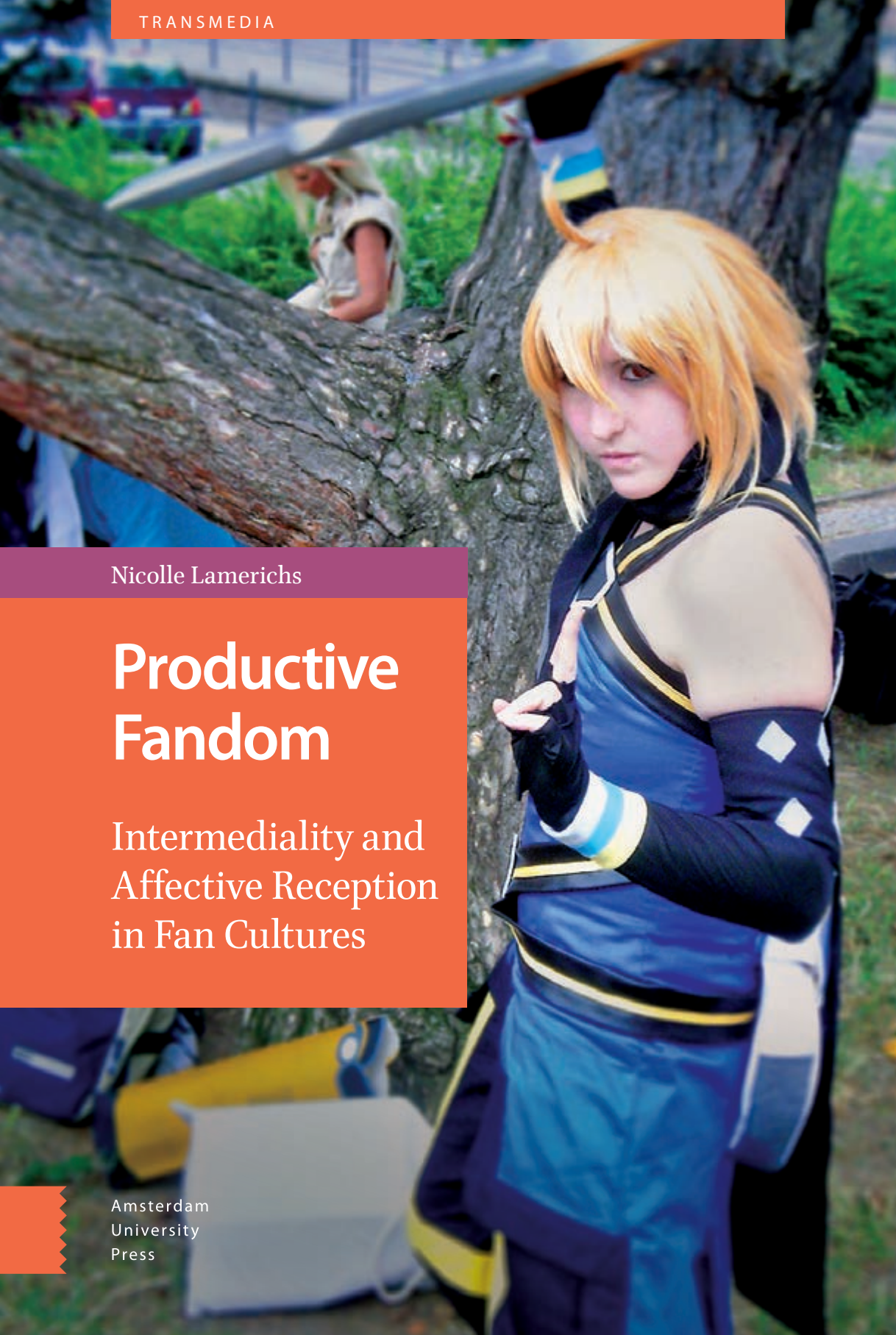


Nicolle Lamerichs

Productive Fandom

Intermediality and
Affective Reception
in Fan Cultures

Amsterdam
University
Press



Productive Fandom

Transmedia: Participatory Culture and Media Convergence

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1. Shared Narratives: Intermediality in Fandom

Abstract

Fandom is a rich and vibrant culture of rewriting – a formation of media spaces and audiences that come together online and off-line. In this introduction chapter, I provide a short overview of fandom and diverse fan activities. These practices have been studied in the interdisciplinary field of fan studies, also known as fandom studies. I provide a short overview of the field, its history, and state-of-the-art studies. Finally, I propose a theoretical model that can be used to study fan practices, with attention to their media relationships (their inter/transmediality), affect, characters, and worlds within the productive space of fan practices. This model is not limited to understanding fan activities, but highlights properties that are increasingly important in the analysis of any media text.

Keywords: Fandom, intermediality, transmediality, affect

Introduction

Whenever I wonder what being or becoming a fan means, I think about the first time that I attended a convention for Japanese popular culture. I had been a fan for years and subscribed to online forums to discuss manga (Japanese comics) and anime (Japanese cartoons). Still, I only had a handful of off-line friends who understood how much this fiction actually meant to me. When I was eighteen, I travelled across the country to a weekend-long event where fans met up to enjoy Japanese popular culture. This convention, Animecon (2005), was held in a hotel, and nearly one thousand people supposedly attended as visitors and volunteers.

My best friend had sewn me an outfit as Aerith, a fictional character from a game that I liked (*Final Fantasy VII*) and had told me that many other attendees would also be dressed up. I knew that many fans engaged

in different creative hobbies, such as sewing or writing, and I showcased my own drawings of *Final Fantasy* characters on different Internet sites as well. Japanese popular culture inspired young fans like me to engage in arts and crafts. I heard that these practices were motivated at the convention through costume competitions, workshops, and much more. Still, wearing a costume of one of my favorite characters seemed somehow odd; then again, the whole convention seemed odd. My friend described it as a type of Disneyland where fiction would be all around you. We had made a little group of *Final Fantasy* characters with whom we would compete in the costume competition and had practiced weeks before. I had prepared for the convention for a long time, but, really, I had no idea what to expect.

Upon arrival, I was dazzled by the busy, colorful atmosphere. In the lobby of the hotel, many people sat in costume and seemed to know one another. Characters that I had only seen on-screen passed me: Mrs. Hellsing, Lulu, Rinoa. It was uncanny. Everywhere, fans discussed animation and games excitedly, admired characters, and quoted their favorite lines. Many fans were so excited that I did not really know how to converse with them. This was my community, and many of the fans were undoubtedly on the same Dutch online forums that I frequented, but I did not really feel at home. The convention fell outside all of the social categories that I had ever seen. Many people wore geek shirts, there were men dressed up as women, and people playing card games at tables in the lobby. It seemed as if everyone communicated through fiction, but did not really communicate with one another.

Somehow, the convention was very different from online fan forums, where I could simply comment on anything and discuss with everyone. Back then, I was already subscribed to several fan communities. Since the late 1990s, I had been active on MangaDVD, a Dutch forum for Japanese popular culture. The Internet had been in its early stages when I had subscribed, but, by the time of this convention, many users had affordable and unlimited access to this technology. Through my online activities, I made many new friends, some of whom I had already met, whom I hoped to meet at this convention. The Internet enlarged my world, as I know it did for many other people at that time. Distant places suddenly seemed nearby.

I had long defined myself as a fan and felt comfortable in online fan spaces. At Animecon, I started to doubt myself. Who were these eccentric people and what did we actually have in common? A friend saw that I was uncomfortable and took me to the video game room to show me the titles that we could

play. We battled in *Soul Calibur 2* and talked about the characters. I was more at ease and started to get accustomed to the atmosphere. Yes, as fans, we did share some things that united us: not personal knowledge about one another but a different type of capital, related to the subculture in which we engaged. We shared knowledge, social contacts, creativity, and, above all, a passion for particular stories and visual designs.

When I donned my costume the next day, I gained a sense of belonging. The outfit made me fit in visually and became a greeting card. Conversations became easier because fellow fans found topics to converse with me about: my character, *Final Fantasy*, video games. Some visitors recognized me from the forum because they knew that I was going to be wearing an Aerith outfit. They called me by my nickname, "Setsuna". By the end of the weekend, I had made many new friends while watching anime, playing games, and attending workshops. From that point on, fan conventions seemed exotic and diverse to me, as well as attractive. Increasingly, they became a social context that I could fall back on: a place called home.

Fan conventions are only one manifestation of a fan community and its organizational structures. Fans come in all shapes and sizes, ranging from gamers to sport fans, from *Harry Potter* readers to collectors of *Beatles* records. It is often tricky to pinpoint what all of these groups have in common. Although we have our assumptions about what makes a real fan, we can only examine our own fan loyalties or recognize them as a social stance of others. As a cultural trope, fandom is not always recognized as a creative pursuit, but it is instead equated with obsession and excess (Bailey, 2005). The media serve us images of men as "Trekkies", addicted gamers or hooligans, while women are seen as groupies, sobbing over pop music or indulging in celebrity gossip. Fans are prone to be stigmatized, even by those who are part of the communities. Through their behavior, fans seemingly transgress social norms and are easily labeled as deviants as opposed to other types of audiences, such as those of the high arts.

I am particularly concerned with media fans who invest in popular culture and are inspired by television series, movies, or digital games. These fans engage in a wide range of creative and social activities to pay tribute to the stories that they love. Some collect signatures, merchandise, or blog images of their favorite shows; others attend concerts to be as close to their favorite bands as possible; and yet others share passionate reviews online.

My interest, however, lies in specific modes of fan productivity that are creative, and engage in storytelling and play. Creatively, fans publish written stories ("fan fiction"), sew costumes of their favorite characters'

outfits (“cosplay”), design different types of games, and make visual art and videos, among other outlets. Thus, fans produce different types of narratives and objects and express themselves through play and performances. Through these homages, fans mediate existing symbols, plotlines, characters, and settings. These fan creations are heavily inspired by the existing text or “source text”, but they also create new textual relationships.

Although contemporary media fandom flourishes in off-line sites such as fan conventions, the Internet has increased the visibility of fan practices and the number of people who actively engage in them. On distinct media platforms – here defined as unique software environments with specific social and technological affordances – fans show their creative products and discuss or refer to popular culture. Such fan activities may occur on blogs and forums, but they can also be staged in digital games or elsewhere. These organized fan activities are captured under the term “fandom”. This concept refers to the sum total of the fan communities and individuals who are connected by their love for a particular text. Moreover, fandom refers to the interpretive and creative practices in which invested audience members engage. Fans and scholars alike use the term fandom to depict the activity of fans as a genre phenomenon (anime fandom) or as related to a particular text (*Harry Potter*). Online fan communities often celebrate particular content, ranging from texts to characters (Booth, 2010).

Productive Fandom offers a detailed study of fan cultures as they are lived – social, creative, and affective spaces of productive reception. By drawing from insider experiences, this study provides a rich tour of the worlds of fans, but it stresses that these domains have much to offer to the study of narratives and media audiences. While my ethnographic methods are detailed in the next chapter, I shall briefly note that I understand ethnography as the study of lived cultures in their natural settings or fields through the use of qualitative methods. I support these findings with methods of narrative inquiry to generate further insights into the themes and structures of fan works.

Theoretically, I am interested in charting how fan practices migrate across different media and production contexts. I signify these processes of transfer through the concept of “intermediality”. These migratory structures are not only apparent in fandom, but they have also increasingly characterized the production culture of the media industry itself. In this chapter, I describe the creative activities of fans and how they have been researched in previous studies. Subsequently, I discuss my own theoretical framework and provide an overview of the book.