is dance. Lamerichs' transmedial design proves useful here as she notes that while some forms of fan productivity establish overarching narratives *across* media, not all revolve around storytelling. Instead, they can be "forms of play, critical interpretations, and material or embodied performances", which may possess some narrative qualities but do not extend a source narrative (Lamerichs, p. 18). She proposes transmedial *design* to better reflect the various types of intermedial fan play, the term 'design' incorporating the fan products that, while not narrative focused, nevertheless play between media (Lamerichs, 2018).

Dance trend videos demonstrate how people use movement to participate in culture. This is not necessarily fan productivity; those who create such videos may not necessarily know the song or artist they are dancing to, but simply want to get involved in the latest viral trend. Yet artists have tapped into this form of engagement, sharing short snippets of choreography that fans can recreate and share with each other. Such participation can help popularise songs, artists, and even accompanying music videos, demonstrating the power of intermedial fan service (and how companies rely on it to market their product) to grow an audience.

Dance is a key component within K-pop groups and their fandoms, such as BTS and their fanbase ARMY. Such groups release dedicated choreography videos that emphasise the dance aspect of their performances. These videos are unlike other performance videos, which are either live or incorporate studio lighting, editing, and camerawork. In these dedicated choreography videos, the group is in a dance studio and all production values are stripped back. There are no sets, studio lights, and everything is done in a single take. The members are not singing live, sometimes not even lip syncing. The focus, instead, is purely on the choreography – on the physical performance of the song. Such videos are released simultaneously or close to the release of the official music video, underscoring dance as a crucial element to the piece. In presenting their songs as dances, the group transforms their music into multimedia pieces. In highlighting the choreography, these videos invite fans to participate with the group – to watch and learn the choreography so they can interpret the content in and with their own bodies and dance along with them. In this way, the fan's body becomes the site *and* tool of intermedial play. Some fans then share their interpretation with others, either through videos or at in-person dance conventions or random play dance events, events organised by fans where snippets of songs are played and anyone who knows the accompanying choreography can dance with other fans. Some even take the time to make their own videos breaking down the choreography for others to learn from at a slower pace.

Affected Space of Productive Reception

Yet fan productivity is not embodied merely because one physically creates something. A fan uses their body to make content they have been physically *affected* by, making fandom and fan productivity what Lamerichs calls “affective spaces of productive reception” (p. 14). She describes affect as “an unqualified bodily state or intensity in which we are touched by an encounter with another – an artwork, a human being, a place” (p. 205). While this state has no meaning in and of itself, meaning is created when this intensity is processed into emotions (Lamerichs, 2018). She describes being a fan as an experience rooted in feeling, with fan works “consciously and productively” articulating one’s embodied response to source material (p. 206). Fan productivity is embodied, therefore, because fans are *moved* to create, using intermedial play to make meaning, process, and articulate their affected experiences. Emotions are thus central in and to such work, as is evident when Coppa describes vids as “concentrated emotion, where music is used to create or extend...feelings associated with that text”, giving voice to the power of affect (p. 18). This works, in turn, to impact its own audience, making consumers “see what [the creator] see[s] and feel what they feel” (Coppa, p. 17). The same is true of dance; a fan is compelled to reimagine choreography in his or her own body because of the affected experience they had and the desire to share that experience with others. Fan works both convey and provoke affect to engage in, make sense of, and *share* “a deeply felt and embodied experience” (Lamerichs, p. 30).

Affected Fan Works as Ekphrastic Works

Ekphrasis is useful to further understand the affective power of media blurring on creator and consumer more broadly. As Keefe asserts, ekphrasis is “located in the experience of the material body”, with writers using their bodies to capture experience and fuse text and image to heighten intensity and affect their readers (p. 137). It requires both writer and reader to “write, read, see, and hear with and from the body”, rendering the body central in not only creating but consuming the work (Keefe, p. 146). In affect being an unqualifiable experience, understanding fan products as ekphrastic works highlights them *as* affected responses – a way a fan makes sense of overwhelming sensations that are deeply felt yet hard to articulate. Other forms of fan productivity function in the same way, whether they center on the text/image relationship or not; intermedial play and creation becomes a way to untangle and make sense of affected responses, further underscoring fan production as an embodied practice, both affected and affective.

Concerts

The affective power of intermedial play is on full display at concerts, particularly large-scale pop concerts. These are overwhelming sensory experiences. Each show is a single event built upon the combination of various media, such as music, live performance, and videos on screen, and showcase various fan practices and products. Fans sing and dance along, display handmade signs and banners, and don outfits specifically chosen or made for the event. At K-pop concerts, for example, where each song is accompanied with particular choreography, fans dance along with the group on stage or with the music videos played before the show begins. Taylor Swift’s Eras Tour saw the widespread sharing of handmade friendship bracelets inspired by a lyric in one of her songs. The thought, effort, and time that went into participating in the event (even if it is as simple as learning the lyrics to sing along) demonstrates how fans are moved to engage with the content. Such engagement and amalgamation of various media creates an intensely affective experience, leading many to

dance, sing, cheer, and even cry with the people around them – people who share their interests.

The Concert Film

The last few years has seen a rise in concert films that aim to replicate this experience in cinemas. These films focus primarily, if not solely, on the concert as a performance, rather than providing behind the scenes content. The camera is not static and no view is restricted, with sweeping camera movements and close-ups that capture the spectacle while keeping viewers close to the artists. The editing style changes throughout the film to mirror the tone of each song. In BTS's concert film, *BTS: Yet to Come* (2023), for example, the aggressive rap songs utilise more rapid editing to reflect the quick pace and high energy of the performance while the ballads use longer uninterrupted takes that underscore their gentle tone. Yet in both instances, as in other contemporary concert films, the film constantly cuts between the performance on stage and the crowd, providing cinema goers with a sense of inclusion even though removed from the venue. Such films make use of cinematic techniques and aesthetics to mimic conventions of live performance, blurring the two to create a new type of experience for the viewer.

The impact of such media blurring is evident in the fact that viewers do not treat the screenings of these films like regular movie experiences. Fans bring signs, wear special outfits, handout handmade keepsakes, sing along, dance in the aisle, cry, and take videos of the events they see on screen. With the K-pop concert films, fans bring that group's light sticks (a flashlight type wand that lights up in accordance with the music) that they wave around *even though* it is not synced with the crowd on screen. Unlike live concerts, ticket prices for these films are the same regardless of where one sits. In fact, such films provide fans with a far cheaper way to see the concert they may have missed or did not experience from this intimate vantage point. While some films are recordings of previous performances, others are live-streamed, aiming to recreate the liveness of the actual concert by having fans in cinemas experience the event in real time. In both cases, however, the films are marketed as *events*, typically screening only once or twice before disappearing (*Taylor Swift: The Eras Tour* (2023) was an anomaly in this regard, playing in cinemas for multiple weeks). While some may appear later on streaming sites (*BTS: Yet to Come* is currently on Amazon Prime and *Taylor Swift: The Eras Tour* is on Disney +), most do not. Whether this will happen is never announced before the cinema run, generating a sense that if one misses it in theatres, they may miss it entirely and giving the experience a sense of rarity. Positioning these films this way plays a huge role in their financial success. BTS's film made over \$29 million globally at the box office while Taylor Swift's made over \$93 million on its opening weekend in North America alone, eventually grossing over \$261 million globally and breaking the world record for the most financially successful concert movie in history. The financial success of these concert films demonstrates not only how fandom is built on intermedial play and receptive to further medial blurring to extend the life of beloved content but also how fans display and embody their fandom through various media experiences.

Female Labour and Emotion

Intermedial fan play requires skill and time to engage in and produce, both physically and emotionally. In *Rogue Archives: Digital Cultural Memory and Media Fandom*, Abigail De Kosnik (2016) describes this as “a type of free labor...on which companies have come to rely for the generation and maintenance of audience interest in...their commodities and

platforms” (p. 13). This labour is predominantly done by women, people of colour, and the queer community. Vidding, for example, was pioneered by women (Coppa, 2022), while fanfiction was “created primarily by...and for people who self-identify as female or as not-male, many of whom identify as nonheterosexual or not exclusively heterosexual” (De Kosnik, p. 12). Yet dominant culture does not take this work seriously, specifically regarding female fan expression as “a ‘scandalous category’ of cultural production, well outside the bounds of ‘good taste, appropriate conduct, or aesthetic merit’” (De Kosnik, pp. 14-15), leading women to fear “both legal repercussions and ridicule” by those outside of their communities (Coppa, p. 5). This is because such work is considered ‘emotional’.

In *Loving Fanfiction: Exploring the Role of Emotion in Online Fandoms*, Brit Kelley (2021) explains while fan work necessitates powerful emotional engagement with source material, emotions are typically “relegated to the realm of the feminine or the other (sometimes racialised, sometimes not) – the weak” (pp. 2-4). This belief derives from the dominant Western, Cartesian theory of being, which regards emotions as something to be overcome to attain knowledge (Kelley, 2021). Like the supposed divide between media, this approach views emotions and logic as separate categories, positioning logic as superior to unproductive, irrational emotions. Despite being an integral part of learning – the place where one makes sense of feelings, experiences, and ideas – the body and its responses are dismissed, as “to be emotional is to be unprofessional, and irrational, and even, sometimes, unreliable” (Kelley, p. 4). Fan productivity then, predominantly female labour, is not taken seriously because emotions and embodied responses are not taken seriously.

The Fangirl

The fangirl is a type of fan routinely ridiculed for being overly emotional. In “Fangirling as Feminist Auto Assemblage”, Emma Maguire (2018) explains how the term ‘fangirl’ denotes “obsessive fandom”, a woman ““who has overstepped the line between healthy fandom and indecent obsession”” (pp. 112-113). While the term has been assumed by and applied to women and men “with varying degrees of irony, insult, and pride,” it is typically used as an insult to “police the consumption and appreciation of cultural texts” (Maguire, p. 113). Supposedly consumed by out-of-control emotions, the fangirl and her interests are “trivial, low-quality, and not to be taken ‘seriously’”, her work hysterical and “beyond the boundaries of normal or healthy appreciation of texts” (Maguire, pp. 113-114). Simply put, the fangirl is regarded as a bad cultural producer, incapable of engaging with and creating worthwhile products *because of her emotions*. Yet this labour is an integral part of self-expression for women, particularly young women. With dominant culture often ignoring female narratives and perspectives, fan productivity allows women to imagine, expand, and interpret materials to *include* their voices (Maguire, 2018). In a culture where women are looked at, represented, and defined by others, repurposing and remixing media allows them to take control of their media (Maguire, 2018). The fangirl then, is a prime of example Keefe’s 21st century viewer – “a viewer who is self-reflective about her own viewing” (Keefe, p. 135), enabling women “to critique, evaluate, and make meaning from cultural texts” by blurring boundaries to challenging their existence altogether (Maguire, p. 114). Maguire further explains how the fangirl constructs identity across media, bringing together a range of media objects and actively combining media into a single self-representation (Maguire, 2018). Such work is valuable not despite its emotion but *because* of it, allowing women (and others marginalised in dominant culture) to articulate their own perspectives, desires, bodies, and identities.

Building Community and Fan Archives

Fan productivity also helps the fangirl find and build community as her labour is “rewarded with the currencies of social belonging and identity” (Maguire, p. 114). Expanding on this, De Kosnik discusses how female fans act as rogue archivists to create safe spaces for their members and preserve their communities. While official archives are maintained by traditional institutions to document cultural memory, *rogue* archives preserve the content ignored by such memory institutions – online spaces that disregard copyright restriction and are constantly available and free to anyone connected to the Internet (De Kosnik, 2016). Rogue archives document what official archives will not, protecting communities “whose histories and cultures are constantly in danger of being overwritten, forgotten, deleted...by the guardians of ‘official’ history and culture” (De Kosnik, p. 135). Thus, De Kosnik proclaims, “memory has fallen into the hands of rogues”, all those typically left behind by straight, white, male dominant culture (p. 10). As fan works are often produced by women, fan archives value and preserve a mode of female cultural production typically “derided by the male-dominated media industries” (De Kosnik, p. 142). Like both Lamerichs and Keefe, De Kosnik emphasises embodiment, noting how fan archives are maintained by physical labour by preserving embodied fan practices. Discovering such archives is beneficial to fans as it proves he or she is not alone “in their acts of...appropriation and transformation” but instead part of a community with similar interests, experiences, and identities (De Kosnik, pp. 135-136). Fan archives thus archive affect, preserving affected responses and labour and showing fans that their communities are worth remembering (De Kosnik, 2016).

Physical Fan Archives

While De Kosnik’s discussion revolves around digital fan archives, I wondered what its physical manifestation would look like, if it could exist at all. Embodiment and space are important aspects in female fan expression as the treatment by dominant culture directly impacts how female fans display their fandom. This, of course, comes back to the larger issue of the space women are permitted to take up in the world generally. When alone, the fangirl is easily othered. However, by coming together in a physical space and displaying their fandom, digital fan archives can be *made physical*. A concert is not only a prime example of fans coming together, but also, like the archive, houses a wide range of fan practices. It is not, on its own, a fan archive but rather *becomes* one by incorporating a range of fan work into the single experience of the concert. That is, the venue becomes a fan archive *through* fan productivity. It is *that* which transforms spaces into fan archives – community spaces where the fangirl can safely embrace, engage in, and display her interests with like-minded individuals and ultimately assert her existence and the value of her work.

Concert Films as Rogue Fan Archive

It is not just concert venues that transform in this way. Screenings of concert films function in the same way. Yet unlike concerts, where thousands of fans travel to the building for the same purpose, the audience for such cinema screenings is significantly smaller. These films are typically shown at multiplexes, meaning that not everyone there is there to see that particular film. This often results in fans hiding their fandom until they are inside the screening room to avoid any ridicule or suspicious looks garnered when not visibly part of a community. Yet the experience changes upon stepping into the screening room, with viewers growing more relaxed knowing everyone there has gathered for the same reason. Fans unveil their outfits, pull out their banners, trade homemade keepsakes, and grab their lightsticks. As

all of these things would be common to see at concerts, by bringing them to cinemas, fans use intermedial play and references to turn the mundane screening room into their community space where singing, dancing, and talking throughout the film are permitted. It is worthwhile noting that the content of this screening is not necessarily new. Fans may have already been to the concert in-person or seen videos of the performances online. While there may be some who are seeing it for the first time, the majority of those in attendance are more than just casual fans. This means that while there is a desire to see the content, there is another reason they chose to attend the screening – that is, to recreate the experience with others. For those few hours, fangirls reclaim a physical space in the world where they can freely display and practice their fandom. The energy of such a transformation lingers once the credits roll, with viewers sticking around to discuss their experience. Unlike coming into the theatre, where people are hesitant that they will be out of place, fans leave the building at the same time. Together. In this way, by coming together, the fangirl carves a space for herself and her community in a world that normally shuns her.

Conclusion

Fans of BTS and Taylor Swift are precisely the type of fans routinely belittled, mocked, and dismissed for how they engage with the content they consume. They are *just* fangirls, too emotional to be rational. Yet treating this engagement seriously and investigating the affective power of intermedial fan work first-hand – by talking to fans and going to these events and embracing the loud, self-aware ridiculousness yet fully earnest fan play – exposes the importance of embodied, felt responses to logic and understanding. The fangirl's work is valuable not despite its emotion but *because* of it, allowing her (and all those marginalised from mainstream culture) to articulate her own perspectives, desires, bodies, and identities. Neither obsessive nor an expression of out-of-control emotions, such work is in fact labour that requires effort, skill, and time. It is an avenue for one to feel and process affected experiences in order to articulate a sense of self and build community in a world that undermines and dismisses such experiences. While I focused on female fan expression and the fangirl, this project provides a starting point for further exploration into how intermedial fan play is affected by such things as gender, race, class, and sexual orientation. Not merely a phenomenon in art nor a method to increase affective power, intermedial play combines various modes of expression in order for one to communicate with the world. A way to articulate thoughts and understand overwhelming feeling, intermediality helps give life meaning.

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