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Intimate Intertextuality and Performative Fragments in Media Fanfiction

KRISTINA BUSSE

In the late nineties I started reading *X-Files* fanfiction. It was only my second fandom, and the first where I came upon a wealth of archived fanfiction, alphabetized, tagged, and searchable in *The Gossamer Project* and, for my slash desires, in *Down in the Basement*. In the latter, I found a strange Mulder/Krycek story in which an eggbeater featured centrally. And then another one. And then several more. At that point, I realized that I might be missing something. Even knowing the canon fairly well, I could not recall the centrality of eggbeaters. Eventually, I learned that there had been a challenge on the MKRA (Mulder/Krycek Romantics Association) mailing list in 1996 for stories of exactly five hundred words and an eggbeater.

Since then, I've learned to assume that there may indeed be intense meta-conversations, quirky challenges, or intra- and inter-fannish tropes behind seemingly surprising literary choices. And sometimes I see these ideas developing in real time, such as the Tumblr post where a fan bemoaned the fact that *Person of Interest* (then in season 2) wasn't a proper fandom yet, because it did not have an mpreg (male pregnancy) story. In response, one fan writer scripted such a story, which, in turn, spawned several sequels by others, all of which then got recorded and turned into podfic by multiple readers. The podfic collection was titled "violent amoral unicorn of justice gets knocked up," using one of the tags that connected all the stories. It played on very specific stereotypes of the main character played out in a series of Tumblr drawings in which this hypermasculine, hyperphysical crusader for justice was lovingly drawn as a unicorn—now, of course, pregnant.

Whereas the *X-Files* story took me by surprise and I had to painstakingly retrace the contextual origins, more than a decade later I

understood the fannish conventions and tropes and could appreciate many of the layers of inside jokes and intertextual references that made the *Person of Interest* story meaningful above and beyond its actual intertextuality with the show itself. More specifically, both examples exhibit the ludic interplay of viewers turned readers turned writers, all of which are fans connected through their love for the show and for fandom. Requests shape stories and create tropes, which in turn shape our perceptions and create more stories. Accordingly, in this essay I challenge the discourses that merge all forms of transformative works, without taking into account the creative relationships within and between fan communities and the often ephemeral contexts in which fanfic is written.¹

Mainstream media and self-reflexive fan discourses often connect fan writing with professional transformative works, which range from mythological adaptations like the *Iliad* and *Aeneid* to postmodern rewrites like *Wide Sargasso Sea* or *Wicked*. Even as media convergence erodes the dichotomy between fan and professional, fanfiction's *raison d'être* should be understood on its own terms, as a series of personal—if not intimate—textual engagements. That centrality of affect, compounded by fanfiction's near ephemeral intertextuality (with source text, cultural and literary context, and, most importantly, other derivative interpretive texts), suggests that we lose an important layer of interpretation and meaning if we divorce fanfiction from its contexts and equate it with other forms of transformative creativity. There exist four interrelated aspects that are not restricted to fanfiction but that tend to be more pronounced in amateur transformative works written within a specific community: (1) fragmentation, the way fanfiction often tends to be part of an ongoing conversation; (2) intertextuality, a given story's dependence on community and fantext; (3) performativity, the conversational, community interaction component of many stories; and (4) intimacy, the emotional and often sexual openness and vulnerability readers and writers exhibit in the stories and surrounding interaction.

It is against these particular community aspects that the recent increase of professionally released fanfiction and its fannish and academic responses should be understood. While it is certainly worthwhile to study popular former fanfic franchises in terms of their aesthetic characteristics and narrative tropes, I want to focus on the aspects that get lost

in translation, the parts of fanfiction that are specific to its dialogic amateur community status. Fanfiction in general relies more heavily on intertextuality and ephemerality. In fact, part of the goal of this essay is to show how fanfiction can throw into relief aspects of reading and writing often overlooked or minimized in literary texts: it foregrounds certain collective and intertextual aspects that traditional theories of reading and writing often like to ignore and brings them front and center. Nevertheless, when I suggest that fanfiction exemplifies certain characteristics that deeply embed it in a particular time and place and restrict its easy legibility, I describe dominant tendencies, not absolutes. All writing is intertextual, communal, and performative to a degree; fanfiction just tends to be more so, on individual and collective levels.

“Arcana” as Case Study

E. L. James's *Twilight* fanfiction “Masters of the Universe” turned *New York Times* number-one best-seller *Fifty Shades of Grey* clearly constitutes a watershed for fanfiction studies concerned with defining a particular fannish aesthetic. Perhaps the most astounding aspect of comparing the two versions is how little they differ. In her side-by-side comparisons, Jane Litte (2012) finds an 89 percent match, which is quite high when taking into account that all proper names were changed. Yet even though the two texts are virtually identical, Anne Jamison points to a fundamental difference that is contextual rather than text intrinsic: “I’m not arguing that *Fifty Shades* somehow *can’t* stand on its own (more than twenty million readers say otherwise), but rather that the same work was more literary (read: more complex, discursive, critical, stylistically motivated) when it didn’t” (2012: 316). Effectively, “Masters of the Universe” offers more interpretative possibilities when read in its fanfictional context. There are many reasons why *Fifty Shades* remained comprehensible and enjoyable even when stripped of all its initial contexts and intertexts: as an Alternate Universe, its direct relationship to the source text was already a step removed, using the archetypal ideas that Bella and Edward represent rather than the actual specific characters. And while Jamison describes a text that is clearly in dialogue with some of the fannish tropes in *Twilight* fandom, the fandom contains a large number of first-time fans, which made it somewhat insular, and

characterizations require. Rather than modeling a story to fit a 60,000 to 80,000 word count, fic writers can end their narrative at 15,000 or expand to 130,000 without any concern for print cost and publication house requirements.

More specifically, the communicative nature of online fanfiction publishing, which offers immediate feedback to partial drafts, has created the work in progress (WIP). WIPs are exemplary fanfiction for a variety of reasons: they advertise their open status and writerly quality, to use Barthes's term (1990: 5–6). Rather than a closed text with fixed meaning, the very form of the WIP asks readers to collaborate in the meaning production, either imaginatively by envisioning various narrative threads as they wait for an update or literally by inviting feedback and discussions about the story line. Often, WIP fanfiction is episodic and thus, like televisual texts, easily enjoyed in parts. Nevertheless, the serial publication of many fan stories indicates one of the characteristics of what Cat Tosenberger (2014) has called fanfiction's "unpublishability." Unfinished stories are mostly unpublishable by definition, and WIPs often showcase all the virtues and vices of extemporaneous writing that is raw not only stylistically and grammatically but also in terms of plot and character development or even world building. The unfinished ending may exist in the mind of the fan writer and just hasn't (yet) been written down, but it may never be envisioned, which leaves the WIP as fragmentary ephemera at its best.

"Arcana" as a story was abandoned and has remained a WIP for over a decade now. It was nominated for the Tiptree as a WIP, and while its word count suggests a more conventional novel length, the story ends all but mid-scene, leaving the reader with a complex dilemma, unsolved relationship issues, and two worlds that have collided with no resolution in sight. As such, it is impossible to evaluate it as a complete and closed text even without the various other aspects (challenge response, crackfic, crossover) that make it such an apt example of fanfiction's unreadability. Moreover, its WIP status further foregrounds fan critics' need not just to analyze stories aesthetically but to understand them at the same time as deeply embedded cultural artifacts. Busse and Hellekson expand the meaning of WIP accordingly to include the entirety of fan productions. Calling "the entirety of stories and critical commentary written in a fandom" *fantext*, they describe it as an ever-expanding, ever-changing, self-

contradictory collaboration (2006: 7). As such, every story, fragment or not, is always also an added part to the never-ending WIP that constitutes the *fantext* itself.

In fact, this *fantext* is not a purely text-based phenomenon: the online environment in which most fanfiction is shared relies heavily on multimedia and hypertextual interaction. Blogging tools such as LiveJournal (LJ), Twitter, or Tumblr not only offer easy sharing of image and video with text, but also invite interaction, response, and transformation (Stein & Busse 2009; Wood & Baughman 2012; Petersen 2014). So, even when individual stories do not feature multimedia, experimental, or hypertextual elements, the *fantext*, the entirety of fan responses can be understood as a highly experimental text whose interactive and transitory components span many sites, often interlinked with and more often creatively indebted to one another (Derecho 2006).

Fanfiction in Context

As a result, fanfiction is in conversation not only with the source text but usually also with other stories in the fandom and the discussions that permeate the community. Thus, it seems useful not to look at a story as if it were a distinct and isolated piece of art but instead to acknowledge its social and communicative aspects. Fan stories always are a response to the source text, often are produced in communication with several other fans, and likely are part of a conversation with other stories and discussions. In fact, while some stories are envisioned as autonomous artifacts and thus can be read by anyone unfamiliar with the source text, a large (if not larger) number of stories rely on an audience that is familiar with the source text and likely also the *fantext*, that is, the ever-growing collection of other fan stories.

In the case of "Arcana," there are multiple contexts necessary for understanding the story: (1) the two source texts of children's book *Harry Potter* and forensic procedural *CSI*; (2) the fan communities surrounding these shows; (3) general fannish tropes such as slash itself and mpreg and the rules of crossovers; and, more specifically, (4) the particular circumstances of the story, including the community in which it was posted and the challenge to which it responded. *Oh_No_Nicky* is an LJ community that was created in response to the season 5 finale of *CSI*,

in which crime scene investigator Nick Stokes was abducted and buried alive. The community defined its central purpose as “organized flailing” in a “place where folks can come to be googly and crazy and cry and go wild about Nicky and all things CSI and no one will judge.” Tone and diction indicate clearly a specific reading of the characters and the show as well as a focus on particular types of stories.

“Arcana” was one of several responses to a community mpreg challenge, that is, the story was expected to include male pregnancy and a particular fannish version of Nick as protagonist. Losing this particular intertextual context makes it difficult for readers to comprehend or enjoy the story—after all, they weren’t its audience. In her involved post that spawned expansive discussion, Matociquala describes the specificity and often quite limited audience of fanfiction as follows:

Fanfiction is written in the expectation of being enjoyed in an open membership but tight-knit community, and the writer has an expectation of being included in the enjoyment and discussion. It is the difference, in other words, between throwing a fair on the high road, and a party in a back yard. Sure, you might be able to see what’s going on from the street, but you’re expected not to stare. (LJ, May 18, 2006)⁴

There are several aspects that Matociquala points out here that are important. The author in fanfiction tends to be in a conversation with other fans just like her; that is, there is a conversation going on that often includes the writer, thus rejecting literary models that tend to privilege authors. Moreover, there tend to be specific and limited audiences for every story—sometimes the recipient in a gift exchange, other times all fans of a particular pairing—and these particular audiences often share a sizable number of assumptions with the writer that won’t be spelled out and are thus often invisible to outsiders.⁵

Fanfiction as Ephemeral Traces

Most importantly, however, Matociquala’s metaphor of the “party in the back yard” suggests a level of immediacy and performativity that we associate with theater, ballet, and opera rather than novels and short stories. Francesca Coppa points out this similarity when she argues that

“fanfiction develops in response to dramatic rather than literary modes of storytelling and can therefore be seen to fulfill performative rather than literary criteria” (2006: 225). Moreover, the party metaphor showcases fanfiction’s ephemerality: the process of its production is often as important as are the textual remnants. In fact, researchers should be careful not to take the resulting artifacts for the thing itself. Like any anthropological recovery, artistic products may need to be studied as artistic artifact *and* as ephemeral trace.

José Esteban Muñoz defines “ephemeral traces” as that which is left behind a performative event, both hinting at and hiding the originating social engagements. Ephemera thus is “a kind of evidence of what has transpired but certainly not the thing itself. It [. . .] includes traces of lived experience and performances of lived experience, maintaining experiential politics and urgencies long after those experiences have been lived” (1996: 10). Applying this notion to fannish artifacts helps us remain aware that much of the text’s meaning can be tied in with a specific place, time, and community in ways that make it difficult to read (let alone judge) these artifacts. In fact, most of the social media platforms that fandom uses provide varying degrees of structural built-in ephemerality: older posts and comments disappear off the clearly visible top page and can be recovered only with some difficulty, and the rhizomatic structure of the Internet supports the concurrence of multiple conversations in separate spaces. As such, going back to a given post later on can make it difficult to understand all contributing aspects, since only parts are available.

But it is this layering of conversations, analyses, and fiction that not only constitutes the necessary context to explain and understand a given narrative but also offers a paratextual frame complementing fanfiction. And it is often in such frame debates that competing understandings of literary and cultural definitions and values become visible. Fanfiction challenges many attempts at traditional aesthetic valuation, because critics who ignore the guiding frameworks of how, when, and where a fan text was created can easily misread and misjudge. This is exacerbated because while much of the ephemeral performative aspects of fan writings occur on social networks, the stories are often archived on personal web pages, fandom-specific archives, or general fan archives. And whether by design or necessity, archives tend to “valu[e] the docu-

ment over event” (Schneider 2012: 140) or, in our case, the story over the creative process, communal betaing, critical responses, and all other paratextual detritus.⁶

In the case of “Arcana,” the contextual ephemerality is the particular community and challenge response as well as the partaking in a communal activity, the posting of parts that people responded to, the shared enjoyment over a particular version of Nick Stokes, and the back-and-forth within the feedback comments. It thus showcases how much of fannish writing is part of a dialog. Indeed, fanfiction can easily serve other purposes, ranging from personal interaction like a gift to intervening in fannish debates. And while the results may indeed be excellent, the event itself, the fan engagement is often more important than the actual product, that is, the few sentences of fictional prose. Likewise, role-playing games follow a similar logic where the actual play is the event itself with the textual traces leaving a remnant, a hint toward the event but not encompassing the event in its entirety (Stein 2006; McClellan 2013).

• Fanfiction and the Id

The network of interconnected conversations, not only about the shows and fanfiction but also about personal and public events, remains the current model of fan interaction. The medium not only clearly exhibits the layers of multiple intersecting contexts, but also illustrates how the personal and the fictional sit side by side: a personal triumph or defeat, commentary on national and international politics, TV reviews, and fanfic snippet—shared in a single post or aggregated and displayed together on one’s feed. The intimate details of one’s life and fannish fantasies comment on one another in many ways, whether as escape, working through, or acting out. And while these are features common to much fiction, fanfiction’s rawness and immediacy often make these aspects more visible. Moreover, fanfiction often tailors to our very desires, our innermost fantasies, sexual or not.

Ellen Fremedon introduces the term “Id Vortex” into fannish discourse to describe the tailored and customized writing that caters to the writers’ and/or readers’ kinks, that creates stories that move us emotionally not only because we already care about the characters but also because they use tropes, characterizations, scenes that appeal viscerally:

[I]n fandom, we’ve all got this agreement to just suspend shame. I mean, a lot of what we write is masturbation material, and we all know it, and so we can’t really pretend that we’re only trying to write for our readers’ most rarefied sensibilities, you know? We all know right where the Id Vortex is, and we have this agreement to approach it with caution, but without any shame at all. (LJ, December 2, 2004)

It is this celebration of the id that seemed to spawn the criticism driving much of the discussions around “Arcana” *within* fandom. Even though many critics foreground their concern about quality issues, the story’s crackfic premise is mentioned often enough in the debates to suggest that its id aspects are at least partly to blame for large parts of the criticism. In general, a lot of the responses seem to be exemplified by this comment: “If fanfic is going to get press/award nominations, why can’t it please be fanfic that makes the genre look *good*?” (comment in Matociquala, LJ, May 15, 2006). So while Ellen Fremedon describes fandom as collectively embracing the Id Vortex without shame, clearly some hesitation to share these feelings with the world at large remains. In fact, in their book-length study on celebration and shame in fandom, Lynn Zubernis and Katherine Larsen describe how “a pervasive sense of shame permeates both fan spaces and academic approaches to the subject” (2012: 1).

So whether fans fault the story for not following traditional literary aesthetics or for not fulfilling their own specific desires, at issue is the choice of a story whose appeal is narrow and predicated on specific established genre expectations. This is not to suggest that this intense emotional writerly investment is either necessary for fanfiction or absent from pro writing. Nevertheless, the context of production, dissemination, and reception differs substantially: whereas much of the editorial process in pro writing distances the writer from her story, fanfiction purposefully encourages and thrives on intimacy and pleasing the Id Vortex. In fact, fan writing often is purposefully tailored toward narrow audiences, and fanfiction headers and tags tend to signal these specific genre elements, characterizations, and tropes.

Where fandom, pairings, and warnings provide the broadest selection, fans fine-tune their searches much further (Johnson 2014). Certain terms may signal specific characterizations shared by a small subset of

fans and carrying with it a whole host of associated assumptions: in “Arcana,” the mpreg tag invokes not just the fact of male pregnancy but a host of specific genre implications, while the reference to Nicky suggests a very specific interpretation of character Nick Stokes that feminizes if not infantilizes him. At its most extreme, a story may try to perfectly please one person rather than offering a mere moderate appeal to many. It is ultimately irrelevant whether fans like a given story and its tropes for sexual or other affective reasons. The fact that fans share these kinks and that fanfiction is an easy way to write and read specific desired story lines, characterizations, and tropes is a feature rather than a bug. Fandom should celebrate its ability to appeal to narrow audiences, and yet the events surrounding “Arcana” clearly suggest that wide appeal remains a quality for many even within fandom.

Conclusion

Many fan reactions to “Arcana” (just like those to *Fifty Shades of Grey* several years later) were predicated on the question as to how well it represented fanfiction as a whole. One fan writer analyzes her ambivalent reaction to the nomination of “Arcana”: “So, you know, a crackfic CSI/HP mpreg angst-heavy h/c [hurt-comfort] crossover is not the poster child I would have picked, but as a representative of the way we are getting down in the muck of the id with dirt under our fingernails over here, I’m not sure that it’s *wrong*” (Shalott, LJ, May 18, 2006). Looking at the discussions surrounding the story’s nomination both within and without fandom suggests that far from being a bad representative for fandom, “Arcana” is actually exemplary in that it testifies to the focused narrowness of much of fan writing. It may not be a story that easily translates or that can be effortlessly or even enjoyably read by people outside of the community for which it was written, but then they aren’t its audience. So, while fandom does produce artistic artifacts that can easily be judged valuable by traditional literary aesthetic values (often modernist and emphasizing complexity), we would miss large sections of fannish creation and its effects if those were the only criteria we employed. By understanding fanfiction in its fannish context and as a performative act that may have been written for a specific purpose

or person, we can value fanfiction as both text and artifact, as a literary work and a cultural engagement.

We thus cannot simply divorce fanfiction from its context and equate it with other forms of derivative creativity. Fannish artifacts that are removed from their initial setting require us to be aware of the fact that we may see only traces rather than the entire textual and community engagement. And yet, even with fanfiction’s peculiar status as always already social and intertextual, it still begs the question as to why it may require a distinct discussion. Or, said differently, my entire line of reasoning doesn’t address whether fanfiction is indeed so fundamentally different that traditional models of literary theory cannot contain it. Rather than attempting to find a clear boundary that might distinguish fanfiction, however, I’d like to suggest a differentiated focus based less on absolute difference and more on degree. In other words, fanfiction is not necessarily wholly unlike other fiction in its creation, dissemination, and reception, but it markedly foregrounds communal and intertextual performativity that often caters to highly individualized reading desires. As a result, studying fanfiction may allow us to observe all of writing’s social and contextual aspects in an exemplary environment, where intimate community engagement and contextual performative encounters accompany, affect, and shape all textual artifacts.

NOTES

- 1 The main argument I am juxtaposing here is one that looks at fanfiction as literature and thus focuses in particular on the way fan texts engage with an earlier source text. As a result, most highly intertextual and citational literature can be seen as fanfiction. See Pugh (2005), Derecho (2006), Jamison (2013), and Romano (2010).
- 2 For a comparison of published novels with the fanfiction they are based on, see Woledge (2005). For a close analysis of the relation between slash and romance fiction, see Kaplan (2012).
- 3 Often when fanfiction is removed from its environment and placed in different contexts, fans collectively react quite negatively. Recent events include the public reading of fanfiction at the *Sherlock* season 3 premiere event (Romano 2013), the inclusion of fanfiction on the book review site Goodreads (fanlore.org), and a fanfiction class that assigned reading and commenting on various stories (fanlore.org).
- 4 I do not link fan commentary on social networking sites such as LiveJournal (LJ) directly, but instead reference parenthetically with name, site, and date.

- 5 Over the past two decades, online fandom has moved from protected spaces into public view, which has increased debates over what constitutes private and public spaces. Fans often assume a form of “layered public,” where interactions occur in public places, yet outsiders are expected “not to stare.” See Busse and Hellekson (2012) and note 3.
- 6 For the relationship between fan archives, memory, and ephemera, also see Lothian (2013). For a discussion of *Fifty Shades* and fan archives, see De Kosnik (2015).

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Copyright Law, Fan Practices, and the Rights of the Author (2017)

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Fans of popular media who write stories about their favorite characters, draw pictures of them, and edit music videos reworking the original sources occasionally stop to think about whether what they are doing is legal under copyright law. In the past, many fans assumed that these creations were technically illegal—in copyright-specific terms, infringing—but not harmful to copyright owners and therefore not truly wrong, at least as long as fans kept relatively quiet about their creative practices (e.g., Brook n.d.). More commonly these days, fans think that fan creations count as "fair use," and thus as noninfringing, at least as long as no one is making any money from selling them (e.g., Gran 1999). Regardless, fans often see their legal status as similar to their social status: marginal and, at best, tolerated rather than celebrated as part of the universe of creators. Recent attempts to monetize or license fanworks, such as Amazon's Kindle Worlds or Paramount's guidelines for tolerating fan films that do some crowdfunding, remain a relatively small part of fans' creative worlds; though they offer some opportunities for fans looking for a path to commercialization, they cannot and will not substitute for fair use (Tushnet 2014).

Shortly after I found online fandom, I wrote an article on the subject (Tushnet 1997). I concluded that most fan fiction, particularly that disseminated on the Internet, would be classified as fair use under US copyright law.¹ Since then, much has changed. Fan fiction has regularly entered the legal discussion, usually as an example of fair use (Fanlore n.d.); I co-founded the Organization for Transformative Works (OTW), whose mission is to protect and defend noncommercial fan activities; and the Copyright Office has recognized that enough fan videos are fair