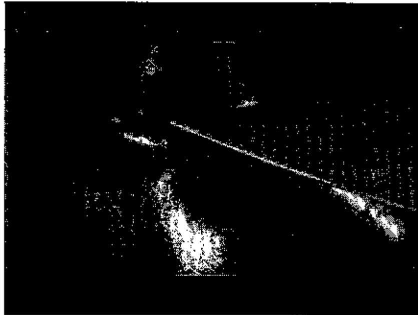

Sisabet and Luminosity foreground the torture of both female characters and the feminist spectator in their vid "Women's Work" (2007).



# An Editing Room of One's Own: Vidding as Women's Work

Francesca Coppa

**Introduction: What Is Vidding?**

Vidding is a grassroots art form in which fans reedit television or film into music videos called "vids" or "fanvids." A form of video production overwhelmingly dominated by women, vidding is also one of the oldest ongoing forms of remix. Vidders typically date their art to 1975, the year that Kandy Fong, inspired by the Beatles' video for "Strawberry Fields Forever," first created a slideshow setting *Star Trek* outtakes to music. During the 1980s and 1990s women made vids, often in collectives, with two VCRs using VHS footage. They shared the results at conventions or by sending cassettes through the mail. Vidders now edit digitally and share files online.

Unlike MTV-style music videos, in which a filmmaker creates images to illustrate a song, vidders use music to interpret a visual source; in other words, the song tells the spectator how to understand the montage the vidder has constructed. Vids are therefore a form of in-kind media criticism: a visual essay on a visual source. Typically, a vidder will have edited the footage to

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draw out a pattern or to emphasize a particular trope in the source footage, and the song will narrate and contextualize the reedited sequence, telling a new story or making an argument.

**On the Importance of Looking**

Vidding tells us several important stories about women and visual culture. One is about women and technology: women have historically taught each other to vid in local, geographically based collectives, sharing equipment, footage, and expertise.[1] More recently, they have mentored each other online, trading technical tips and answering questions for first-time vidders.

But perhaps more important is the way in which vidders have taught each other to see. Vidding is an art that happens through editing—a field historically open to women, as it was thought to be related to sewing. In the case of vidding, editing is not just about bringing images together; it is also about taking mass-media images apart.[2] A vidder learns to watch television and movies fetishistically, for parts; to look for patterns against the flow of narrative structure; to slice desired images out of a larger whole. A vidder making a vid of a particular television show might have seasons of episodes to sift through; a vidder making a multisourced vid has almost unlimited footage, and constructing a particular visual pattern can be like searching for a needle in a haystack. A vidder can tailor-make her media to be as she likes it, and can convey her preferred reading of a text by showing us exactly what and how she sees.

What a vidder cuts out can be just as important as what she chooses to include. Entire characters and subplots can be eliminated or marginalized, so that the vid asserts the vidder's own narrative values. Foreground can become background and vice versa. Action sequences might be excised in favor of character development or relationships; secondary characters might be moved into prominence. This customization of the visual text is particularly important for women and people of color, who often find their desires marginalized. In vidding, their priorities are central.

In "Women's Work" (2007), the vidders Sisabet and Luminosity cut out *Supernatural*'s male protagonists, the Winchester brothers, and focus instead on the show's marginalized female characters, most of whom exist to be victimized by the monster of the week. "Women's Work" argues that the job of these female characters is to be menaced and killed so that the brothers have evil to fight; it is also women's work to make a vid like this, which makes sexism and misogyny visible to those who might otherwise see these women as mere plot devices.[3] Similarly, a vid like Lierdumoa's "How Much Is That Geisha in the Window?" (2008) ignores *Firefly*'s main cast to draw attention to the show's Asian-influenced backdrop, which not only includes set design, costumes, and props but also a few highly stereotyped Asian extras. Not a single member of the large main cast is Asian, although the show's universe is purportedly half Chinese, and characters speak an English-Chinese patois.

A vid can also keep typical televisual protagonists front and center, but eroticize them for the pleasure of the spectator, thereby queering this male visual centrality. Mary Crawford's "Improper Dancing" (2007) uses footage from a wide array of television and film sources, focusing on their mostly male bodies and meticulously synchronizing their gestures to music. Through editing, these individual actors become collective dancers, their actions taken out of context and offered for aesthetic appreciation. The lyrics to "Improper Dancing" tell us that "Everybody's doin' / What they shouldn't be doin,'"[4] and while this certainly describes much of the constructed "dancing" we see in the vid, the true impropriety may be the vidder's own. Crawford gleefully stages "improper dancing" by forcing these mass-media characters to dance for and with us; her vid is conscious of both the subversion of vidding and the pleasures of appropriation.

**On the Importance of Not Being Seen**

There are certainly vids that feature, and even eroticize, women, often from a lesbian perspective, though many fewer than those featuring men as the object of the gaze.[5] Characters like *Battlestar Galactica*'s Kara (Starbuck) Thrace and *Farscape's* Aeryn Sun have

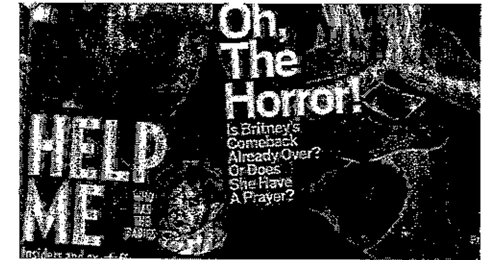
their devotees, and both *Xena: Warrior Princess* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* are popular vidding fandoms (and both are, not accidentally, about female warriors). But in general, fans tend to be critical of the eroticized female image.[6]

Instead, vidding lets women experience the pleasure and power of not being seen. Vidders relish the godlike control of the editing room, bending images to their will.[7] A concomitant pleasure is that of not having to be overtly figured in the text themselves. Female media fans typically refuse simple identifications; they will identify with the action hero's geeky scientist buddy, rather than his supermodel girlfriend, when these are the clichéd choices on offer. There is also a powerful disincentive to identify with women in mainstream media: one is likely to be ambushed by sexism ranging from narrative irrelevance to depictions of graphic sexual violence and murder.[8]

The powerful invisibility of the video editor—and the pleasurable invisibility of the vid spectator to whose sensibility footage has been tailored—comes as a welcome change from the pain of objectification and identification. The superiority of invisibility to visibility for women, even in a celebrity-obsessed culture such as ours, is the theme of Obsessive24's "Piece of Me" (2008), about Britney Spears. It may be surprising that vidders would be interested in a mainstream pop star like Spears, but there is a subsection of the fan community that treats celebrity narratives not only as fictional (i.e., as constructed performances designed to showcase and sell celebrity "characters") but as science fictional. Such "real-person" fandoms typically blur the line between the merely glamorous and the literally fantastic, with fans writing stories in which Lance Bass of N'Sync replaces himself with a robot, or American Idol's Adam Lambert fights zombies. Moreover, just as technically minded women identify with geeks over supermodels, many female fans identify with celebrities like Spears, N'Sync, and the Backstreet Boys precisely because they are visible and vulnerable. Presented as spectacle, pop stars are feminized by definition: open to criticism of their appearance, autonomy, and talent in ways that posit them as opposed to the masculine authority of the rock-and-roll band or singer-songwriter.[9]



"Piece of Me" uses one of Spears's own songs to analyze not only the tabloid version of the singer's story (divorce, custody battles, substance abuse, bad behavior, etc.) but also Spears's counternarrative of control. Spears's 2007 song was described by Alex Fletcher of *Digital Spy* as "a two fingered-salute to the media hounds" and a "cry of defiance,"[10] and the song skillfully works its metaphor, with the phrase "You want a piece of me?" functioning both as a belligerent provocation and a sexy come-on. But the song and its official music video both repress an additional connotation of the metaphor: that of breakdown and collapse. It is this repressed meaning—cracking up, falling to pieces—that Obsessive24 explores in her vid, which uses not only professional footage from throughout Spears's career but also low-grade entertainment television video, pixilated YouTube footage, and blurry tabloid photography. Taken together, the video undercuts Spears's provocative poses and bravado, reminding us that two months after this "cry of defiance" was released, Spears was taken away on a gurney and held for a seventy-two-hour involuntary psychiatric evaluation.

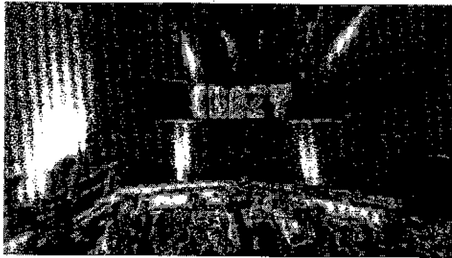



Obsessive24 uses tabloid covers to generate sympathy for Britney Spears in "Piece of Me" (2008).

While the official video to "Piece of Me" creates fake tabloid covers and paparazzi video, Obsessive24 uses the real thing to heartbreaking effect. It is difficult not to wince at the song's forced sassiness when juxtaposed with Spears shaving off all her hair and losing custody of her children—painful images that would never appear in an authorized music video. Obsessive24 lingers on actual headlines like "Brit Loses Kids," "Unfit," "Out of Control?" and jumps from the buzz-cut Spears to a montage of Spears dancing before the headline "CRAZY."[11] The vid's crescendo evokes vultures snatching at pieces: Spears's father, mother, manager, Dr. Phil, CNN, FOX News—even Chris Crocker, who became an Internet celebrity through his "Leave

Britney alone!" YouTube video. The final few images are of Spears with bloody wrists, sinking into a tub.

As a counternarrative to the official song and video, "Piece of Me" argues the futility of trying to control one's own commodification and suggests that Spears's objectification has caused, or at the very least triggered, serious mental illness—a celebrity version of the ancient proverb, "whom the gods would destroy, they first make mad." The vid also suggests that it is better to be the invisible video editor (she who cuts) than the visible filmic object (she who is cut into pieces), however beautiful, rich, or successful.



Britney Spears's music video "Crazy" is recontextualized in Obsessive24's "Piece of Me" (2008).

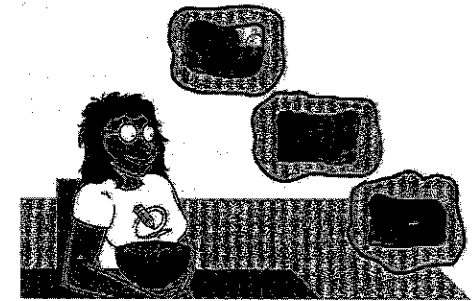
#### Conclusion: I Put You There

Some vidders have attempted self-representations or, more precisely, representations of the self as vidder. By this I mean representations beyond the typical fannish identifications with unusual on-screen protagonists like the alien or the geek scientist. Rather, I am talking about distinctly female images that embody a specifically visual subjectivity: the representation of the woman who looks.

The first and most important of these self-representations is "Pressure" (1990), a vid made by three vidders known collectively as Sterling Eidolan and the Odd Woman Out, in which they document themselves making a VCR vid: watching footage, selecting, and editing.[12] More recently, fans recognized themselves in the final image of Lim's "Us" (2007): a girl in glasses who, in unmasking herself, takes the first step toward a revolutionary visibility; the glasses, of course, emphasize her status as perceiver rather than object. Vidders also identify with the animated fangirl Laura Shapiro and Lithium Doll created for "I Put You There" (2006), a vid about



a vidder asserting her creative control over a TV star: "You're in this here song with me, 'cause I put you there." In a more recent vid, "Hard Sun" (2009), Shapiro and her collaborator Bradcpu integrated original footage of vidders and DVD footage from *Firefly* to show vidders from all over the world creatively musing over the same source. Lastly, my own documentary, *Vidding* (2008), features vidders speaking directly about their work. As remix arts like vidding move from the margins to the mainstream, it will be important for vidders to be visible both as artists and as women.



Laura Shapiro and Lithium Doll's emblematic fangirl celebrates her control of the image in "I Put You There" (2006).

#### Notes

1. Vidding collectives include groups like the Media Cannibals, the California Crew, and Apocalypse West; individual vidders typically work under pseudonyms.

2. See Francesca Coppa, "A Fannish Taxonomy of Hotness," *Cinema Journal* 48 (2009): 107–13.

3. Fans have argued that female creative work is literally a survival mechanism. See Katharina Freund, "'I'm Glad We Got Burned, Think of All the Things We Learned': Fandom, Conflict, and Context in Counteragent's 'Still Alive,'" *Transformative Works and Cultures* 4 (2010), dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2010.0187.

4. Electric Six, "Improper Dancing," *Fire* (2003).

5. See Julie Levin Russo, "Indiscrete Media: Television/Digital Convergence and Economies of Online Lesbian Fan Communities" (PhD. diss., Brown University, 2010). However, lesbian, bisexual, and queer women make up a large, possibly majority, percentage of vidders, which means they also predominantly make vids featuring men as the object of the gaze.

So, arguably, most vids are made "from a lesbian perspective." The VividCon vidding convention also sporadically programs vidshows dedicated to women characters and relationships, implying that these vids might not otherwise be featured.

6. Vidders also criticize fanworks that insufficiently challenge sexist culture. AbsoluteDestiny, a male anime vidder, made a gaffe with his first live-action vid, "Revenge" (2005), a "violent, upbeat homage" to exploitation cinema. VividCon's overwhelmingly female audience was upset by the vid's sexual violence. His subsequent vids have been better received.

7. Laura Shapiro comments, "Vidding=playing god. I am not kidding even a little bit," April 4, 2010, vidding.dreamwidth.org.

8. The prevalence of these experiences is indicated by fannish vocabulary: for example, someone with an "embarrassment squick" feels pain when characters are humiliated; a woman who exists to be killed has been "fridged"; "fridging" is a device for creating "manpain," excessive, self-centered male angst. See Fanlore, fanlore.org/wiki/Embarrassment_squick, fanlore.org/wiki/Women_In_Refrigerators, fanlore.org/wiki/Manpain (accessed 13 February 2011).

9. N'Sync ironically posed as marionettes on the cover of *No Strings Attached.*

10. Alex Fletcher, "Britney Spears: Piece of Me," *Digital Spy*, 7 January 2008, digitalspy.co.uk/music/a81637/britney-spears-piece-of-me.html.

11. Recontexualized footage from the official video to Spears's hit, "(You Drive Me) Crazy."

12. See Francesca Coppa, "Women, *Star Trek*, and the Early Development of Fannish Vidding," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 1 (2008), journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/44.

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# How to Suppress Women's Remix

Francesca Coppa and Rebecca Tushnet

*She didn't really make it. She made it but she shouldn't have. She made it but look what she made it about. She made it but she isn't really an artist, and it isn't really art. She made it but it's derivative. She made it but it's infringing. She made it but it violates the DMCA. She made it BUT . . .*[1]

YouTube was founded in the spring of 2005. That summer, vidders—the overwhelmingly female community of video editors who create fan music video out of television and film footage—gathered in Chicago to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of vidding with a dance party and two cakes: one shaped like a VHS cassette and one like a DVD.

It now seems incredible that vidders managed to create and share video for almost thirty years without streaming technology; in fact, in 2005, some vidders were still distributing their work on VHS. However, most vidders had by then switched to digital editing, and some were even cautiously offering their work for download on password-protected sites.

Vidders exercised caution because they thought they could be sued if they did not. Tashery Shannon, the founder of *Rainbow*

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*Noise*, a letterzine for vidders, wrote an essay in 1993 explaining her understanding of vidding's legality:

> Perhaps the greatest barrier to their spread among fans is that song videos cannot legally be sold. The music and footage, no matter how it has been edited, is [*sic*] still someone else's creative property. It does not belong to the song vid maker. Anyone considering selling song tapes should be aware that there is a danger of prosecution under the same laws governing pirating of music or movie tapes. Giving away your song tapes or trading them, however, is perfectly legal.[2]

Shannon's essay is, from a legal perspective, unduly certain both about the dangers of commercialization and the safety of the noncommercial; neither is absolute in copyright law. But it ends on a defensive note more about cultural value than about law: "Again, yes, song vids are a derivative art form. But since vids are mainly a fan-to-fan form of communication, who cares? Song vids represent a special, private communication between fans and friends." This was changed, for better and worse, by the Internet, which blurred the distinction between communication and publication.

Still, vidders tried to keep control of their work, mostly to make sure that it reached its intended audience and remained invisible to the wrong audience. Killa, a vidder, put up a simple Web page in 2003 inviting potential vidwatchers to request a password and insisting that her vids not be copied, archived, or distributed. Similarly, Morgan Dawn's 2003 page instructed potential spectators to e-mail her a promise "not to link to, archive, sample, or redistribute" her vids, noting, "Your vigilance in keeping fan creations under the radar of The Powers That Be helps keep fandom alive. Thank you."[3]

So rather than create centralized archives, as fans had for fan fiction, vidders discreetly offered their vids on individual password-protected sites.[4] They adopted pseudonyms, gathered on mailing lists rather than in public forums, and named their annual convention VividCon, camouflaging even the word *vid* from the casual observer.

However, in the first years of the twenty-first century, other (male-dominated) remix communities began using the Internet



to draw attention to their work. AnimeMusicVideos.org, a community for "the creation, discussion, and general enjoyment" of anime music videos (AMVs), was launched in 2000, and the Academy of Machinima Arts and Sciences was founded in 2002 to "make the current creative industries aware of Machinima" (movies created using video games) "as well as bring support & credibility to independent Machinima productions as a whole."[5] Conferences like MIT's "Media in Transition" and the Berkman Center's "Signal/Noise 2k5" began to study remix culture. Streaming sites proliferated: Vimeo (2004), Veoh (2005), Ning (2005), Imeem (2006), and Viddler (2006). By December 2006, "You"—presumably the user of YouTube and other DIY video sites—had been named *Time*'s person of the year.[6]

The rapid rise of online video caused a stir in the established vidding community, which was ambivalent about the new distribution methods and the concomitant visibility. Still, it was hard not to notice that other communities were putting their work out there and being celebrated for it. As the vidder Laura Shapiro pointed out after attending an organizational meeting for the "24/7 DIY Video" conference at the University of Southern California: "Everyone thinks we're crazy to be so afraid. They think the world is changing. They think we have little to fear. Okay, they may concede a bit of reality-based fear of the RIAA [Recording Industry Association of America], but in general, they are all out and proud, and they think what we are doing is cool, and they think we should be out and proud, too."[7] But many vidders feared taking the legal and cultural risks. As tzikeh noted in a comment to Henry Jenkins's 2006 post, "How to Watch a Fan-Vid":

> There is a sense among the long-standing community of vidders that this may be a watershed moment when, rather than receiving accolades for and understanding of the development of a nearly 30-year-old art form, vids will be so *misunderstood* due to the non-fans' complete unfamiliarity with the visual and aural vocabulary of vidding, the lack of context and history and metatext, that vids and vidders will fall into the "whatever" abyss: "Anyone can put video clips to music; what's so special?"[8]

In the end, vidders received both the accolades and the misunderstanding. Vids have been written about as a cultural phenomenon, and some individual vidders have been recognized by art-world gatekeepers. For instance, Lim's vids have been screened at the California Museum of Photography and the Library of Congress, and Luminosity was profiled by *New York Magazine* after her vid "Vogue" was chosen as one of the twenty funniest videos of 2007.[9] But even categorizing "Vogue" as "funny" indicates misunderstanding. While "Vogue" is certainly witty, to classify it as humor is to appreciate it on a relatively superficial level. As its subtitle, "Bite Me, Frank Miller," indicates, "Vogue" is also a vehicle for feminist anger. As Cathy Cupitt notes, Luminosity made "Vogue" because she was "not happy with the misogyny and sexualized violence" of Frank Miller's *300* and so wanted to "turn the 'male gaze' back onto itself."[10] *New York Magazine*'s editors thought that this "female gaze"—which objectified *300*'s half-naked male warriors—would be experienced as comedy by the mainstream viewer, presumably one not entirely comfortable with sexualizing oiled-up male bodies.

This is not an atypical response. "Closer," a *Star Trek* vid by T. Jonesy and Killa, is often taken as a joke by viewers who do not understand its grounding in serious representations of male-male desire.[11] Several of T. Jonesy's and Killa's vids went viral in 2006 after someone posted them to YouTube; they were subsequently linked from popular sites BoingBoing and Metafilter, earning tens of millions of views. Even today, multiple copies of these vids can be found on streaming sites, none put there by the vidders themselves. Not incidentally, other people often get the credit.

T. Jonesy's and Killa's response to the loss of control over their work—which they believed put them at legal risk—was to take down all copies over which they did have control. In 2007, Killa replaced her vid download page with a notice that vids were "no longer hosted at this location," explaining: "I've removed them for the sake of my own sanity, after several incidents in 2006 made me question whether continuing to host vids online was worth the anxiety levels it was causing me. I concluded it wasn't."[12] As a result, fans lost access to these works. Killa and T. Jonesy are known for



their exquisite timing, as well as for their use of color and internal motion. Of course, that talent was what made their vids spreadable in the first place. But while some remix artists gained success through visibility,[13] these vidders experienced visibility negatively: as exposure. Others overcame their fears and began to stream their work online. While some used YouTube, many preferred Imeem, mainly because Imeem initially had better video quality and audio-video synchronicity, but also because it was smaller and less well known. Imeem allowed vidders to form a network; it also kept track of the number of views and offered comment and discussion space. It is also worth noting that in 2007, when fans began to use streaming sites, there were no ads on the videos themselves: aesthetically minded vidders would never have stood for them.

The vidding community used Imeem for more than two years: just long enough for vidders to get complacent. The downfall of Imeem was slow, and due primarily to economic causes: first the company put banner ads over the vids, then it eliminated services like embedding, then it got rid of all videos, without even allowing users the option of preserving their own work.[14] Similar problems occurred with other commercial services, including Bam! Video Vault, which eliminated free service when Ning, the underlying service provider, decided it was economically unsustainable. In each case, whole communities have been disrupted (not to mention the citations/physical traces that academics—including the authors—were using to document these communities and their productions). The economic interests of video services diverge so sharply from those of noncommercial vidders that even out-of-the-way ones like Imeem are structurally inhospitable.

YouTube remains, but YouTube is increasingly structured so that no one will ever see remix that is not commercialized by the "content owner." Under the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA), YouTube users can receive takedown notices from copyright owners, and to preserve its freedom from copyright liability, YouTube must automatically remove videos when it receives notice. YouTube has been hit with hundreds of thousands of such notices, covering everything from the wholesale reproduction of movies to remix video caught in the net. Counternotification is possible but

rarely given because the creator faces a small but hard-to-ignore risk of escalation to a lawsuit. YouTube's Content ID system goes beyond the DMCA, screening video before it is posted based on submissions by major studios and labels. If a match is found of even a small portion of an existing work, the content owner can block the video (or, alternately, can choose to run ads next to it; revenue goes to the content owner, not to the uploader). Though an uploader can contest the results, Content ID is a purely private system. Unlike the DMCA counternotification process, which requires YouTube to restore the work unless the copyright owner takes the extreme step of suing, there is not even the chance of getting a true fair use determination.

This evolution has made YouTube even less hospitable to vidders. "Vogue" was taken down in 2008, destroying its record of viewership, at which point Luminosity invited others to take the vid viral, surrendering control to get her message out. In 2010, "Vogue" disappeared again, along with "Subterranean Homesick Blues," an X-Files vid made with tzikeh that explores the character of Agent Fox Mulder through Bob Dylan's paranoid lyrics. As YouTube becomes more congruent with the economic interests of large media companies and starts to define its success by a decline in the percentage of "user-generated content," the need for a truly noncommercial alternative becomes more apparent.[15]

As part of the nonprofit Organization for Transformative Works, the authors are working to preserve space for fair-use video. We are exploring possibilities such as a dark archive for vids that would support scholarly inquiry and preservation as well as a noncommercial remix-only bittorrent client.[16] We need to keep in mind that remix is threatened by both visibility and invisibility. Copyright policy makers are too likely to presume that there is no real need for remix and that copying means the same thing as pirating. In testimony before the Copyright Office, we sought, and recently received, an exemption from the DMCA's prohibition on the circumvention of technological controls—designed to prevent large-scale movie piracy, but threatening to prohibit even the smallest uses of video clips—for noncommercial remix creators such as vidders.



It is easy to suppress women's remix. It is being done right now. All the excuses and canards that Joanna Russ enumerated in "How to Suppress Women's Writing" apply to vidding, which is at risk of becoming yet another hidden female history. Even today, a woman creating appears to be on her own—each vid carefully screened so that it does not reach a broader audience because it is not what artists are supposed to make. In valuing vids, we value their creators and the systems that connect them.

## Notes

1. With apologies to Joanna Russ for adapting her work to vids, *How to Suppress Women's Writing* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983), 76.
2. Tashery Shannon, "Move Over, MTV: Here Come the Song Vids! Fan Music Videos," *Strange New Worlds*, June–July 1993, strangenewworlds.com/issues/feature-09f.html.
3. "Morgan Dawn Fan Fiction and Music Videos," 24 December 2003, web.archive.org/web/20031224130007/http://www.morgandawn.com/VidEntry.html.
4. There are some interesting exceptions; some Xena and Buffy vidders founded centralized public vid listings.
5. "Who We Are," Machinima Arts and Sciences, "Academy Info," machinima.org/who-we-are.html (accessed 13 February 2011).
6. Lev Grossman, "Time's Person of the Year: You," *Time Magazine*, 13 December 2006, time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1569514,00.html.
7. Laura Shapiro, comment to astolat's LiveJournal entry, "Vidding and Imeem.com," 2 December 2006.
8. Tzikeh, comment to Henry Jenkins, "How to Watch a Fan-Vid," 18 September 2006, henryjenkins.org/2006/09/how_to_watch_a_fanvid.html#comment-4767.
9. "The Twenty (Intentionally) Funniest Videos of 2007," *New York Magazine*, 19 November 2007, 62–63; Logan Hill, "The Vidder: Luminosity Upgrades Fan Video," *New York Magazine*, 12 November 2007, nymag.com/movies/features/videos/40622.

10. Cathy Cupitt, "Nothing but Net: When Cultures Collide," *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 1 (2008), journal .transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/55.

11. Henry Jenkins, "How to Watch a Fan-Vid," henryjenkins .org/2006/09/how_to_watch_a_fanvid.html, 18 September 2006.

12. Killa, personal Web page, seacouver.slashcity.net/vidland/vids .html.

13. The creators of Halo offered machinima artists Rooster Teeth a license-free use of their material and allowed them to sell it. "Red vs. Blue" may generate as much as $200,000 a year. See the Wikipedia entry "Red vs. Blue," en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Red_vs ._Blue#Development_history (accessed 22 April 2011).

14. Elisa Kreisinger, "Imeem Removes Fan Vids along with All UGV," 6 July 2009, politicalremixvideo.com/2009/07/06/imeem-removes-all-fan-vids-along-with-all-other-ugv.

15. "YouTube's Top 100 by Type," TubeMogul.com, 31 January 2010, tubemogul.com/research/report/31.

16. See the Organization for Transformative Works's vidding roadmap, transformativeworks.org/projects/vidding-roadmap (accessed 13 Feb 2010).

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# Scholarly Critiques and Critiques of Scholarship: The Uses of Remix Video

Kristina Busse and Alexis Lothian

In a 2008 "Manifesto for Critical Media," Eric Faden calls for media scholars to move beyond the written word into the realm of *critical media*, which he describes as "using moving images to engage and critique themselves; moving images illustrating theory; or even moving images revealing the labor of their own construction."[1] Faden's own popular remix, "A Fair(y) Use Tale," exemplifies this mode of scholarly media production.[2] But to academics studying and participating in media fan cultures—or to anyone who has read Francesca Coppa's essay in this dossier—Faden's description of reproducing sounds and images to craft critical arguments sounds familiar. It sounds like vidding: the creation of interpretive media works in the form of music videos in which members of mostly female fan communities have participated since the 1970s.

As Coppa and Rebecca Tushnet discuss in their piece in this dossier, online vids are vulnerable to erasure on account of their use of copyrighted material. Hosting sites like YouTube and Vimeo

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frequently remove user videos whose copyright status is dubious, leaving users little room to argue for the value of their works. In this context, the potential for vids to be understood as scholarly and critical—and therefore legal—works is a matter not just of semantics but also of survival. Scholars have repeatedly argued that vids are critical textual engagements and transformative works. Could these qualities give vids a home at emerging scholarly video repositories?

At the 2010 SCMS (Society for Cinema and Media Studies) conference in Los Angeles, this possibility came up in response to a talk by Faden, when a conversation between Steve Anderson and Louisa Stein ended with the University of Southern California–sponsored Web site Critical Commons—which hosts film clips supplemented by textual discussion for use in media studies classes—being proposed as an appropriate venue for vidders to make their works available.[3] From an academic perspective, this is an elegant solution, but the issues it raises within vidding culture are not so simple. In *Fan Cultures*, Matt Hills reminds us that while fans and academics may seem to engage in like activities, their driving forces, ultimate outcomes, and modes of engagement often differ.[4] Scholarly content may help us argue that fan works are valid and legal, yet academics may do a disservice to fannish spaces if we model all engagement and motivations on our own. If Critical Commons has the potential to rescue vids, framing them exclusively within an academic context elides possible distinctions and continuities between vidding and an as yet tenuous category of video-based scholarship. We can see this best by looking at examples of vids that move between contexts. Our own work has both encouraged and participated in the convergence of vidding and scholarship, and we draw on that to discuss a vid created by one of the authors as well as one we have both written about academically.

## Alexis: Scholarly Vidding?

*As a scholar of vidding, I am fascinated by the traffic of vids between academic and nonacademic spaces. As a vidder, I am also interested in creating video works that could speak to both communities. While fanvids often celebrate media products as they are, they can also make visible subjugated knowledges, deconstructing the ideological frameworks of film and TV by unmaking those frameworks technologically. In this latter form, vidding becomes not only an object but also a mode of critical study. A vid can expose the visual and ideological workings of a particular media text, succinctly examining larger cultural patterns and socio-political issues.*

*"The Future Stops Here" was my first attempt to use vidding in a way that would do the work of meta-analysis with regard not just to fandom but to larger critical concerns.*[5] *Using three science fiction film sources, the vid depicts a complex intersection between desire, violence, reproductivity, and futurity, played out in moments from* Children of Men, V for Vendetta, *and* 28 Days Later. *Functioning as what could be called a scholarly vid, it visualizes a historical and theoretical analysis of the ways in which race, gender, and sexuality impact the ways we imagine the future. Beyond the use of UNKLE's "Rabbit in Your Headlights" as a sound track evocative of paranoia and the three films' dystopian images of authoritarian power, the asynchronous multimedia structure of the vid draws attention to nonlinear temporalities of history and memory: the past flashes up in the present and the future is left behind. Making the vid was a process that drew from and fed into my PhD dissertation on deviant futures and queer temporalities, and it led me to contemplate vidding as a critical methodology that allows an argument to exceed a conventional textual structure. The juxtapositional logic of a vid, rather than the explanatory and linear flow of textual argument, expresses the way imaginary futures created at particular historical moments both consolidate and undermine power structures' embedding in temporal narratives.*

*The process of making this work led me to appreciate the extent to which vidders' modes of creative analysis could provide useful additions to cultural theorists' methodological tool kits. Unlike the structured linearity of academic argument, vidding uses the interplay of sound and images, as well as the extensive intertextual references each clip offers, to construct a visual and textual framework in which meaning is produced through evocations and juxtapositions, contrasts and gaps, rather than extensive explication. In its most complex forms, vidding requires an intense and creative investment from the viewer. This is perhaps most akin to the experience of engaging with some kinds of poetry, or with experimental film and fiction, where*

*a reader or viewer's interaction creates much of the meaning of a text. This interactivity is easily obscured by the music video format—which was, after all, originally created as visual fodder to emphasize the aural creativity of a song—as well as by the close coordination of visual and aural track that vidders' smooth, visually flowing editing tends to create. Vid interpretation is a complex and labor-intensive process, with highly dense and complex vids often textually explicable only in long and involved critical essays. Vidding fandom knows how to do this reading, and though some of the more esoteric of the ideas I wanted to express in my vid may not have been available to the fannish audience, the vid's project and intent was immediately legible. As a result, my vid has also moved through fannish networks, shown at the annual vidding convention VividCon and at the feminist science fiction convention WisCon. The perceived narrative may not always have been quite what I intended, but each reading fed into my project and deepened my understanding of the ideas and texts I was exploring.*

Vidders and academics often engage in similar analytic processes to comparable critical ends; vids offer condensed critiques of media texts that would take dozens of pages to unravel in academic analysis and whose impact would fall short of the emotional power of the vid. Moreover, the process of vidding is often analogous to the labor of producing scholarship in cultural theory. In both cases, finding one's archive and articulating connections between the creative and/or scholarly work of others is central. Scholarly vids could be connections between the world of academic digital humanities and the emerging digital critical and creative practices that thrive outside traditional institutional contexts. Yet we must not forget the ultimately different emotional and intellectual investments and rewards that separate the academic from the nonacademic fan.

### Kristina: Vidding against the Institution

*The cross-audience career of Lim's 2007 vid "Us" illustrates the central role of intended audiences and shared interpretive communities in vidding reception. "Us" may be the fan video that has been most shown and discussed in academic spaces, from classrooms to conferences to museums. Lim's work is, however, squarely situated within a set of fannish norms and communities and appeals to academics and other outsiders quite coincidentally.*



*"Us" encompasses a spectrum of the films and TV shows best loved by certain fan communities. The vid illustrates how media fans engage with texts—not only the intense love fans feel for shows and characters but also how fans appropriate images and narratives to make them their own. In quick succession, the vid references oft-cited moments in fannishly beloved cinematic and televisual texts from the past forty years. The vid heavily manipulates its images, often rendering them difficult to recognize. For many fannish viewers, the extent to which repetition in other fanworks made Lim's chosen images visible under their layers of manipulation ranked among the chief pleasures of "Us." Fanworks foreground certain aspects and deemphasize others, analyze and critique character representation, and continue, fill in, and expand the given story lines; "Us" celebrates this transformative encounter. The lyrics to the Regina Spektor song that gives the vid its sound track and title foreground the transformative aspects of fanworks: "slightly used" "parts" that are nevertheless "contagious." And while it celebrates fannish affect, the vid does not shy away from the ambiguous legal status of fanworks. Turning the Bat Signal into a copyright symbol, Lim points toward the way fans continually challenge current ideas of the ownership of ideas in a community that revolves around shared production, distribution, and dissemination—all the while relying on yet refusing a capitalist engagement.*

*Lim created "Us" for an exclusively fannish purpose and audience, but the vid has been showcased in many conferences and classrooms, even exhibited at the California Museum of Photography. "Us" not only thematizes aesthetics in the way it manipulates and overwrites images; it has itself become an exemplary fan object, a model for grassroots transformative intellectual engagement. Yet the vidder endeavors to protect and cherish the fannish space by being indifferent to or critical of academic engagement. When the lyrics describe how "tourists come and stare at us," the vid flashes past a shot of Henry Jenkins, a pioneer of fan studies. The vid asserts fannish pleasures and values while questioning outsiders' interests. The tourists who "stare" explicitly include academics—to subject "Us" to academic discourse is a fertile and fascinating task, but it also undermines the vid's own argument. The vid intellectually and affectively offers an intense vision of media fans without need for explication, and to engage it in a more distanced mode*

*moves the viewer from "us" to "they." The context in which we encounter "Us" makes that distinction very clear. At the museum, visitors are unlikely to have any conception of the "Us" to which Lim makes Spektor's lyrics refer. When vids are shown in a classroom or conference context, nonfannish audiences necessarily lose some of the context. Regardless of how embedded in fan communities the speaker who introduces the vid may be, those to whom it is shown are likely to approach it as a virtuoso display of editing, visual art, and interpretive capacity. They may see Lim's artistic capabilities but not the community that enabled her production—a community that, crucially, includes fans who feel excluded or alienated by the seeming claims to universality that "Us" makes.*

When the "tourists" who "come and stare" take away what they have learned to use it for their own ends, they are driven by a variety of motives. While media fandom prides itself on its nonprofit ethos and purposefully cherishes the free labor within fannish spaces, academic analysis is driven not only by love for study. And while fan praise and esteem functions as a currency of its own, academic analysis can provide social and monetary rewards beyond fannish boundaries. Debates over how much open-access scholarship and cultural production by academics should contribute to tenure reviews—the context within which media scholars debated the issue at SCMS—make this very clear. As scholars of fan production, we constantly seek to problematize the arbitrary binary between interpretive and creative work, between academic and artist—but that does not mean we want to erase it.

While Alexis's scholarly vid purposefully opens up a space where academic analysis and fannish engagement feed into one another, Lim's subcultural fanvid addresses the conflicts that spring up in this tenuous intersection. Lim complicates the narratives that spring up around the kind of crossover success "Us" achieves to insist on the place for fannish intellectual engagement outside an academic model. When Lim remains weary and critical of the tourists coming to stare, she is not denouncing academics' right to share fannish spaces or to employ vidding as a tool, but rather is recalling the relative privilege held by amateur and professional cultural analysts, viewers, and media makers. It is vital



for us as academics, fans, and vidding scholars—whether creating or analyzing vids—to pay constant attention to these subtle distinctions.

**Notes**

1. Eric Faden, "A Manifesto for Critical Media," *Mediascape*, spring 2008, www.tft.ucla.edu/mediascape/Spring08_ManifestoForCriticalMedia.html.

2. Eric Faden, "A Fair(y) Use Tale," cyberlaw.stanford.edu/documentary-film-program/film/a-fair-y-use-tale (accessed 15 July 2010).

3. Ironmanx28 (Steve Anderson), "Re: Fair Use in Media Studies See Critical Commons www.criticalcommons.org—Fair Use Advocacy Meets Media Sharing Database! #scms," Twitter, 18 March 2010, twitter.com/ironmanx28/status/10682011473; ironmanx28 (Steve Anderson), Twitter, 18 March 2010, twitter.com/ironmanx28/status/10683396559; l_e_s (Louisa Stein), "Faden: Criticalcommons.org Clips Private until You Add Commentary, and Then They Become Public. (Implications for Vidding?) #scms," Twitter, 18 March 2010, twitter.com/l_e_s/status/10683837519.

4. Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

5. Alexis Lothian, "The Future Stops Here," queergeektheory.org/future/stopshere.html (accessed 15 July 2010).

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Fan studies pioneer Henry Jenkins as academic "tourist" in Lim's "Us" (2007).

# Call for Submissions: In Practice: Feminism/Culture/Media

*Camera Obscura* is happy to announce the renewal and reconception of a section devoted to the types of questions and formats, productions and receptions that the journal once featured under the title "Women Working." This section will also continue the work of remarking on the ever-fluid shape of "feminism, culture, and media" that more recently appeared in our "Archive for the Future" section.

When the "Women Working" section originally appeared in the 1970s, contributions included book and film/video reviews, conference and festival reports, interviews and personal reflections, and accounts of large-scale works-in-progress by female producers. In "In Practice: Feminism/Culture/Media," we would like to include similar work and more—that is, work that may even broaden the scope of those previous textual forms and cultural events. We invite the submission of short essays (750–2,500 words maximum) on current media practices, practitioners, projects, resources, events, or issues—particularly those that highlight new work, fresh perspectives, and emerging material in a contemporary feminist media studies context.

As "In Practice: Feminism/Culture/Media" will enable the continuation of short-format pieces like the assessments and appreciations included in our "Archive for the Future" and "Fabulous! Divas" special issues, we encourage authors to invoke a tone that veers between playful and rigorous, speculative and conclusive in