

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 creat-

ing 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 non-profit 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/1068396559; l_e_s (Louisa Stein), “Faden: [Criticalcommons.org](http://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).