

2010

## "Your Own Imagination": Vidding and Vidwatching as Collaborative Interpretation

Tisha Turk

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.morris.umn.edu/eng\\_facpubs](http://digitalcommons.morris.umn.edu/eng_facpubs)

 Part of the [American Popular Culture Commons](#), [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), and the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Definitive version available from *Film & Film Culture* 5 (2010).

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at University of Minnesota Morris Digital Well. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty by an authorized administrator of University of Minnesota Morris Digital Well. For more information, please contact [skulann@morris.umn.edu](mailto:skulann@morris.umn.edu).

# “YOUR OWN IMAGINATION”: VIDDING AND VIDWATCHING AS COLLABORATIVE INTERPRETATION

TISHA TURK

For decades, scholars in the social sciences and literary, media and communication studies have demonstrated that audiences are not necessarily passive consumers of written and visual texts, and that they can and do actively interpret, negotiate, and even resist the variable meanings encoded in those texts.<sup>1</sup> Media fans were among the earliest spectators to shift from merely reading actively to creating texts of their own that extend or comment on the originals and constructing communities organized around those creations. Fans were there-fore early adopters of the practices that characterize what has come to be called read/write culture<sup>2</sup> or participatory culture, a culture in which “everyday people take advantage of new technologies that enable them

to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content”<sup>3</sup> and “audiences themselves frequently function as self-conscious media producers and critics.”<sup>4</sup>

This essay focuses on a particular genre of audience production: fan-made song videos, known within the media fan community simply as vids. In vids, footage from television series or films is edited in conjunction with carefully chosen music to celebrate, interpret, critique, or subvert mass media narratives. A vid is, as Francesca Coppa has put it, “a visual essay that stages an argument,” but, unlike academic essays or written reviews, vids allow their creators—called vidders—to present arguments in the same medium as the original

source.<sup>5</sup> Vidders thus position themselves simultaneously as fans, filmmakers, and critics. Vids express what vidders find important in the source narrative, which characters, relationships, stories and subtexts they find most interesting and rewarding to examine. A vid represents a close reading, and like any close reading it is selective: vidders can retain or subvert the original story, foreground a minor story element or character, excise the parts of the story that displease them, or create a new story altogether. Vids are therefore opportunities to resist as well as reinscribe visual narratives.

Because of the increasingly widespread availability both of digital non-linear editing software—nearly all new computers come with a basic version of such software already installed—and of broadband internet access, most vids in recent years have been made on computers and distributed online. But vidding did not begin with YouTube; it is a well-established practice that predates our current conception of “new media” by

many years. Kandy Fong made the first vid (a slideshow) in 1975, and a relatively small number of women, often working in groups and pooling resources, produced vids using two VCRs throughout the 1980s and 90s, and in some cases well into the current decade.<sup>6</sup> Digital video editing has made certain vidding procedures much easier and has enabled the use of shorter clips and of digital effects ranging from adjusting colour and speed to masking characters in and out of shots, but the work of vidding and vidwatching in the digital era remains continuous with, if not always identical to, that of the VCR era.

In this essay, I argue that, in addition to being artefacts of participatory culture, vids represent critical engagements that both encode and demand collaborative interpretation. Treating collaborative interpretation as a central fan activity allows us to understand why growing numbers of fans identify themselves as fans of vids and vidding as well as, or even instead of, specific television

series and films.<sup>7</sup> As Henry Jenkins has argued, vids “articulate [...] what the fans have in common: their shared understandings, their mutual interests, their collective fantasies” and “focus on those aspects of the narrative that the community wants to explore”.<sup>8</sup> Increasingly, those shared understandings and mutual interests transcend specific source material: vidders and vidwatchers are fans of particular ways of seeing, ways of reclaiming or talking back to mass media. Vids like Luminosity’s “Vogue” and sisabet’s “Ring Them Bells,” discussed hereafter, are not grounded in shared understandings of a particular source—at least, not understandings worked out in fannish activity related specifically to that source. While they might be said to “focus on the aspects of the narrative that the community wants to explore,” some of the narratives explored in these two vids are much larger than the specific films *300* (Zack Snyder, 2006) and *Kill Bill Vols. 1 and 2* (Quentin Tarantino, 2003-2004); they

are cultural narratives about gender and sexuality, including the representation of gendered bodies, roles, and choices.

Although vidding is not inherently feminist, it does offer the female spectator a chance to talk back to media representations of both male and female bodies. It is impossible to offer a simple reason why this particular form of participatory culture is practiced so overwhelmingly by women while fan films—perhaps the closest analogue—are typically made by men; female fans create vids about a variety of sources from a variety of perspectives for a variety of purposes and pleasures, and attempting to explain the phenomenon risks homogenizing these differences. But, if as Julie Levin Russo argues, “fans are appropriating the signifiers of mass culture in the service of their independent narrative and social needs”.<sup>9</sup> We might speculate that women are more likely than men to feel that their narrative and social needs are not being met by that culture: television and film are not giving these

women enough of the stories they want, so they make those stories themselves. Vids, like fan fiction, can be a way of simultaneously improving beloved but problematic commercial texts and creating new non-commercial texts expressly designed to fulfil a particular set of desires; they can also be a way of calling attention to the elements that need fixing, of registering anger or frustration. Vids show us something about what the vidder sees in a particular media text, what she liked about it, what she disliked, what she found interesting or absurd. They tell us something about the kinds of stories that women want to see, the stories that women will create out of what is available to them. As Coppa notes,

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.<sup>10</sup>

Vids are one way for women to lay claim to a medium that still makes little room for their voices and desires.

This appropriation has been going on for decades, although the specifics of the practice have changed over time. When Jenkins wrote *Textual Poachers*—for many years the only published scholarship on fans and fandom to discuss vidding in detail—vids were an underground and highly insular cultural phenomenon: in order to watch vids, and especially to get one's own copies of vids, one had to know where to go and whom to contact. Fans were most likely to see vids for the first time at a convention or in the home of a fellow fan who already possessed vid collections on tape; these tapes could typically be obtained only at conventions or, occasionally, by writing to the vidders to request that a tape be sent by mail. Vids are still “narrowcast” rather than broadcast, but even narrowcast texts are now widely available, if not widely announced, and fannish

infrastructures—including listservs, forums, and especially fan communities on LiveJournal and other social networking sites—make them not only available but easily accessible.<sup>11</sup> It is now possible for a fan who discovers she likes vids to download dozens of them without ever having any contact with the vidders. In this sense, though vids continue to operate in some of the ways of folk culture,<sup>12</sup> and though they are still profoundly non-commercial, they are simultaneously taking on shadings of mass culture, something “produced at a distance by strangers,” as Richard Ohmann describes it.<sup>13</sup>

These changes can be attributed, in part, to the dramatic rise in the number of people participating in fannish activities. The explosion of media fandom in the wake of the Internet suggests that there were always far more potential than actual participants in the culture of fandom; many profans simply did not know that communities organized around fannish consumption

and production even existed, much less how to find those communities. Now that those communities are online, more and more people do join fandom, or set up fannish outposts of their own—and many of these fans have begun to watch vids and even to make them. Many—possibly most—of these new vidders and vidwatchers are unfamiliar with the history of vids; they may have no idea, for example, that fans were making vids on two VCRs decades before it was possible to make them on computers. Nevertheless, they have joined the active audience that characterizes media fandom generally and the vidding community in particular.

But if the Internet has enabled rapid and wide-ranging circulation of artefacts of the vidding culture, the interpretive assumptions, community norms, and personal relationships around which that culture has developed cannot be so easily distributed. Like the largely male-authored digital fan films Jenkins discusses in *Convergence Culture*, a vid constitutes a

“public dialogue” with its source narrative.<sup>14</sup> But, most vids are public in a specific and limited sense: they are intended for consumption by a particular subset of the fan community. While the (often male) creators of machinima and anime music videos have begun to garner attention as early practitioners of remix video, vidders—who belong to a considerably older tradition—have largely kept themselves off the cultural and academic radar, and most of them continue to post their work under pseudonyms.<sup>15</sup> The reluctance to go fully public can be attributed in part to legal concerns; because (as of this writing) the U.S. Digital Millennium Copyright Act prohibits the circumvention of copyright protection systems on commercial DVDs (most vidders’ preferred source of video in recent years), the status of vids as transformative and therefore fair use has yet to be tested in U.S. courts. But vidders’ collective aversion to publicity can also be ascribed to a community perception of fandom as outsider culture,

and of fannish reading practices as so specific to that culture that the artefacts of those practices, including vids, will make no sense in a mainstream context, and might therefore be dismissed, misunderstood, or ridiculed—a perception that has, indeed, some historical justification.<sup>16</sup> The occasional media “discovery” of vids, frequently vids re-uploaded to YouTube without the vidders’ consent and circulated well beyond the originally intended fannish audiences, has more often than not confirmed vidders’ concerns about audience misperceptions.<sup>17</sup>

These concerns about audience highlight just how important it is that a viewer be prepared to do the work of vidwatching: not all vids are equally complex, but they all require certain kinds of decoding. Much of the academic scholarship in fan studies has focused either on developing ethnographies of the fan community or on analyzing fan texts, such as fan fiction or even vids; very little scholarship has examined the work that fans do when

consuming texts by fellow fans—a curious oversight, given that such consumption is a major component of the fan community. Vidding itself, once one understands what it entails, is easily understood as a creative practice, a form of fannish activity that requires particular kinds of work, but the status of vidwatching is less immediately obvious.<sup>18</sup> And yet it is precisely the advanced interpretive practices of vidwatching that render vids opaque to so many viewers unfamiliar with the genre.

All spectatorship, of course, involves some degree of participation and interpretation: we track and respond to characters, anticipate and react to plot developments, and otherwise connect the dots that define a narrative's line. More generally, we apply our knowledge of genres, the aggregations and mutual influences of texts that share assumptions or traditions, to a particular text in order to help make sense of it; with visual narratives, as with books, our "prior knowledge of

conventions of reading shapes [our] experiences and evaluations" of the text.<sup>19</sup> Any text is to some extent a puzzle: the author supplies the pieces and the audience puts them together. But a vid constitutes a particular, and particularly pleasurable, kind of puzzle: in the case of a vid, the viewer must supply some of the pieces. If the viewer does not collaborate—if she cannot supply those pieces—the vid does not work the way it was designed to. It may still work; it may still be interesting, engaging, and effective. But it will be, in a very real sense, a different vid. A vid's meanings, then, are never located solely within the vid itself, but rather in the interaction between the vid, the source, and the viewer: meanings emerge and are negotiated by the vidwatcher in the gap (whether wide or narrow) between the original narrative and the vid's new narrative.

When watching a vid based on a source text she knows, a fan processes multiple streams of information at once: music, lyrics, visual images, the



juxtaposition of clips within the vid, the original contexts of at least some of the clips (which may allude to particular events or even whole storylines), the meanings assigned to those clips by the song's music and lyrics. Her response to the vid, like the vidder's interpretation of the original source, is likely to be forged in relation not only to the source but to some subset of the interpretations already circulating in her corner of fandom: the post-episode discussions, the critical conversations, the fan fiction, the other vids. A vidwatcher's knowledge of the source and her own reading of that source inform her understanding of the vid, and her experience of the vid may in turn affect her perception of the source. A vid thus encourages both the co-construction and re-construction of meaning; it models a particular critical viewpoint, inviting a viewer to solidify her position within, or perhaps to join for the first time, a particular audience for the source narrative.

Vidders' use of music is critical to this collaborative

construction of meaning: the song and its lyrics provide narrative and emotional information that the audience must decode. Claudia Gorbman has commented on "the enormous power music holds in shaping the film experience, manipulating emotions and point of view, and guiding perceptions of characters, moods, and narrative events," but argues that the audience is generally not supposed to be aware of music's presence in a film.<sup>20</sup> In the case of vids, the power of music is even more pronounced, because music is a vid's most obvious and essential discursive feature. Vidders and vidwatchers are entirely aware of the importance of music in vids; in a recent documentary series on vidding (a collaboration between MIT's Project New Media Literacies and the Organization for Transformative Works), a long series of fans identify "song choice" as the single most important decision a vidder makes.<sup>21</sup>

Music thus plays a key role in the creation and reception

of vids; it structures the new narrative and guides viewers' responses to what they see. If, as H. Porter Abbott observes, the burden of narration in film is "borne largely by the camera (the angles, duration, and sequencing of what it sees) and not uncommonly by music,"<sup>22</sup> then it is clear that, by adding music, vidders re-narrate source texts: the new music functions not merely as a soundtrack for the images but as an "interpretive lens" through which to view the re-cut and re-sequenced clips.<sup>23</sup> The song's lyrics are the exposition—often, though not always, chosen to "draw out aspects of the emotional lives of the characters or otherwise get inside their heads" —and the music provides the affect.<sup>24</sup> By stripping out the original sound and adding music of her choosing, the vidder takes over a key role in production, transforming the original source and creating something new.

The importance of collaborative interpretation also helps explain why vidders have more often chosen to work with television than with

film. As Bertha Chin observes, films "do not possess the same kind of 'longevity'" as narrative TV; "the character and plot development in a TV series, which can continue over years," make it "easier for fans to become emotionally attached to the show's characters and their relationships."<sup>25</sup> Because these characters and relationships are precisely the narrative elements that most interest vidders, and because of the intratextual complexity (and extratextual fan camaraderie) that a regular ongoing narrative enables, it's not surprising that vids based on TV dominate fannish vidding and vidwatching experiences. In addition, the movies most often vided tend to be series and franchises: *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, *The Lord of the Rings*, the *Harry Potter* series, Hollywood versions of superhero comics—movies that inspire extensive fannish activity in other realms, such as fan fiction.

But vidders do work with other kinds of films, ranging from *Duck Soup* to *A Scanner*

Darkly. Vids for standalone films are typically somewhat more limited in scope than vids based on television series and movie franchises; such films offer fewer opportunities to track the development of characters and relationships over time, examine subplots and secondary characters, or (as vidder Milly puts it) simply to “play with the narrative.”<sup>26</sup> Movie vids not embedded in a pre-existing fannish context are nevertheless made by fans, distributed in fan networks, and shown at fan conventions. These vids constitute, therefore, the rather peculiar phenomenon of fannish activity untethered to a specific existing fandom—vids that are likely to be made and watched for reasons other than an expression of fannish investment in particular characters, storylines, or themes. This phenomenon makes sense when we recall the increasing tendency to treat vidding as its own fandom, intersecting with but not wholly contained by fandoms for shared source narratives.

No single vid or even pair of

vids can fully represent the scope and variety of vidding as a whole, but Luminosity’s “Vogue” and sisabet’s “Ring Them Bells” illustrate a few of the narrative and critical possibilities developed by vidders responding to films that have not generated large organized fandoms. “Vogue” reframes 300 as a queer dance floor; “Ring Them Bells” meditates on the causes and consequences of violence in Kill Bill. Both vids are based on gleefully violent movies that feature severed limbs, decapitations, fountains of blood—representations of violence that tend to be aestheticized, stylized, shown in close-up or slow motion. Both movies might be described as literally cartoonish: 300 is faithfully adapted from Frank Miller’s graphic novel, while Kill Bill: Vol. 1 shifts from live action to animation for one of its most bloody sequences. In contrast to Annette Kuhn’s analysis of gendered spectatorship in relation to “women’s genres,” these vids represent instances of women watching bloody action

epics—films that are decidedly not supposed to be women’s genres—and reconfiguring those films for their own interpretive purposes.<sup>27</sup>

Luminosity has been quite explicit about her intentions in making “Vogue”; as she explained to Logan Hill of New York Magazine, “It was my chance to do a bait and switch, and turn the ‘male gaze’ back onto itself.”<sup>28</sup> Easier said than done, of course. Mary Ann Doane, after asking how such a reversal or appropriation might work, concludes that the effort is stymied by the fact that any male body available for the gaze is marked as an “aberration.”<sup>29</sup> Steve Neale observes of the epic—the genre to which 300 clearly aspires—that

we are offered the spectacle of male bodies, but bodies unmarked as objects of erotic display. There is no trace of an acknowledgement or recognition of those bodies as displayed solely for the gaze of the spectator

our look is “heavily mediated by the looks of the characters involved. And those looks are marked not by desire, but rather by fear, or hatred, or aggression.”<sup>30</sup> But Luminosity uses the lyrics of “Vogue” to force us to recognize the possibility of seeing the bodies onscreen as “objects of erotic display.”<sup>31</sup> The vid’s humour is grounded in the tension between this possibility and the movie’s refusal of it; that refusal is framed as both anxious and pointless.

“Vogue” may not be quite the “counter-cinema” that Claire Johnston called for, but it does “[disrupt] the fabric of the male bourgeois cinema” to great effect: with the recontextualization provided in the vid, these images yield quite different meanings than they did in the original context of the film. The vid opens with a brief split screen of Leonidas climbing toward the oracle’s tower, but shifts quickly to the writhing gauze-covered oracle herself: the female character subjected to the sexual predations of the male characters and the gaze of the (presumed) male or

male-identified spectator. But, in the context of what follows, the image sends a different signal in the vid than it does in the movie: it invokes the gaze only to refocus it on the male characters.

Luminosity's choice of song and establishment of point of view signal clearly that she will not be exploring the interiority of 300's main character. Most popular songs are first-person narratives; not surprisingly, then, most vids frame a particular character as the "I" singing the song and use that narration to construct an argument about what the characters feel, what they want, how they think. In "Vogue," by contrast, Leonidas is the "you," not the "I"—the object, not the subject, of the song—and the lyrics are thus framed as an extradiegetic perspective on the text rather than an exploration or elaboration of the character's interiority. With the first lyrics, the vid cuts from the oracle first to Leonidas and then to Xerxes, as the singer, in a pointed comment on their masculinist posturing, instructs them to

"strike a pose." In case we have somehow missed that we are supposed to find this commentary funny as well as insightful, Luminosity constructs a visual pun at the opening of the first verse: "Look around," the narrator commands, as a decapitated head twirls in the centre of the screen. Leonidas, longing to be "something better than [he is] today," turns away from Queen Gorgo; the Spartans' destination—the "place where you can get away"—turns out to be a dance club.

If Luminosity's choice of music contributes significantly to the enabling of a female gaze free to roam over bodies recontextualized as dancing, so too does her use of split screens and her manipulation of colour. The first chorus incorporates clips from one of the movie's stylized combat sequences, here stylized further: Luminosity desaturates the outer thirds of the screen, leaving only the centre in colour to focus our attention on the body of Leonidas. The second chorus takes a similar approach but tints the outer segments of the

screen with blue and red. Splitting and refocusing the screen in this way decontextualizes the body and emphasizes its motions—"let your body move to the music"—rather than its fighting power. In conjunction with the speed effects in the original source, the visual is also evocative of, if not quite identical to, the voguing immortalized in Paris is Burning.

It is worth noting that, despite the vid's obvious play with representations of queer sexuality—voguing was made famous by Madonna, but is practiced primarily in African American and Latino gay dance clubs—"Vogue" is not a slash vid of the type discussed by Jenkins in *Textual Poachers: Luminosity* is not, in this instance, constructing or implying a homosexual relationship between two specific characters (though she does so in many of her other vids). Her project here more closely resembles a queer reading of the movie as a whole. And although the vid is funny, it's important to recognize that

our laughter is not meant to be at the expense of men who are actually gay, or even at men who might be gay; what a fannish viewer laughs at is precisely the ease with which the homophobic homosocial, crystallized in Leonidas's contempt for Athenian "boy-lovers," can be read as homosexual despite its protests.

"Vogue" is grounded in the profoundly fannish impulse to "exceed and rework" media texts, to make them show what we want to see; in this case, what we want to see is actually not so much a herd of voguing Spartans (although this too is an entertaining prospect) as the creation of a female gaze, a female subjectivity that not merely rejects but destabilizes the original film—having seen the vid, we cannot see 300 in quite the same way—and does so with considerable flair.<sup>32</sup> Seen in this light, the vid can be understood not only as a comment on the movie but as a communication directly with the audience: "All you need is your own imagination," the song reminds us, "so use it—

that's what it's for." Like any vid, "Vogue" asks for the spectator's collaboration; the viewer as well as the vidder is encouraged to adopt the female gaze, to re-imagine the bodies before her as objects displayed for her pleasure, to claim the privilege of looking. But the vid can also be read in terms of non-fannish paradigms, including, as I have suggested, both literary/cultural critique and parody—the same category into which we might put the once ubiquitous "Brokeback Penguin"<sup>33</sup> and "Brokeback to the Future"<sup>34</sup> trailer mashups. While reading "Vogue" merely as a parody arguably oversimplifies the vid, and may flatten out its most feminist elements, such a reading does provide non-fannish viewers with a framework within which to understand the vid. I would argue that this interpretive multiplicity has played a key role in the vid's popularity outside fandom, most notably New York Magazine's inclusion of the vid in its "Twenty (Intentionally) Funniest Web Videos of

2007."

By contrast, sisabet's "Ring Them Bells," a vid every bit as insightful and nuanced as "Vogue," cannot be understood as parody. We might, indeed, read it as cultural critique, as a feminist reinvention of Kill Bill in which the female protagonist's emotional arc is not subordinated to the demands of a director bent on mashing up Japanese samurai movies with Chinese kung fu and spaghetti westerns. But I wish to suggest that it is instead a different kind of re-imagining of filmic material, a critical narrative whose mode of analysis is primarily affective.

Like Luminosity, sisabet has chosen a song that does not provide the vid's central character with an interior monologue. Beatrix is the point of identification in the vid, but the vid does not speak in her voice; instead, she is associated with several of the figures in the lyrics, including "ye heathen," "sweet Martha," "Saint Catherine," and (most clearly) "the bride"—an instance of literalism entirely different in tone from

Luminosity's "look around." Like "Vogue," then, "Ring Them Bells" is framed as an outsider's rather than an insider's perspective on the source, but here that perspective is serious and allusive rather than playful and ironic. Bob Dylan's oblique Biblical language gives the vid the feel of a parable, and indeed the vid works largely through metaphor and metonymy: Bill is figured as "the shepherd"; Gogo Yubari and the Deadly Viper Assassination Squad are "lost sheep"; the bodies of Beatrix's vanquished enemies are laid out like "the lilies that bloom"; and Beatrix's shock at her unexpected pregnancy is figured through her bare feet on the bathroom floor, a brief flash of a ticking watch, a lingering shot of the results of her pregnancy test, and the lyrics "the world's on its side." Instead of constructing an interior emotional life for Beatrix, "Ring Them Bells" reshapes her narrative. The vid's story is essentially that of the films: Beatrix discovers her pregnancy, survives the massacre at her wedding

rehearsal, wakes from her coma, fights her former colleagues, and kills Bill; ultimately, she also finds her daughter BB. But sisabet rebalances the film's elements, removing the bloody excess, emphasizing emotion over action, and foregrounding the themes of motherhood and redemption as well as death and rebirth. Motherhood, in particular, plays a proportionately larger role in the vid than in the movie. This shift is most evident in the relative prominence of BB, who appears in the vid more often than any of Beatrix's adversaries even though confrontations with those adversaries take up most of the film. By intercutting shots of BB with clips from Beatrix's fights with the Crazy 88s and with Bill, sisabet recalibrates the relative importance of maternal responsibility and personal revenge in Beatrix's final confrontation with Bill, and in fact throughout the vid. The emphasis on motherhood is seen, too, in the retention of Vernita's daughter Nicky as "the child who cries / when



innocence dies.”

The vid does not simply convert Beatrix from an assassin to a mother; her sword, her gun, and her hands are all present and powerful. But considering the nature of the source material, the vid is surprisingly devoid of bloodshed; we see several clips of Beatrix raising her sword, but very few clips of the fights themselves. Instead of rehashing the films’ many action sequences, sisabet organizes the vid around nearly-still images: Beatrix stands at Bill’s door with gun in hand or faces off with ORen in the distance as a pump coughs water in the foreground; a line of blood slashes across snow; a glance is reflected in the blade of a sword. What we see of Beatrix’s battles is not the exhilaration or the vengeance or the blood, but the determination and the exhaustion as she steps up to fight or staggers away afterwards: “it’s rush hour now / on the wheel and the plow.” While the movie might be described as interested in the origins and consequences

of violence, as seen in the slow parcelling out of back-story about Bill’s attack and the implementation of Beatrix’s revenge, the vid foregrounds those origins and consequences without getting sidetracked by Shaw Brothers homage: violence itself matters less than the reasons for fighting and the question of how one goes on afterwards.

It is perhaps not surprising, and then, that “Ring Them Bells” has not garnered the same attention outside fandom as vids featuring humour, violence, or what an article in the online version of the *Toronto Star* coyly refers to as “naughty pairings.”<sup>35</sup> Nor does it fall into the other recognizable YouTube remix video categories of film analysis or political criticism of film.<sup>36</sup> For a fan of vids and vidding, “Ring Them Bells” is a work of tremendous aesthetic and emotional power, but without an interest in fannish ways of seeing on the one hand, or remix video for its own sake on the other, it is hard to perceive the vid’s beauty or understand its appeal. This type of fannish

video may, in fact, never go mainstream.

Over time, vidding has developed its own topics of debate, its own communities devoted to discussions of process and craft, even its own conventions (including VividCon, at which both “Ring Them Bells” and “Vogue” premiered). Vidding and vidwatching are therefore not necessarily mere supplements to fannish investment in a particular text (although certainly this continues to be the way that many fans, including many vidders, experience them); these practices may also be a locus of fannish investment in their own right. The recent attention to and interest in remix videos as a form of “user-generated content” imply that in this area, as in so many others, fandom has indeed been, as Jenkins puts it, “the experimental prototype, the testing ground for the way media and culture industries are going to operate in the future,”<sup>37</sup> and Jenkins has further suggested that the popularity of YouTube shows that “there is a public

interested in seeing amateur made [video] almost without regard to its origins or genre.”<sup>38</sup> We might hope, then, that digital media and the internet will enable the spread not only of individual works but of a culture of critical engagement with visual narratives, including the critical and rhetorical practices that many vids model and promote—a culture in which increasing numbers of people are fans of collaborative interpretation for its own sake, in which viewers not only move from passive reception to active reading of visual texts but seek out meta-texts that demand still further engagement and prompt additional discussion. From this perspective, vidding is hardly a frontier for fandom, but it may be the future for everyone else.

### **Bibliography**

Abbott, H. Porter. “Story, Plot, and Narration.” *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*. Ed. David Herman. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007.  
“The Brokeback Effect: Buffy

- and Angel Slash Videos.” Whedon.info. 19 Feb. 2006. <<http://www.whedon.info/The-Brokeback-effect-Buffy-Angel.html>>. Accessed 31 Jan. 2010.
- Caldwell, John Thornton. *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008.
- Chin, Bertha. “Beyond Kung Fu and Violence.” *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*. Ed. Jonathan Gray, Cornell Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington. New York: New York UP, 2007.
- Coppa, Francesca. “A Fannish Taxonomy of Hotness.” *Cinema Journal* 48:4 (2009): 107-113. Project Muse. Web. Accessed 15 Sept. 2009.
- . “Remixing Television: Francesca Coppa on the Vidding Underground.” Interview with Jesse Walker. Reason.com. Aug./Sept. 2008. Web. 15 Sept. 2009.
- . “Women, Star Trek, and the early development of fannish vidding.” *Transformative Works and Cultures* 1 (2008): n.p. Web. Accessed 15 Sept. 2009.
- Eco, Umberto. *The Open Work*. Trans. Anna Cancogni. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1989.
- Electronic Frontier Foundation. “EFF Exemption Request: Video Remixing and Jailbreaking. Comment before the U.S. Copyright Office, Library of Congress, in the matter of exemption to prohibition on circumvention of copyright protection systems for access control technologies.” EFF.org. 2 Dec. 2008. Web. Accessed 15 Sept. 2009.
- Fiske, John. “The Cultural Economy of Fandom.” *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*. Ed. Lisa A. Lewis. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Gorbman, Claudia. “Film Music.” *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*. Ed. John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998.
- Gray, Jonathan, Cornell Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington, eds. *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*. New York: New York UP, 2007.
- Hall, Stuart. “Encoding/Decoding.”

- Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79*. Ed. Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe, and Paul Willis. London: Routledge, 1992.
- Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. Updated ed. New York: New York UP, 2008.
- . "The Future of Fandom." *Afterword. Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*. Ed. Jonathan Gray, Cornell Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington. New York: New York UP, 2007.
- . "How to Watch a FanVid." *Confessions of an AcaFan*. 18 Sep. 2006. Web. Accessed 15 Sept. 2009.
- . *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Johnston, Claire. "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema." *Feminism and Film*. Ed. E. Ann Kaplan. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000.
- Kuhn, Annette. "Women's Genres." *Feminism and Film*. Ed. E. Ann Kaplan. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000.
- Lessig, Lawrence. *Free Culture: The Nature and Future of Creativity*. New York: Penguin, 2004.
- Luminosity. "Luminosity upgrades fan video." Interview with Logan Hill. *New York Magazine*. 12 Nov. 2007. Web. Accessed 15 Sept. 2009.
- Merton, Robert. *Mass Persuasion*. New York: Free Press, 1946.
- Millylicious. Comment on "TV and Movie Vids." *LiveJournal.com*, tishaturk, 2 Dec. 2008. Web. Accessed 15 Sept. 2009.
- Neale, Steve. "Masculinity as Spectacle: Reflections on Men and Mainstream Cinema." *Feminism and Film*. Ed. E. Ann Kaplan. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000.
- Ohmann, Richard. "History and Literary History: The Case of Mass Culture." *Modernity and Mass Culture*. Ed. James Naremore and Patrick Brantlinger. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991.
- Rabinowitz, Peter J. *Before Reading: Narrative Conventions and the Politics of Interpretation*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1987.
- Radway, Janice. *Reading the*

Romance. Chapel Hill: U. North Carolina P, 1984.

Russo, Julie Levin. "NEW VOY 'cyborg sex' J/7 [NC-17] 1/1: New Methodologies, New Fantasies." *j-l-r.org*. Oct. 2002. Web. Accessed 15 Sept. 2009. <<http://j-l-r.org/asmic/fanfic/print/jlr-cyborgsex.pdf>>.

---. "User-Penetrated Content: Fan Video in the Age of Convergence." *Cinema Journal* 48:4 (2009): 125-130. Project Muse. Web. 15 Sept. 2009.

"Twenty (Intentionally) Funniest Web Videos of 2007." *New York Magazine* 11 Nov. 2007. Web. Accessed 15 Sept. 2009.

### Filmography

"Brokeback Penguin" (n.d.)  
 Colour, 2 mins.  
 YouTube, Web. Accessed 15 Sept. 2009  
 <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BEhRklZArnw>>

"Brokeback to the Future"  
 (n.d.)  
 Colour, 2 mins.  
 YouTube, n.d. Web. Accessed 15 Sept. 2009

<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8uwuLxrv8jY>>

*Duck Soup* (US, 1933)  
 Paramount Pictures  
 Producer: Herman J. Mankiewicz  
 Director: Leo McCarey  
 Black and White, 68 mins.

"Good Vids, Bad Vids"  
 Producer: Organization for Transformative Works  
 Colour, 3 mins.  
 MIT TechTV. 2008. Web. Accessed 15 Sept. 2009  
 <<http://techtv.mit.edu/tags/2522-otw/videos/1247-otw-fanvidding-series-good-vids-bad-vids>>

*Kill Bill Vol. 1* (US, 2003)  
 Miramax Films / A Band Apart / Super Cool ManChu  
 Producer: Lawrence Bender  
 Director: Quentin Tarantino  
 Colour / Black and White, 111 mins.

*Kill Bill Vol. 2* (US, 2004)  
 Miramax Films / A Band Apart / Super Cool ManChu  
 Producer: Lawrence Bender  
 Director: Quentin Tarantino  
 Colour / Black and White, 136 mins.

“The Making of Kill Bill: Vol. 2”

Miramax Television

Producer: Shannon McIntosh  
Colour, 26 mins.

*Paris is Burning* (US, 1991)

Miramax Films / Off White  
Productions / Prestige

Producer: Jennie Livingston,  
Barry Swimar

Director: Jennie Livingston  
Colour, 71 mins.

“Ring Them Bells” (US, 2005)

Creator: sisabet.

Colour, 3 mins.

YouTube. Web. Accessed 15  
Sept. 2009

<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZpnNAg9Ngj4>>

*A Scanner Darkly* (US, 2006)

Warner Independent Pictures  
/ Thousand Words

Producer: Tommy Pallotta,  
Jonah Smith, Erwin Stoff,  
Anne Walker-McBay, and  
Palmer West

Director: Richard Linklater  
Colour, 100 mins.

*300* (US, 2006)

Warner Brothers / Legendary  
Pictures

Producer: Jeffrey Silver, Mark  
Canton, Bernie Goldman, and  
Gianni Nunnari

Director: Zack Snyder  
Colour, 117 mins.

“Vogue” (US, 2007)

Creator: Luminosity  
Colour, 5 mins.

Viddler.com. Web. Accessed  
15 Sept. 2009

<http://www.viddler.com/explore/Luminosity/videos/4/>

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Robert Merton, *Mass Persuasion*; Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*; Stuart Hall, “Encoding/Decoding”; Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance*.

<sup>2</sup> Lawrence Lessig, *Free Culture: The Nature and Future of Creativity*, p. 37.

<sup>3</sup> Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, p. 140.

<sup>4</sup> John Thornton Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television*, p. 336.

<sup>5</sup> Francesca Coppa, “Women, Star Trek, and the early development of fannish vidding,” §1.1.

<sup>6</sup> For more detailed accounts of the practices and contexts of VCR vidders, see Coppa, “Women, *Star Trek*, and the early development of fannish vidding,” and Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, p. 223-

---

249.

<sup>7</sup> For example, LiveJournal.com (the social hub of a significant portion of media fandom, including much of the vidding community) lists 460 individuals who include “vids” as one of the interests in their user profile, and 471 who include “vidding.” For purposes of comparison, note that 470 individuals list “Harry Potter” as an interest and 458 list “Star Trek.” The LiveJournal communities vidding and fan\_vids, two multi-fandom (as opposed to series-specific) venues for announcing vids and discussing vid-related topics, have 1854 and 1167 members respectively. (All statistics as of 15 Sept. 2009.)

<sup>8</sup> Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, p. 249.

<sup>9</sup> Julie Levin Russo, “NEW VOY ‘cyborg sex’ J/7 [NC-17] 1/1: New Methodologies, New Fantasies.”

<sup>10</sup> Francesca Coppa, “A Fannish Taxonomy of Hotness,” p. 112.

<sup>11</sup> See John Fiske, “The Cultural Economy of Fandom,” p. 39.

<sup>12</sup> For a fuller discussion of fandom as folk culture, see Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, p. 268-273.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Ohmann, “History and Literary History: The Case of Mass Culture,” p. 32.

<sup>14</sup> Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, p. 147.

---

<sup>15</sup> This tendency towards pseudonymity, coupled with the increasing size and decentralization of fannish communities, makes it difficult to generate accurate demographic data on vidders and vidwatchers; it is to be hoped that sociologists and anthropologists within fandom studies will take up this problem in future research. In the meantime, it is possible to provide some anecdotal information. One large community, or loosely linked set of communities, is English-based, U.S. and U.K.-centric, and networked primarily through LiveJournal. However, there are many vidders and vidwatchers posting and commenting in other languages, notably Russian and German, both on LiveJournal and in other fan communities, such as forum boards (including general interest, series- or actor-specific, and vid-centric). YouTube-based vidders can be more difficult to pin down and, though they do form social networks, seem less likely than LiveJournal users to be hooked into organized communities. Vidding in general is perceived within fandom to be a female practice, though there are a few vidders who self-identify as male. The vast majority of fans attending VividCon, the annual U.S. fan-run convention

---

dedicated to vids and vidding, are female and white; in 2008, 176 of 181 attending and supporting members were women, and within the community this ratio has generally been treated as typical. Ages of practicing vidders range quite widely, from 50s to early teens, and vary in part depending on the source texts; it should surprise no one that fans vidding the recent *Twilight* movies, for example, appear to be considerably younger than fans still vidding *Starsky and Hutch*, *Professionals*, and other television series from the 1970s and early 1980s. It should also be noted that digital vidding requires specialized tools and equipment—editing software, processing power, hard drive space, bandwidth—that are cheaper than ever before but still entail considerably more financial outlay than, for example, the means to produce and share fan fiction; these technological constraints unquestionably affect class demographics to some degree.

<sup>16</sup> See Francesca Coppa, “Remixing Television: Francesca Coppa on the Vidding Underground.”

<sup>17</sup> For summaries and discussions of one such instance, see Henry Jenkins, “How to Watch a Fan-Vid,” and Julie Levin Russo,

---

“User-Penetrated Content: Fan Video in the Age of Convergence,” p. 126-7.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Jonathan Gray, Cornell Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington (eds.), *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, p. 3-4. In their introduction, the editors note that early studies of fandom tended to focus on fans who produced artifacts, such as fan fiction, fanzines, conventions, or letters, and therefore left out “fans who merely love a show, watch it religiously, talk about it, and yet engage in no other fan practices or activities.” Vids, though not mentioned by the authors, seem to fit neatly into their list of artifacts produced by fans; it is unclear, however, whether the authors would count watching vids (or for that matter reading fan fiction) as fan practices or activities.

<sup>19</sup> Peter J. Rabinowitz, *Before Reading: Narrative Conventions and the Politics of Interpretation*, p 3.

<sup>20</sup> Claudia Gorbman, “Film Music,” p. 43.

<sup>21</sup> “Good Vids, Bad Vids,” Organization for Transformative Works Fanvidding Series.

<sup>22</sup> Abbott, H. Porter, “Story, Plot, and Narration,” p. 49.

<sup>23</sup> Coppa, “Women, *Star Trek*, and the early development of fannish vidding,” §1.1.



---

<sup>24</sup> Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, p. 159-60.

<sup>25</sup> Bertha Chin, "Beyond Kung Fu and Violence," p. 215.

<sup>26</sup> Millylicious, comment on "TV and Movie Vids."

<sup>27</sup> Annette Kuhn, "Women's Genres," p. 437-449.

<sup>28</sup> Luminosity, "Luminosity upgrades fan video."

<sup>29</sup> Mary Anne Doane, "Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator," p. 422.

<sup>30</sup> Steve Neale, "Masculinity as Spectacle: Reflections on Men and Mainstream Cinema," p. 262.

<sup>31</sup> Claire Johnston, "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema," p. 29.

---

<sup>32</sup> Fiske, "The Cultural Economy of Fandom," p. 41.

<sup>33</sup> "Brokeback Penguin." *YouTube*, n.d.

<sup>34</sup> "Brokeback to the Future," *YouTube*, n.d.

<sup>35</sup> "The Brokeback Effect: Buffy and Angel Slash Videos." *Whedon.info*.

<sup>36</sup> For more information about genres of short-form remix video on YouTube, see Michael Wesch's statement in Electronic Frontier Foundation, "EFF Exemption Request."

<sup>37</sup> Henry Jenkins, "The Future of Fandom," p. 361.

<sup>38</sup> Jenkins, "How to Watch a Fan-Vid."