

Identi-play: Cosplay, Camp, Cons and the Carnavalesque

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Abstract:

Cosplay: people donning home-made costumes patterned after fictional characters. A Japanese portmanteau of "costume" and "play", Cosplay exhibits characteristics of both - dressing up like a fictional character, but also 'inhabiting' the character's world; the filtered life of someone who does not exist, and an attempt to capture it for a fleeting moment. Photographer Elena Dorfman (2007) calls it a blurring of fantasy and reality, where identity is exploded, narrative is privileged and persona paramount.

What draws amateur artisans to Cosplay and the convention events that propagate it? Theorists (Butler, 1998; Mercer 1994) posit that switching, trying on, and performing other identities, genders, and in the case of Cosplay, personas and *species*, allow Cosplayers to fluidly define, stretch, discover, and augment their own sense of identity. Like other performative groups studied by identity theorists - such as gangs or drag queens - Cosplayers slip in and out of identities by slipping in and out of costumes, and perform themselves by surrendering to *play*. That the concept of identity is itself in flux is perhaps a sign that in an age of virtual hobbies and connections, we no longer know who we are. Cosplay allows participants to create and participate in the physical world, to move a hobby that is primarily screen-centric into a concrete medium.

I elucidate the passion for the art by drawing on Susan Sontag's treatise on Camp, illuminating the excruciating work and joy Cosplayers wring from a pastime that makes most onlookers squirm, and Mikhail Bakhtin's study of the carnivalesque in comparison to the festival atmosphere of the convention hall. Straddling the gap between is an insightful essay by *Paper Magazine* editor Carlo McCormick (Dorfman 2007), which serves as a stark entry point to the cacophony of voices that is Cosplay.

Why Cosplay?

*Why do I Cosplay... neat costume, get to act, get to watch the silly normals gawk at me...
it's part creative challenge, part childhood game, part exhibitionism.
It lets you be someone else for the day, some far cooler than you.
--irvinekinneas*

When I was twelve years old, my mother took me to a Star Trek convention. It was a Christmas gift; I had recently become enamoured of the puzzle of Lieutenant Commander Data, the machine who strove to be human, played by a human who strove to be a machine. I rushed to the first of the tables and smiled up at a woman in the blue tunic of the medical officers of the "U.S.S. Enterprise". I thought she was an actor on the show; why else would she have a uniform on? A short, confused conversation later, I realized that she wasn't an actress, she was *playing dress up*. This woman was the 'captain' of a 'federation starship' based out of the area. Only she wasn't and there was no starship she could show me when I excitedly asked to tour the bridge. I went about the rest of my afternoon with a question niggling in the back of my brain. 'Was it really okay', I wondered, 'to dress up in costumes and pretend to be someone else when it's not Hallowe'en?' Fast forward to 2002. I joined a friend a Sci-Fi convention for the day. There they were again, the people who dressed up *just for the fun of it*. 'Why?' I wondered. 'What's the appeal? Why spend all that time and money? Just so people take pictures of you? Just to be strange?' I watched the people in costumes wherever I hobbled – here, a Gallifreyan Doctor laughed with a man dressed like a giant pepper pot; there, a cat-girl flung herself excitedly at a similarly dressed friend; everywhere, people talking, renewing or forging friendships based solely on the fact that everyone looked like they had raided Mr. Dressup's tickletrunk. And I thought, 'well, heck, if dressing up and getting to be someone else for the day is so much fun, I should try it next year.' So I did. And the year after that, and the year after that. Fast forward again to 2013 – to date I

have dropped thousands of dollars on fabric and props, spent hours painting sleeves, sewing together wigs, and generally utilizing every skill my years as a professional theatre practitioner has granted me in creating a bunch of outfits that I only wear once.

And the question still remains – *why?*

What is Cosplay?

I like the atmosphere, I like the people, and I like the excitement. It's a place where hundreds, sometimes even thousands come to sell the dream that is fantasy and in turn have it sold back to them with someone else's flavor attached.
--project_japan

Trying to understand the compulsion to dress up without ever having attended a fan convention or dressed up yourself is a little bit like trying to understand Camp without having read any Sontag: a lot of people know it exists, but many couldn't tell you exactly what it is. Officially, all this dressing up and mucking about is called *Cosplay*. A typically Japanese portmanteau of *costume* and *play*, Cosplay exhibits characteristics of both - dressing up like a fictional character, but also 'inhabiting' that character's world; wearing the filtered life of someone who does not, and cannot ever exist. Carlos McCormick, an editor for Paper Magazine, in a forward for Elena Dorfman's Cosplay portrait book Fandomania, explains that for "as long as fans of the socially debased medium of science fiction have gathered to share their passion with like-minded friends, they have always indulged, in some degree, in role-playing and costumes" (McCormick 6). Cosplay is an extended, extreme version of make-believe, a desire to be Other, to be better or cooler than oneself, and that desire is natural, as "such benign wish fulfillments have surely existed in some form for as long as we've been blessed with imagination and cursed with desire" (ibid 4). The term itself was purportedly coined by a Japanese studio executive at the 1984 World Science Fiction Convention and has become an

"increasingly sophisticated and coded fantasy of transformative outfitting... cross-pollinat[ing] across cultures, traditions, [and] media" (McCormick 6; Wikipedia "Cosplay"; Nygard *T2*). No longer only for scifi geeks, Cosplayers imitate the work of everything from anime to Lovecraft, Harry Potter to Marvel heroes to Tim Burton, and even the sexy morbidity of American McGee.

Cosplay is "most closely associated with Japan, which has the largest, most visible, and least stigmatized Cosplay subculture" (McCormick 6). Shops for Cosplay accessories – wigs, fake guns, series-specific paraphernalia, a rainbow of contact lenses – sprinkle every major city. In North America, Cosplay has come to ensconce "other preexisting mantles of identity play, from Renaissance fairs to Star Trek conventions to Rocky Horror audience participations" (ibid 7). MIT theorist Henry Jenkins explains that "fandom is not about Bourdieu's notion of holding art at a distance, it's not a high art discourse at all; it's about having control and mastery over art by pulling it close and integrating it into your sense of self" (ibid 23). Cosplay exemplifies this - fans pull the art so close to themselves that they are literally wearing it. They take up the mantle of a fictional persona, living another's life, and come away from the experience with a new sense of self. Jenkins, in his 2006 Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers narrates an anecdote about stopping in at a corner store on his way home from a trip. A bewildered man had asked "the grocery clerk, a white girl with a broad southern accent.... why she had a Japanese name on her employee badge and [the clerk] found herself talking about an alternative identity she assumes through 'Cosplay', the practice of anime fans dressing up like favourite characters" (Jenkins, *FBG* 152). The clerk was neither Japanese, nor the fictional persona whose name she had attached to herself, she was one of hundreds of "real people pretending to be people who aren't real, yet become so by virtue of fanatical

belief systems" (McCormick 8), connected to one another by a thread of mutual enjoyment for fantasy and roleplaying. Cosplay embodies "the psychological transaction of identity that all costume acts share" (ibid 7). Theoretically and in psychological terms, "Cosplay teeters somewhere between a healthy semi-sanctioned and controlled way of acting out fantasies and the kind of red flag that's thrown up when you see a kid with a fascination for his parent's knickers," explains McCormick; "enjoy or squirm... but know that here is a celebration of beauty, not travesty" (ibid), a passionate campy celebration of excess, colour, chintz, and the fantastic. It is a blurring of fantasy and reality, where identity is exploded, narrative is privileged, and persona paramount.

This paper will serve as an overview of several ways of thinking about Cosplay, and is by no means an attempt at an exhaustive theoretical investigation.

Cons and the Carnavalesque

Here's why Cosplay is hard for me: Ficcign and vidding create a product. In Cosplay, you essentially ARE the product. Rather, there's still a product, the costume, but the final result is a combination of skill and your innate attractiveness. Because of this, it's more personal when people insult or praise you, it takes a lot of guts (or exhibitionism) to try, and it's harder to distance yourself from your work.
 --sarahtheboring

Mikhail Bakhtin, theorist and philosopher, put forward that during the liberated and chaotic time of the medieval European carnivals the ideological, legal, and political, authority of the church and state were inverted, although only temporarily. He called this 'the carnivalesque'. As authority meant nothing, the king became no more than a peasant and a peasant could be crowned the carnival king; women were given grounds to dress and act as men, and visa versa (Russo); and excess was encouraged. All the accumulated 'steam' from a year's worth of repression and control let off, the underclasses were

satisfied and exorcised, and the upperclasses returned unchallenged to ruling (Bahktin). Fan conventions are not unsimilar. Like medieval carnivals, scifi, anime, gamer, comic, horror and fantasy conventions are held annually; some, like Toronto's FanExpo serve all genres at once. They, too, are a time of letting loose: hotel room parties, events that make actors accessible and break down the star-fan dichotomy, the reuniting of friends or meeting new ones, the serious discussion of things that society considers frivolous, and a privileging of the strange, grotesque, horrible, thrilling, and the Other. It's a topsy turvy liminal locus wherein the sober, sane, outside world populated with regular people in regular clothing is overturned. Cosplayers even crown their King of Fools: like in Bahktin's carnivals, the Convention Masquerade event exists to select the best costume from Cosplayers who wish to enter a judged contest. Entrants must perform a short skit to entertain – and in true Bahktinian fashion, usually horrifically embarrassing – while the judges evaluate their costume based on aspects of proficiency, accuracy to the character, or originality. Awards are then presented for best workmanship, and best presentation – that is, the best *recreation* and the best *inhabitation*. The day after the Masquerade event winners openly wear badges, ribbons, dollar store tiaras, or other such detritus of victory. And then, like Bahktin's kings, the winners remove their costumes – symbolically dying and resurrecting themselves (Bahktin 197) – and metamorphose from king, and Cosplaying clown, back to peasant layman.

There is an element of the grotesque about the peeling off of an identity. Grotesques are a site of experimentation, where risk is a seductive ally that pries open the aperture for possibility (Russo). The grotesque invokes a realm of mutative, transitional, and transgressive potentiality: peasants can kings, but they can also be fairies, demons, starship captains, Time Lords, giant robots, priestesses, and either or both genders if they

feel so inclined. The common denominator is the "desire to be Other, transported to a different place" (McCormick 9). Fiction trades places with fact. Bartheian signs made alive, the miasma of myth clings to the Cosplayers, submersing them in the fictions and personalities that they can never fully inhabit, "so deeply enrapt in their own hermetic plots that they are bereft of context and float as virtual signs given uneasy flesh and blood" (ibid 4). Non-Cosplayers, often referred to as 'mundanes' or 'normals' in the Cosplay circuit, who stumble into the carnival, are often left with "that awestruck feeling one inevitably gets when faced with the oddity of nonconformity, a breathtaking 'is that for real?' quality not without some unintended whimsy" (ibid). Cosplayers

approximate simultaneously the most innocent and the most perverse aspects of roleplaying... subject and viewer alike find the spectacle of eroticized idols, fetish fashion, gender bending ('crossplay'), and hybrid confections of dominance and submission a delirious experience (ibid 7).

Drunk on the colour, the conversation, the outpouring of communal enthusiasm and interest, conventions are energetic, spastic affairs that leave their participants exhausted, their lust for community and the text of their choice slaked, and ready to re-don the 'normal' guise - their true costume, some fans would say - and return to the regular world, content to follow its laws and taboos for another year, until the frenzy begins again.

Camp

I think Cosplayers are generally just looking to have some fun. I don't really differentiate between the "good" and "bad" ones, except for maybe quality of work. But even then I don't really care if their costume is perfect or not.
--Karen Wood

A majority of my love for Cosplay is best explained by citing Susan Sontag's own justification of Camp, found in 1961's Against Interpretation. Cosplay and Camp both adore the gleeful joy acquired from activities that take pleasure from all art regardless of

height (Sontag 286); the historical nostalgia (285); the treating of seriousness with frivolity and *visa versa* (288); the stylistic expression void of politics (277); the extremity of life-as-theatre performativity (280); the deliberate gender confusion (279); and most importantly, the utter seriousness with which Cosplayers approach their art form and the resulting naivety, self-love (283). The hallmark of Camp is the essential element of seriousness that fails, the "proper mixture of the exaggerated, the fantastic, the passionate, and the naïve" (283). And *Cosplay is pure Camp*. That most 'mundanes' suspect Cosplayers of mental disorders, an inability to tell fiction from reality, or as just plain socially hopeless, only confirms it. Both are about "art that proposes itself seriously, but cannot be taken altogether seriously because it is 'too much'" (Sontag 284).

Aficionados love every extreme they go to, and 'mundanes' balk at the sheer excess. Cosplay is often regarded with the "the condescending compassion, derisive dismissal, or agonized bewilderment typical of most" (McCormick 4) subcultures. Yet, Cosplay has no inherent political bent; meaning is imposed on Cosplay by those outsiders who judge, who seek to find concerns and issues and something to raise the alarm about, because "anytime so much energy is devoted to something so perversely obsessive, fractiously outré, and fleetingly superogatory, it cannot help but transcend the mundane limitations we otherwise put on human endeavour" (ibid). And media fans *are* notoriously stereotyped as detail oriented and obsessive. Cosplayers spend anywhere between months and years, and thousands of dollars on materials in effort to make a recreation 'just right'. Phasers blink, magical weapons glow, and absurdly gravity-defying hairstyles miraculously stay up. This exhaustive work is undertaken in the complete spirit of seriousness, a real devotion to the craft and an honest, innocent desire to enjoy the art. Camp makes love to "things which, from a 'serious' point of view, are either bad art or

kitch" (Sontag 278), refusing these labels, ignoring and therefore dissolving binary paradigms of low and high art, of 'good' and 'bad', of worthy and vulgar, to "be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious" (ibid 288).

The last tenant of Camp that I'll address here is the passion for 'old' things and mannerisms, the "old-fashioned, out-of-date, *démodé*" (ibid 285). Camp's 'failed seriousness' is sometimes difficult to detect when the object or theme is contemporary, and only "the process of aging or deterioration provides the necessary detachment – or arouses the necessary sympathy" (ibid 285) – for an object. Cosplay, especially for the faction who focus on historical recreation, have a great love for the past. Or, rather, the idealized romantic past, the nostalgia. The historical battle recreationists, the Renaissance Faire goers, the Society for the Creative Anachronism; these are the people who nostalgically look backward, ignoring the hardships of bygone eras and focussing instead on a Hollywood-esque adoration of chivalry, simple subject identification, and false perceptions of freedom. "Sure, this has got to be one of the nerdiest collection of hopeless geeks ever assembled, but come on, they're also way cool" (McCormick 4). With what other hobby is any person so desperately, so vulnerably on display with their own, sometimes painfully mediocre outcome? What can explain the brave ability and drive to expose oneself to ridicule or confusion for the sake of an obscure passion? And how can we not in turn appreciate someone who is willing to do that for the sake of something they acutely love?

Identity Play

Using discourses of religiosity within fandom might actually be part of a fan's performance of an appropriate fan identity that says 'I know you can't understand the intensity of my interest in this text, so think of it as this,'
 --Henry Jenkins, "Fans, Gamers, and Bloggers", p 20

Let us return now to Sontag's tenth point about Camp, the act of "Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theatre" (Sontag 280). Identity theorists posit that the trying on of identities is a normal process in the socialization of a subject. Sociologist John Dewey suggested that we come to know who we are, we come to form our identities, through social interaction. "Everything human is learned," says Dewey, developed through communication and "an effective sense of being an individually distinctive member... who understands and appreciates [community's] beliefs, desires and methods" (Dewey 154). McCormick points out that "the process of 'becoming' seems a natural extension (albeit significantly more ritualized) of the way we find out who we are by donning different personae... Identity, as both a coded lexicon of social signals and a commodity, is like fashion" (McCormick 7). Subjects slip on different hats, different roles, different identities in order to balance their own lives. Cosplay therefore, could be considered a speechact – rather, an act-act – wherein the performative "exercises a binding power" (Butler, *BTM* 108). In acting like a character, the Cosplayer performs the act upon their own identity; they become the other persona, as closely as a flesh and blood impersonator is able. The Cosplayer experiences the world through this filter, and then strips it away. In gendered performances, such as drag, Butler explains that "what is 'performed' ... is of course the *sign* of gender, a sign that is not the same as the body that it figures, but that cannot be read without it" (ibid 113). I would argue that for Cosplay, the *sign* is the identity and the body is the self. Cosplay challenges 'core' identity. Cartesian philosophy grants the mind

primacy over the body – *cogito ergo sum* – making the body a 'thing' that is less-than-human. Yet Butler argues that "'essential' identity as a fiction, conjured by the socially coded actions of the body, contrived via a 'stylized repetition of acts'" (Counsell & Wolf 72); "such acts, gestures, enactments, generally constructed, are performative... the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs" (Butler, *GT* 73). Cosplayers perform an identity, and in so doing, redefine their own. There is no 'essence' as "that very interiority is an effect and function of a decidedly public and social discourse" (ibid 73). Butler goes on to claim that if gender and identity lack a binary and are dependant on performance, they "are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity." (ibid 75). Thus, if one can impersonate or perform another gender or identity convincingly, then doesn't this reconstruct the binary, question the truth of it? If I can be you, then your identity is not essential, and neither is mine. If I can play at other identities as easily as I can play at other genders, then what does that say about my 'core' self, the person that I am, the person that my play forms? Butler would suggest that this perpetual displacement, this ability to shift, "constitutes a fluidity of identities that suggests an openness to resignification and recontextualization" (ibid 75). These performances help define the self, and therefore the performance of an extreme subjecthood opens the body's own subjecthood up to re-examination and experimentation. Merely being someone else for a day can expose the constructedness of identity, and therefore act as catalyst to the restructuring of one's identity.

In an age of gender role blurring, work that is functionally stationary and physically unrewarding, the sepia-toned vision of a past filled with men who were men, women who were women, physical work that created physical results, and a clear code of

honour and conduct is no doubt appealing to the solitary subject with a fuzzy sense of self. Often historical recreationist Cosplayers extend the reproduction of past mannerisms into their daily lives – men live by the code of chivalry and open doors for female coworkers, women who serve others before themselves in volunteer charities, people who refuse to lie, or to act without honour; these are Cosplayers who have formed their own subject positions through the filter of fiction. That the concept of identity is itself in flux is perhaps a sign that in an age of virtual hobbies and digital connections, we no longer know who we are. Many people are turning to the internet in order to find ever more specialized groups with which to associate themselves, with which to define their own subjecthood, and "fandom is simply the force by which personal disconnect attains interconnectivity, a community of private fantasy, a safety valve for obsessive tendencies that channels our most unhealthy attachments toward worthy pursuits" (McCormick 8). Cosplay allows participants to create and participate in the physical world, to move a hobby that is primarily screen-centric into a concrete medium, and "favoured texts are both tools for thought and spaces for emotional exploration" (Jenkins 5). Barbra Adams, famous for wearing her Starfleet Uniform to jury duty in the Whitewater trial in 1996, defines her identity via her interaction with the franchise, and her role in the community support-centric fanclub (Nygard, *T2*) Adams wore her uniform to promote the fanclub's tenant to work towards Rodenberry's utopia, "to see those ideals...brought into this community in this century" (Adams in Nygard, *T2*). Adams defines her own social values and ideals based on the mores of a world that does not exist. Actor William Shatner explains that Star Trek is not only "part entertainment," it is also "part philosophy" (Nygard *T*). Cosplay provides a natural extension of interest into experimentation, allowing a subject to adopt the mannerisms and dress of a certain 'clique' in order to

decide what to accept or reject in the formation of their own identity type. To oversimplify: Cosplayers become *something* while becoming *someone*.

Cosplaying "becomes a more opened metaphor for the condition of escapism, where the flight from reality is irresistibly drawn to locatable archetypal zones.... Everyone at some slippery point in their development has to start engaging in the ambiguous zones of androgyny and sexual identity if they hope to get any traction on that epic slope of self-realization" (McCormick 8). Crossplay – genderswitch Cosplaying – while not as common as straight Cosplay, "responds particularly to the markedly attenuated and to the strongly exaggerated. The androgyne is certainly one of the great images of Camp sensibility", and a major convention of Japanese animation. Or by contrast, Cosplay may also "relish the exaggeration of sexual characteristics and personality mannerisms" (Sontag 279) as with drag queens or kings. In comparison to performing varying species and race, to investing so thoroughly in fiction, performing the opposite gender seems relatively tame. The normal transgressiveness of genderswitching is overshadowed by the transgressiveness of adults playing 'dress up' and therefore the convention hall becomes a safe, liminal space in which reality is put on hold and all methods of subject identity experimentation are allowable. The opportunity to be another gender for the day – either experimentally or for humorous theatrical effect – seems, however, to be second to the ability to be another *person*. I will hazard a theory that accepting crossplay stems from the fact that most fans' chosen narratives of interest are forward-looking, and therefore include or feature gender transgressive characters. Here again the hobby infiltrates and influences real life.

Cosplay also offers those who would otherwise be outsiders a chance at belonging, even if it is only to belong to a group of the marginalized. Cosplayers, in shedding their

own identities and taking up new ones, Other themselves. Their own lived subjecthood becomes alien, and yet the subjecthood they have taken on is no less unreal. Suspended between identities, Cosplayers are neither this nor that. This lack of definition opens up the self for new ideas, new definition, new development. Subjecthood is amorphous, prey to whimsy, a locus where the acting out of make-believe makes real.

Cosplay's Role in Life

*Ten years ago, this wouldn't have been possible...
the internet allows isolated individuals to band together
--Kappler, p 40*

Cosplay brings people together both online and off, creating socialized groups and friends. It allows people to compete for prestige, converse about those things which are otherwise considered low or vulgar, and experiment with identity. When Dorfman began her foray into Cosplay, she expected the overweight, unhygienic, socially defunct geeks characterized by The Simpson's Comic Book Guy or Saturday Night Live's infamous *Get a Life* sketch. Instead, Dorfman "discovered a group of people who simply go to socialize and see like-minded Cosplayers from all over the world" (Egan). Says one of the Trekkies interviewees, "this is a wonderful way to be crazy" (Nygen, *T2*). So try to forget the strangeness of donning the guise, the morals, or the physicalities of non-existent people, and imagine how Cosplaying can be an experience that is "positive, liberating, and surprisingly free of orthodoxy" (McCormick 9). Come on, who doesn't want to save the galaxy for the afternoon?

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