

# Critical Vidders

## Fandom, Critical Theory and Media

*Sebastian F. K. Svegaard*

*is M.A. in musicology. His research focuses on fan studies, gender and masculinities, and music use in visual media. Most recently he has presented on the portrayal of the superhero Iron Man's masculinity in fan videos, and on the retro-futurism and nostalgia in the soundtrack to Guardians of the Galaxy.*

### Abstract

This article will introduce and take a look at a specific subset of the fan created remix videos known as vids, namely those that deal with feminist based critique of media. Through examples, it will show how fans construct and present their critique, and finally broach the topic of the critical vid as a possible spreadable call for better media products.

**Keywords** #fandom; #vids; #fan studies; #feminism

### Introduction

The fanworks known as vids are short remix videos made by fans. They distinguish themselves from other types of commercial and non-commercial music and remix videos by being made, like all fanworks, as a leisure activity, not for any financial gain, but rather as part of the sharing and gift economy of fandom (Chin, 2014). Stylistically, they are distinct; though as with all genres, the lines are blurry at best. However, surest criteria remains the fannish intent of the creator, if any such can be ascertained. Vids are characterised by an editing style that follows the music track in several possible

ways; editing to match the beat / rhythm or instrumental embellishments, as well as editing to speak with and against the lyrics. Like other fanworks, vids have a longer history than many would presume, reaching back to slide shows and VHS-editing (Coppa, 2008). Vids come in many forms or sub-genres, from celebrating a canon / source or character, over creative story telling, to meta critique, and it is this sub-genre, which I refer to as 'critical vids', I will focus on in the present.

In recent years, fan studies have moved from a focus mainly on the ethnographic study of fan cultures to a wider examination of fanworks as texts (Busse, 2009), and this article is positioned within this latter form of fan studies.

### **Introducing Critical Fandom**

Western media fandom (Jenkins 1992), is the culture of fans dedicated to the products of the Western media landscape in all its diverse expressions. While fandom is no new phenomenon, it has become more and more visible with the rise and spread of the internet and social media, especially gaining visibility with recent developments in social communication, that has turned a one-way stream of information from creators of media content to the consumers into a two-way street. Having a fandom dedicated to one's creations guarantees that there will be people talking about them, generating hype (and possible viral tie-ins), and it gives a basic set of loyal consumers - loyal to a point, and not to a fault. Fans are not only the most passionate consumers of a / several media text / s, they are also the staunchest critics.

That fans are passionate is probably no surprise; fans' affective engagement with their fandoms has long been their defining characteristic in both popular and academic writing outside the small, still emergent, field of fan studies. The adoring audience or the zombiesque consumer is the popular public image of fans, and was the dominant fan image in academia for a long time as well. (Lewis (ed.) "The Adoring Audience" from 1992, is an example of where to find this view of fans.) That fans are passionate critics as well may come as a surprise, but criticism is an inherent part of fandom, not just in the form of reviews etc., but also in serious meta-textual critique informed by critical theory and feminist thinking in particular. This was already noted by Henry Jenkins (Jenkins, 1992, pp.

86-119), but has been a point of much work within fan studies since. That fandom is a female-dominated space with a large queer representation (centrumlumina, 2014) is probably part of how this culture of critique has grown, and by now it is a self-sustaining and -promoting phenomenon that does not seem likely to stop or diminish. Fan driven social justice is one of the more visible faces of fandom, along with the growing mainstream awareness of fanfiction and other transformative fan creations.

Fans and scholars alike speak of a rough division of fans into affirmative and transformative fans, where the former tend towards restating (affirming) authorial intent, text and status, and the latter tend towards reworking (transforming) a text or texts with less regard to the intent and status of the creators (obsessive\_inc, 2009). Though a lot of fans engage in both modes with their fandoms, the fans I speak of here are using their transformative fannishness in a way that shows the non-triviality of fandom to fans and outsiders alike. At their core, vids are expressions of transformative fans, and can be understood as sitting in an intersection between visual fanfic and remix video, but are, ultimately, a separate art form.

Fans have been ahead of the media curve for ages, (re)claiming co-ownership of cultural products, thus predating the more widespread remix culture of today, and in terms of the development we see in social awareness and minority representation in media, especially. From the classic cases of letter writing campaigns and their more modern equivalents (Jenkins, 1992, ; Savage, 2014) to the way fandom's creative outlets subvert the normative media landscape, transformative fans are at the very edge of development and a driving force with a growing voice.

Yet, fans do not keep their critique to non-fiction; fans express their critique through creative output as well. Transformative fanworks often focus on supplying the kind of narratives that are un- or under-represented in the mainstream; the alternate endings, the unsung heroics, the queer romances and the alternate universes where dark skin, not pale, is the default; those are the kinds of things one can find in fandom. They exist alongside at least as many mainstream affirming works, but the subversive power of creation in fandom is part of what distinguishes the culture of transformative fans from the affirmative fan culture, as well as from more casual lovers of a media product. Fanfic is written with the express purpose of

increasing racial diversity, art made to counter body-shaming - the possibilities and creativity are seemingly endless. A simple googling for such terms as "racebending fanfic" turns up a myriad (325,000 at the end of January 2015) of results, just to mention one example. This creative critique is also present in the perhaps less widely known genre of vids.

### Critical Vidds

Through the examples of a few critical vids, I will show some of the strategies vidders employ in their creation of critical vids. These may be a subset of vids, but they are, due to having a complex message, also stellar examples of how vidders use their tools and the various ways in which music and lyrics function as guidelines or structural skeletons for vids. I have chosen two examples where the vidder(s) present a feminist influenced critique of mainstream western media products, and will use these to further explore the ways vidders use and present critical thinking and theory.

### The Price

*The Price* (2011), is, as is often the case, named for the song that makes up one of its parts. It is a multi-canon vid, which means it uses multiple sources, in this case around 30, mostly TV shows, mainly from mainstream Hollywood style productions in the fantastic genres. The vidder behind *The Price*, thingswithwings, also wrote a long analytical blogpost about the themes portrayed in the vid and how and why she chose to focus on them (thingswithwings, 2011). According to thingswithwings, the theme of the vid is manpain, and to the viewer that is exactly what it portrays, even if one might not pick up all the nuances; doing so demands a large amount of insight into all the sources used (Turk and Johnson, 2012). Manpain is the trope that uses women's trauma, injury and death to provide motivation and characterisation for the male hero(es), as well as allowing them a moment of pure, manly pain where they can shed a single, masculine tear without tainting their heteronormative masculinity.

In order to make her point, the vidder shows instances of trope use, edited together to strengthen the message, and she utilises the music and its lyrics to this end. In the vid, thingswithwings has matched themes in the portrayal of manpain, giving us a feel of al-

most *deja-vu* like glimpses that are emphasised by hitting the guitar-enhanced beat of the verse. The scenes are eerily similar, often down to composition of the shots. We see, for instance, the doomed embrace of a loved one who will soon be dead; the carrying of the dead or dying woman; the desperate clutching of a dead body; the kneeling at the gravesite. During soft, slow parts of the song, we are presented with the emotional moments that would make us cry in the cinema, and here the music functions as the kind of emotional hook we know from film music. During the more energetic chorus, we are shown the horrors actually happening to women, matching the repeated lyrics of "nobody's paid the price like I have paid the price, I've paid the price thrice/twice"; the "I" here is of course men, not women - they are simply the price, the men have payed. There are also, as is one of the defining characteristics of many vids, literalisms in the matching of lyrics to image, here for instance the word "burst" to a cup being dropped and breaking. The editing and pacing throughout is sharp and multiple rewatches only reveal more attention to detail.

The song is extremely fitting for the message of the vid. Yet, even when something is almost on the nose perfect, *thingswithwings* plays around with it. Instead of using every lyric literally, the lyrics instead set the overall mood and complement the images to show a pervasive trend. The vid also cleverly uses irony to great effect; this is a funny vid with a serious message; humour is one of the tools to proving its point. That the song itself is ironically funny is used to full effect; music as well as lyrics are somewhat odd or unusual, for instance as the lyrics speak of hearing Bryan Adams' voice on the phone as something horrific, matched visually to the very real horrors happening to women on screen, giving us a juxtaposition and conveying an impression of an overall mood of sarcasm.

Another moment that illustrates the humour and ingenuity of the vid comes towards the very end of it, when a montage of crying men appears during a musical outro of quiet guitar and voice. Each is in a privileged position on the screen, our eyes drawn directly to them, all but one are alone, and they are showing us those precious manly tears, heroically struggling against them, but the horror of whatever has transpired (to women) is overwhelming them. Those few, pure tears escape - and *thingswithwings* uses a visual effect, causing the tears sparkle like precious diamonds. This leads into

the notes/dedication at the end: "vid by thingswithwings - song by wax mannequin - manpain by men".

### Women's Work

Where *The Price* is a sarcastic and funny vid despite its serious critique of misogyny in mainstream visual media, there is nothing funny about the deeply disturbing *Women's Work* (2007), vided by Luminosity and Sisabet. This vid is of and about the US American TV show *Supernatural*, and is not so much about the men who are motivated by dead or maimed women as it is about the women themselves. The show perpetuates the horror trope of killing female characters and sexualising women in danger; if a woman can fight she is most likely a villain. Set to the angry, aggressive song *Violet* (1995) by Courtney Love's band *Hole*, *Women's Work* is fast-paced and angry, pushing through several long seasons of TV to show us just how *Supernatural* uses dead women, and how often the show treats women's lives as trivial and disposable plot-devices. The song provides tone and editing pace foremost, though the lyrics are thematically a good match as well. Most of the vid simply shows us women being threatened and attacked, and on the surface the music here might function more as in a traditional music video, but this is a vid, so the music is there to illustrate the images, not the other way around.

When looking at the details of the vid, this becomes apparent. The lyrics "you should learn how to say no" is deliberately matched to clips that look like a rape, thus commenting on/speaking through the culture of victim blaming in rape cases. The threats seem to rise and fall in intensity with the music. A lull in intensity shows a montage of women who have been stripped of agency, and the lack of power in the music matches the theme of the visuals. Likewise, it is especially the intense chorus with its shouts of "Go on, take everything, take everything, I want you to", matched to violent, graphic murders, that is effective in its use of both lyrics and music. In a technique used more often in vids with a more singular point of view, the "I" of the song at times becomes the "I" of the women in the clips, and "everything" their lives, ready for the taking. It is as if these characters shout their anger at us with their dying breaths, the equivalent of the movie character who, at gunpoint, tells their assailant to just shoot. The fast editing matching



the frenetic song seems to assault the viewer the way the women on the screen are being brutalised.

The only departure from the barrage of dying women is when we see female villains at work, but they, too, are struck down. In keeping with the show's themes, they are banished, exorcised, staked, shot, disposed of. The vid is unrelenting, and as such very direct in its critique. "I'm the one with no soul", it cries in Love's serrated blade voice, and assaults us with a myriad of women who had no agency, no characterisation, who were only a body to be killed in order to kick-start this week's episode.

### **Critics of Culture - Culture of Critics**

Having watched these vids, especially back to back, it is very difficult to claim that western mainstream media do not have a problem with its portrayal of women. Vids like these are, through their editing and media savvy audio-visual language, making the systemic misogyny in media visible and hard to dismiss. The intended audiences - other fans - grasp the message, as can be seen in the comment sections on the vids (Winters, 2009), pointing to fandom's culture of critique.

As seen in the above, Western media fandom of the 21st century is indeed a culture in which critical discourse thrives and is promoted, and that part of that discourse is expressed through creative works. By virtue of being a form of remix or transformation, fanworks are always already a comment on the source they were hatched from (e.g. Tryon, 2009); some fanworks, such as critical vids, are aware of this and perform accordingly. Francesca Coppa wrote that "a vid is a visual essay that stages an argument" and "a form of collective critical thinking" (Coppa 2008), and in the case of critical vids, this is perhaps especially apparent. In the case of *The Price*, the precious tears of men at the end of the vid are the punchline of the argument thingswithwings has presented throughout the vid; if the viewers were not already aware of the prevalence of the manpain trope in Western media, here is where we catch on. In *Women's Work*, there is not as much a line as there is the constant punch of a point that the vid seems intent on getting through to its viewers. But are those messages read and received as intended?

Sarah Fiona Winters has noted that vids can be misread when they travel outside fandom; in her example, what is a constructed

reality, an alternate universe, that deals with the painful issue of rape, has been misunderstood as being a work meant to convey pleasure or titillate its audience. Her argument is that one needs a rather deep understanding of not only Star Trek, but also the part of fandom that is dedicated to the romantic and/or sexual pairing of Kirk and Spock in order to fully understand the intended message of the vid (Winters, 2009). In a somewhat related thread of argumentation, Tisha Turk and Joshua Johnson speak of the layers of understanding that is encompassed in reading a vid in their article *Toward an Ecology of Vidding* (2012). They focus most of their attention on the readings that require knowledge that a fandom insider would have. It is interesting that Turk and Johnson take their model of ecology from composition studies, both because music as an element of vidding has not yet been explored very much, and because music and the use of mood is such a vital part of how a vid is read. Not only do critical vids present a critique, they also act as a form of applied critical theory, that is easily spread and understood across fandom's inside readings of vids, as Turk and Johnson shows. They present a very good argument. I am, however, more interested in one layer they are not engaging with: the ways in which a vid is understood and can be read even outside its intended ecology or audience, and how this is accomplished through editing with and to the music.

Vids, by virtue of inscribing themselves in an audio-visual tradition that we in the west are very well versed in, are accessible to a lot of people, meaning that these vids are also a potential tool to spread, if not as such teach, some of the basic readings that become available when one reads through the lens of feminist critical theory. Yet, as Winters has shown, there is also a risk of unintended readings of a vid, both outside and inside of fandom. It should be noted that vids are not usually made with a non-fandom audience in mind, thus, according to Winters, the risk is that misunderstandings when shown outside context is considerable. So what does this mean for the potential for vids to spread their message? While the details of a vid may not translate well outside fandom, it is difficult to watch a vid like *Women's Work* and not understand the message of anger, of hurt, and experience the huge amount of dead women *Supernatural* has produced over its seasons, and this is in large part due to the choice of song. Despite the risk of misinterpretation that has been well described by other scholars, I consider this an exam-



ple of a vid that could potentially reach a wider audience and retain its legibility. With a song like *Violet* coupled with the visceral images, the point is hard to miss. While *The Price* is not as easily accessible, partly due to the less readily understood song, the visual side of the vid still presents a very clear argument; perhaps especially the sparkly tears drive home the point. These vids do not stand alone either; there are many more like them, presenting different points of feminist media critique.

This then opens the next question: Can vids, through their creative use of music, spread a message such as feminist theory beyond the boards of fandom? Can they play a part in the debate about more diverse and socially aware media world? While this remains to be seen, or even researched (to the best of my knowledge), something is certainly brewing. In his *Convergence Culture* (2008), fan studies scholar Henry Jenkins called for TV to catch up with the internet revolution of fandom, and by the time he co-wrote *Spreadable Media* (2013), the media world was at least trying to harness the power of fans. At the same time, the previous one-way communication from creator(s) to fans has become more of an exchange (Zubernis & Larsen, 2012). While there is no proof that we see more diversity in TV castings, female led TV shows and more heroes who are not straight white men due to fans' intervention, there is a visible trend from the female-led, trans-inclusive *Orange is the New Black* (2013-?) over the casting of an African-American Reed Richards in the new Fantastic Four movie *Fant4stic* (summer 2015) to a female *Thor* (2014-?) in Marvel's comic books. This trend, and the feedback loop from fandom to creators, is only getting stronger in our increasingly mediated world. Vids are positioned to play a part here, because they are easily spread and disseminated from their homes in the streaming media platforms. With critical vids having gone viral and been part of museum exhibits (as was the case with *Vogue* (2007)), maybe they already are.

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