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IMAGES MANIPULATED BY FANS: A CASE STUDY ON FANARTS

Abstract

Fandom is a term which refers to communities where people share the same interest in a cultural object and invest their emotions and their time in it. Within this scenario, fanarts contribute to feed fans passion, giving them a way to express their creativity. This contribution concerns the case of fiction picspam, a specific type of fanart that is particularly useful for creating new stories using screencaps from original audiovisual and visual products. The discussion will be accompanied by a more general analysis that illustrates what kind of picture a fanart is, by listing and briefly examining its different typologies. Finally, the powerful synthetic character of picspam will be highlighted, along with its efficiency in building alternative fictional universes.

Keywords
Fandom; fanarts; photomanip; fiction picspam; TV-series.

I. FANART AND THE CASE OF PHOTOMANIPS

In the last twenty years, Media studies started to focus their attentions on fandom, which have been differently defined as communities of fans highly involved in following and appreciating popular cultural objects; as “registers of subordinate system of cultural state”\(^1\); or as people having a distinct “sensibility”\(^2\). Besides connecting themselves to share their interest with others, fans find pleasure into manipulating media and creating something totally different from the original product, using only their fantasy. The result of these manipulations is commonly called ‘fanwork’, a term declined differently depending on their media nature (fanart, fanfiction, fanvideo etc.\(^3\)). Fanworks are piece of arts usually inspired by a TV-series, a movie, a book, or other media which copyrights is owned by the artist. Academics have been studying the aesthetic value of fanworks as productions coming from popular culture, identifying a new way for people to engage with media narrative products\(^4\).

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\(^4\) M.C. Manifold, “Fanart as Craft and the Creation of Culture”, International Journal of Education
Fanarts are a particular cultural expression owned by fans, who invest their free time and their skills to show affection and create bonds with other people with the same interest, just for the pleasure of sharing. In addition, fanarts maintain fan communities alive even when their cult object is not on screen anymore for several reasons. By discussing how images can be manipulated in order to tell something different from the original author’s intention, I will examine fanarts, which usually includes all kinds of fanworks composed by images, drawings or comics. This contribution will examine only photomansips, fanarts realized by editing existing photos. If we analyse etymologically the word ‘fan’, we discover that it comes from the Latin term ‘fanaticus’, which is a word identifying someone “belonging to the temple, a temple servant, a devotee”. Maybe, it’s not a complete coincidence: as religious people believe in their gods and look at sacred images to feel closer to them (obviously for those religions that approve cult images), fans feel the same looking at the visual representations of their idols. As Pete Ward writes, “The sacred doesn’t reside in sports star, it is located in the fan”. This comparison should explain why, into fandom scenarios, images are so important and why for fans there are never enough.

Once there were only posters or official images that fans could just buy; now, with the advent of the Internet, a simply research on Google Images can give fans everything they want for free. Social networks have also increased fans’ capacity to connect people with common interests. For this reason, sharing and collecting images has become easier for fans, who every day can scroll again and again their Tumblr or Deviant-Art dashboard looking for images taken from the last TV-series episode they have watched.

With the diffusion of PC photo-editing software, fans also started to create massive amount of images with snapshots taken from their favourite TV-shows, anime and films, in order to share them with other fans. This is a no-profit activity, the only repayment that fans get for their work is attention or admiration coming from other fans like them. Using Photoshop (or Gimp or any other photo-editing software) and choosing the images they prefer, fans are able to realize almost every kind of story or fictional event, even crossovers of their favorite fandom (see Fig. 5, for example). Photomansips are usually composed by subtexts, quotes and references that are understandable only by other fans who know the original story that such visual products refer to: only they can in fact be emotionally moved by it, while for other people they are just simple meaningless pictures.

2. NARRATIVE IMAGES AND DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CANON AND FANON

Despite the fact that fanarts are less narrative than fanfictions because of their visual non-narrative content, fans consume both fictional formats: fanarts can be as full of

5 See Jenkins, Textual poachers.
6 Ibid., 12.
meaning as fanfictions, and are immediate, especially if fan know the subtext of the fanart they are looking at. Besides, many fanarts combine the use of images and words to explain a concept or even to arrange a whole story using only visual contents.

The graphic set made by Figure 1 and 2 is composed of edited frames taken from the last episode of the BBC’s TV-show Merlin (2008-2012). Merlin is a TV-series freely inspired by Arthurian legends. It tells the story of Merlin, a young magician who happens to be future King Arthur’s servant. Merlin has to keep his magical power secret from everyone, including Arthur, because in Camelot magic has been forbidden by Arthur’s father, King Uther. Merlin and Arthur are young contemporaries and this is maybe one of the reasons why a large fan base has developed and is still living even if the broadcasting of the show has ended years ago. For this contribution I have chosen two fanarts that represent the perfect meaning of the conclusion of the show (so we can talk about canon). King Arthur is dead, and Merlin, his faithful servant, cannot accept his death and he is condemned to struggle in pain for eternity.

The fan artist also used a quote from Evanescence’s song My Immortal to underline how much Merlin feels desperate and alone, so we could say that this is a multimedial fanart because it combines both lines of a song and images re-elaborated from the show.

Figures 1-2 - Fanarts based on TV-show Merlin, by Ilarina
(source: Ilarina, “and I held your hand through all of these years”.
and-i-held-your-hand-through-all-of-these-years)

When a fanart shows or synthetizes events that really happened in the original story they are defined canon. This is the case of Figures 1 and 2, which simply represent one moment of the last episode of Merlin. Instead, a fanart that represents something that has not been clearly told in the original story or that is never going to happen is called fanon.

This is the case of the NBC TV-show Hannibal. Based on characters appearing in Thomas Harris’ novel The Red Dragon, Hannibal tells the story of the relationship going on between the psychiatric and serial killer Hannibal Lecter and the criminal profiler Will Graham, who has a fragile mind and is able to empathize with psychopathic murderers.

Bryan Fuller, the show-runner, has never confirmed inside or outside the show the attraction that Hannibal feels for Graham, but since Mads Mikkelsen (Hannibal) has said:

Will Graham is the dearest thing I have. [...] Will Graham is the thing in life that Hannibal loves the most, and didn’t go down the path I wanted him to go down.

Fans, who already loved to imagine how a romantic relationship could be developed between Hannibal and Graham, used this quote to support their speculation and create a lot of fanarts using Mads Mikkelsen’s words (like the two in Figg. 3-4).

Figures 3-4 - Fanarts based on TV-show Hannibal, by Ilarina

These images are TV-series snapshots and fanartists arranged them in order to symbolize how much the two characters are bounded to each other. In this case it was also a right interpretation of their relationship, as we can see in the third and last season, aired in 2015.

3. PICSspam IMAGES AS NEW FAN’S NARRATIONS

Another common way of manipulating images is the one called picsspam, i.e. the practice of editing and creating “galleries of screencaps which isolate particular frames of a

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10 When I was writing the first draft of this contribution (June 2015), the last season of Hannibal was on going and episode after episode, fans discussed about Hannibal and Will becoming canon or no, because it became clear that there was something between them (“Is Hannibal in love with me?” asks Will Graham in 3x12). In the end, we could say that they became canon – not really a safe love story, obviously – but it would be called canon. I chose to maintain my definition of fanon for this fanart, because fan created it before third season and everything was based only on speculations.


The most peculiar feature of what fans call ‘fiction picspam’ – or what makes it a very special fandom object – is its capacity to produce highly meaningful stories, similar to fanfictions, simply juxtaposing few single snapshots (Fig. 5).

The fandom the author chooses to use is the ABC’s TV-series *Once Upon a Time*. This series takes place in the imaginary city of Storybrooke, where characters from various fairy tales live without memories of their real hometown, The Enchanted Forest, the parallel world where they come from.

The fanartist uses one of the favourite fandom’s pairing, the one with Belle (Emilie De Ravin) and Rumpelstiltskin (Robert Carlyle), and develops a plot about them:

One morning, the chipped cup turns into a real boy. After their initial shock and mandatory freak out, Rumple and Belle take him home.

The chipped cup is a reference to the Disney movie *Beauty and the Beast* (a little cup named Chip), but the little boy we see in the last three images does not belong to any one of the *Once Upon a Time* episodes. These images in fact belong to another TV-series, *Lost*, where the kid played the role of the son of Emily Raven’s character, Claire. This is an inside joke that is understandable only from who knows the two TV-series. It is not important to understand the meaning of the entire fanart, and it might seem just an anecdote, but from these things, we can notice how powerful and fruitful the use of photo-editing software can be. By accosting or editing images, fans create narrative universes that they can handle in every way they want, just using their fantasy. A photo that has one meaning in its original narrative setting, acquires another meaning thanks to a fan who decides that that meaning is not univocal.

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**Figure 5 - Fanart based on TV-show Once Upon a Time, by Annievh**

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The short story attached to the post is useful to explain images, but they are also understandable even without it. A fan could in fact look at the *picspam* and imagine an Alternative Universe in which Belle and Rumpelstiltskin have a son. In both cases, it is required to the fan the knowledge of the fanwork subtext. Extrapolated from their original context (an *Once Upon a Time* episode), these images are used to show another scenery where characters could act according to fans’ imagination.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Creating and sharing fanarts can have several meanings for fans: they use pictures to show their affection for a cultural object or to highlight their favourite part of a story (canon-inspired fanart). Sometimes fanarts are useful to give fans things they will never expect to see in the original story, like a particular plot development, a missing moment or a romantic relationship between characters (most of them are fanon creations). A particular type of fanart is called ‘fiction picspam’, a fanwork that allows fans to create new stories resembling already existing snapshots. Fiction picspams show how fans’ creativity can change the meaning of pictures that appear to be univocal; also, they empower them to show scenarios which are different from the original authors’ idea.