Just Another Kiss: Narrative and Database in Fan Vidding 2.0

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Abstract:

This essay tackles 'fan vidding', a grassroots practice of remix, a form of video production where fans cut clips from mainstream audio-visual sources (films and television series) and re-edit them, often on a pop music song. After calling into question some of the current typologies and classifications, and partly drawing on the categories that Gerard Genette outlined in *Palimpsests*, I propose three main criteria – relation to the source, mood, and logic – through which it is possible to analyse fan-produced videos: relation points to the difference between transformation and imitation; mood has to do with audience's attitudes towards the source (celebratory, playful, critical); logic, finally, has to do with editing styles. Generally speaking, there are two fundamental logics at play in fan vidding: a narrative, syntagmatic logic, where the fan video tells a story in the form of digest, or focusing on some single episode, although not necessarily in a linear, chronological form; an anti-narrative, associative, paradigmatic logic, where the fan video remixes audiovisual materials according to the laws of similarity, analogy, fetishism squared, the loop, and where the fragment is cut from its original narrative chain to be associated with other fragments of the same kind in an often obsessive repetition. My analysis especially focuses on this last mentioned phenomenon, (currently defined "supercut"), as an example of how digital media and database as 'symbolic form' (Manovich) can represent a treat to the narrative hegemony which has characterized the last decades, promoting instead a kind of "scrap ecology" alongside with fragmented forms of apprehension, perception, knowledge which are more and more available and fruited on the web.

Fan vidding: two or three things I know about it

A fan vid is an interpretive act. A fan vid is a visual essay. A fan vid is a way of facing mass media and fighting back. A fan vid is a striking example of the spread of DIY culture. A fan vid is an act of love towards the source text(s). A fan vid is a work of art. A fan vid is an instance of the politics of fan production.

These are only a few of the statements that can be found both in the critical literature and in meta-reflections on fan vidding by fans/vidders themselves. At the most basic and general level,

fan vidding is a grassroots audiovisual remix practice, and one of the most noteworthy manifestations of media fandom. Vidders cut clips from movies or TV shows, which are particularly loved by the vidders or by a more-or-less structured fan community, and re-edit them on a pop song (although there can be exceptions such as electronic or classical music). Unlike the music video, where images are at the service of music – for example, illustrating it, visualising the song's text, or the atmosphere suggested by the melody – in fan vidding the power relationship is reversed: 'the fans are fans of the visual source, and music is used as an interpretive lens to help the viewer to see the source text differently' (Coppa, 2008, p. 1.1).

Fan vidding is based on various operations that can be tabulated as follows:

- identifying the source text(s)
- choosing the song (or the piece of music);
- selecting some scenes or specific sequences, sampling the chosen clips and thus de-contextualising them;
- re-semantising the clips;
- editing and synchronising the visual track and soundtrack;
- uploading the fan vid, thus making it available to a wider audience.

Before continuing, some brief comments on this scheme are required. First, both the identification of the source and the sampling can be based on the most diverse criteria – a TV or film genre, an actress/actor, a character, an action, a situation. This cannot be considered aside from an affective dimension because fandom itself is based on emotional investment in the first place. Vidders choose something that is striking, upsetting, fascinating, touching, disturbing, but that grips them anyway. That said, fan vidding usually works on a specific kind of source-text: the images and the languages of mainstream media which incorporates widespread and widely-shared contemporary mass culture. Second, the choice of the song, so important in fan vidding, is difficult to place within an ideally linear set of operations. I have placed it between the identification of the source and the selection of the scenes, but it could even be the driving force that starts the whole process. Third, it is not easy to distinguish between de-contextualisation and re-semantisation, or between re-semantisation and editing. De-contextualising already bestows new meaning, which emanates from the single element as isolated from the sequence to which it originally belonged. At the same time, one should ask if re-semantisation might be considered as an operation in its own right, previous to any editing. Does the new meaning not come from the new context in which the clip has been inserted? Is it not a function of the new sequence that the fan vid constructs? Finally, the vidder's re-semantisation does not necessarily coincide with the viewers', who bring into play their knowledge (including a lesser or greater knowledge of the source), point-of-view, cultural background or encyclopaedia, as Umberto Eco would say, 'in order to interpret and understand what they see' (Tralli, 2014, p. 42; my translation).

Fan vidding is a phenomenon that dates back to the mid 1970s and is originally related to home video:

> Vidders typically date their art to 1975, the year that Candy Fog, inspired by the Beatles' video for 'Strawberry Fields Forever', first created a slideshow setting *Star Trek* to music. During the 1980s and 1990s women made vids, often in collectives, with two VCRs using VHS footage. They shared the results at conventions or by sending cassettes through the mail (Coppa, 2011, p. 123).

The multiple genealogies of fan vidding – or vidding, as it is often called – might be traced back to a number of earlier sources: from found footage (films made without a camera by using existing filmed material), which was in practice as early as the first decades of the 20th century, to the collage and the *objet trouvé* that was typical of modernist poetics (and practices). It also importantly incorporates most of the mixing practices of DJs, which appeared in the early 1970s through the rise of multi-track technologies and which enabled different parts of soundtracks to be isolated and treated separately [1]. Yet all scholars tend to agree it has been the development of

digital technologies, the emergence of web 2.0, the rise of video sharing platforms such as YouTube, and the spread of the computer as 'meta-medium' (Manovich, 2001, pp. 25-26 and p. 65), that has contributed to bringing fan vidding within everybody's reach, making it familiar, facilitating it, and up to a certain point 'naturalising' the operations which lie at its basis, and not only from a technical point of view (Manovich, 2003 and 2005; Navas, 2012; Coppa and Levin Russo, 2012).

If we consider the five principles that, according to Lev Manovich, shape new media in both programming and use – numerical representation, modularity, automation, variability, and transcoding (2001, pp. 27-48) – it is easy to see how fan vidding has to do with more general processes that radically hit our culture and experience at different levels. Modularity, for instance, implies working with a combination of single elements that can be independently modified and reused. Numerical representation and automation enable the storage of a huge quantity of data that has become accessible at an unprecedented scale. Variability presupposes that a media object 'is not something fixed once and for all, but something that can exist in different, potentially infinite versions' (Manovich, 2001, p. 36) and so forth.

It is these five principles that make remix and reuse practices materially possible and relatively easy, and which also foster broader transformations – that is, a 'conceptual transfer' from information technologies to culture at large (Manovich, 2001, p. 46). In this framework the remix becomes the index *par excellence* of the cultural logic we live in, what Fredric Jameson (1991) would call the *dominant* of the contemporary media ecosystem. Nowadays, the dominant is a widespread remix or recycling attitude, which does not produce 'original' objects in the traditional sense, but repeatedly recombines the immense database that has accumulated since the rise of technical reproduction. This attitude manifests itself both through bottom up appropriation (reiteration, *détournement*, inversion), and top down exploitation (franchising, for instance, is one of the ways modularity serves profit). All of the above-mentioned phenomena trigger a set of questions concerning notions and values about authorship, origin, text and textuality, the unity of the work of art or the cultural artefact, to name but a few [2].

As I have already noted, fan vidding is related to fandom. Fandom has been variously conceptualised by media and popular culture scholars, as well as by fans themselves and society at large, and has undergone dramatic changes since it emerged as both a phenomenon and an object of study in the 1980s. I do not want (nor have the space) to go into these different interpretations here but they include ethnographic, community- and subculture-oriented perspectives which stress the participatory, bottom up, subversive and even anti-capitalistic aspects of fan activities, and visions of fans and fan communities, less as forms of empowerment than as 'embedded in the existing economic, social, and cultural status quo' (Gray, Sandvoss, Lee Harrington, 2007, p. 6). Different interpretations of fandom also coincide with different phases in the history of fandom and fan studies (Gray, Sandvoss, Lee & Harrington, 2007, pp. 1-16). Others (such as Hills, 2002) argue that different critical attitudes and conceptualisations of fandom cohabit within the field of *fan studies*. They point to the tensions and contradictions between subcultures and mainstream culture, resistance and consumerism, community and hierarchy, ethnography and aesthetics. These issues have impacted, and still impact, both the phenomenon and the categories through which fandom is studied and conceptualised.

However, there is a turning point that almost everybody dates from the early 2000s, when 'being fan has become an ever more common mode of cultural consumption' and 'an ever more integral part of everyday life in modern societies' (Gray, Sandvoss, Lee & Harrington, 2007, pp. 6-7 and p. 9). The pattern of the strongly structured community with a clear identity coexists with a more liquid condition, where fan numbers dramatically increase, and typologies of fan audiences multiply, intertwining with one another, and scattering across the web. Many fan vidding scholars and vidders alike acknowledge such a turning point, which is related to the rise of highly 'generalist' video platforms and social media, and which has deeply affected the production, circulation and fruition of fan vids: 'The threshold of storage, processing capacity, and bandwidth we crossed in the 2000s, exemplified by the YouTube era of virtually infinite video, has catapulted remix into mainstream consciousness' (Coppa & Levin Russo, 2012, 2.4) [3]. In becoming a more widespread practice, fan vidding has also taken on more 'molecular' forms of circulation, which

weakens or cuts across traditional community boundaries and identities. Scholars such as Kathleen Amy Williams go as far as claiming that YouTube's 'relate video' function 'creates an instant community' (2012, 5.1). More cautiously Kristina Busse has argued:

> Some scholars posit that today all viewers are interpellated as fans, that they are invited to engage fannishly by creating content and engaging within an imaginary, online community. Does this mean that the old subcultural stance of media fandom has become obsolete in the face of a general shift in media consumption? (2009, p. 106).

It is from this manifold and partly new scenario that I want to start tackling fan vidding on the basis of a number of methodological moves. First, I will downscale what we may call the 'community factor', although I am conscious that vidder communities have produced and shared an impressive amount of theoretical and technical knowledge on fan vidding practices. I will then perform a self-conscious, intentional *context collapse* (http://fanlore.org/wiki/Context_Collapse), using a heterogeneous corpus, taken from fandoms related to period dramas and cult TV shows such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. From this perspective, however, one should also stress that if vidding can occur within a fandom, it is also often considered its own fandom, because 'a growing number of fans identify themselves as fans of vids and vidding as well as, or even instead of, specific television series and films' (Turk, 2010, pp. 89-90). Finally, I will read some particular aspects of fan vids from a 'symptomatic' perspective (that is, as signs which point to broader phenomena).

Typologies, classifications, and criteria

Fan vidding, media fandom, and grassroots remixing are such rapidly evolving and changing practices that any attempt at classification should be made with great caution. However, there are some acknowledged typologies that have emerged from the intersection between vidders' meta reflections and academic discourse. Here are some of them:

- *fan/fake trailer*, where clips from one or more film or TV sources are edited according to the specific rhetoric of trailers and exhibit some trailer-like features such as a censor-rating certificate, movie enterprise logo, voiceover, addresses to the audience, a rhythmic and non-chronological editing;
- *supercut*, 'a fast-paced montage of short video clips that obsessively isolates a single element from its source, usually a word, phrase, or cliché from film and TV'. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Supercut);
- *redub*, which is a remix of video clips where a new soundtrack (music and/or dialogs) replaces the original audio, often with a satirical intent; (Tralli, 2014, p. 21, my translation);
- *fan vid*, which results from 'the fan labour practice in media fandom of creating music videos from the footage of one or more visual media sources […]. The creators may explore a single character, support a particular romantic pairing between characters, criticise or celebrate the original text, or point out an aspect of the TV show or film that they find under-appreciated' (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vidding);
- *video mashup*, which 'combines multiple pre-existing video sources with no discernible relation with each other into a unified video'. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mashup_(video).

Such typologies and labels, while useful signposts to explore an almost boundless world, are not wholly satisfying. To begin with they are based on heterogeneous criteria that often overlap or are too vague. Secondly, and most importantly, the fan vid encompasses all the others, as it may take the form of a supercut, a mashup, a redub or even a fake trailer. A fan vid is primarily considered as such for pragmatic reasons: that is, because a fan made it, because it is somehow connected to a fandom, because it gravitates around a medial or mediatised object of love or like. Furthermore, to make things more complicated, Francesca Coppa recently argued that we should 'consider remix video to include not only reedits of appropriated footage but other style with a clear transformative logic' (2012, 2.3), thus proposing a 'weaker' notion of remix in which imitation also finds a place.

Instead of classifying then, why not try to identify some general criteria? I wish to propose three main criteria through which it is possible and perhaps fruitful to analyse fan vids: relation, mood and logic. In doing so, I will draw on the categories that Gérard Genette outlined in *Palimpsests*.

Genette's groundbreaking book, first published in 1982. This is not only one of the most important works on transformative processes in literature, it has also been influential in film studies too, especially with regard to intertextuality, reflexivity, adaptation, and borrowing in cinema (Stam, 1985; Cartmell, 2010; Dusi, 2012; Metz, 2016), as well as in remix studies (Dusi, 2015). Although my inspiration has been taken from Genette, I will also expand and freely elaborate on his categories, which may raise some questions when applied to audiovisual texts and especially to fan vidding.

Genette distinguishes two main types of what he names hypertextuality [4]; that is, two different kinds of relation that the derivative text entertains with its source(s): transformation, which works *directly* on the source(s), and imitation, which is an *indirect* process and implies:

> … a previously constituted model of generic competence […] capable of generating an indefinite number of mimetic performances' (1997, p. 6).

In other words, transformation has to do with texts, whereas imitation deals with genres, styles and codes, which one must master in order to produce a new specimen. From this perspective, we are close to what Coppa suggests in the passage quoted above, or to what Nicole Brenez calls respectively 'recycling in itself' and 'intertextual reuse' (2002, pp. 49-50, my translation) [5]. Most fan vids issue from a transformative process. However, Genette rightly argues that there can also be mixtures, texts that derive simultaneously from both processes (1997, p. 30). This might indeed be the case for many fake/fan trailers, which transform audiovisual sources by reediting clips and, at the same, imitating the trailer as a coded 'genre' of the film industry (Kernan, 2004). Moreover, in this connection one should also consider to what extent trailer's conventions may inform fan vidding as a whole, however, this is an issue that I don't have the space to tackle here.

The second criterion that I want to take from Genette, is the mood (*régime*, in the original French), which points to 'the sociopsychological operation of the hypertext'. (1997, p. 28) We could define it as the vid's/vidder's affective and/or intellectual attitude towards the remixed sources, and hence the function that one can assign to the remix, or which the remix itself claims through both textual and paratextual hints. Genette identifies three main moods: 1) 'playful'; 2) 'satirical'; 3) 'serious' (pp. 28-29), yet he also recognises that the three categories are 'too crude', that the borders are uncertain, mobile, and that there are many in-between or undecidable cases. Deciding on mood partly depends on an interpretive act, which is always debatable and not isolated, but takes place in collective contexts, interpretive communities. This is all the more so in fandom (Turk, 2010).

When transposed from literature to fan vidding, however, Genette's categories give rise to other problems. On the one hand, if the difference between the 'playful' and the 'satirical' – which I propose to rename, in this context, 'ironical-critical' – can be connected to a more or less aggressive or demystifying attitude towards the source text(s), the 'serious' mood is less easy to grasp. Key to the problem is that is seems to encompass so many different undertones, attitudes and operations [6], among which I want to detach and highlight a 'celebratory' mood in its own right, one that *celebrates* the source text(s) or some aspect of it. On the other hand, one could rightfully ask if such distinctions make any sense in the contexts of fandom and fan vidding since fandom is based on love or like for its object in the first place. But the issue is even more radically controversial because of what Kristina Busse has called the 'affective aesthetics':

> … the quite complex interrelation between love and critic, aesthetic distance and affect, […] the way fans have long been trailblazing […] the ability to interrogate and criticize and culturally resist without dismissing the text and their relationship to it or ironically distancing themselves (2010).

Fandom, in other words, knocks out the very categories I am advocating and the value system underlying them (a *non* affective aesthetic). Nevertheless, I think they may still be useful, less as means of branding than to stress the multilayered oscillation between fluxes of desire and critical distance.

Finally, for lack of anything better, I will define my third criterion – which is not Genette-based – as logic, meaning by this term the law which inspires/directs the editing of the clips. In this context, logic is less a particular 'style' than something like the kind of 'editing principle' followed by the fan vid. Basically, we could identify two main logics at play. The first is a narrative, sintagmatic logic where the fan vid tells a story; that is, presents or suggests some temporal and causal relationship between the different clips and/or scenes and hence between the actions, the situations, the characters' circumstances, and so forth – although not necessarily according to linearity and/or continuity [7]. Secondly, there is an associative, paradigmatic logic, where the clips are edited (and chosen) according to similarity, seriality, repetition, and not according to causality and temporality links, or at least not suggesting or contributing to the (re)construction of a story. Put in these terms the distinction sounds very crude, and I will need to introduce some undertones, as well as add some further qualifications, to my initial dichotomy. However, it is true that the dialectics between the two logics are of paramount importance in the contemporary cultural and digital environment. And it is precisely these dialectics that I wish to consider in the second part of my essay.

Narrative, quasi narrative, non-narrative, anti-narrative

In recent years, the debate on what narrative is and how one should or could define it has inflamed narratology on both a transmedial and transdisciplinary basis, and the humanities at large. As Mieke Bal (2002) has pointed out, narrative is a 'travelling concept' and there is no doubt that the concept has travelled far and wide through different media, supports, disciplinary fields, social contexts and institutional domains. During these multiple trips, it has undergone innumerable revisions, gained an ever-increasing cultural hegemony, and become much more flexible than it used to be [8]. It is no wonder that Marie-Laure Ryan has advocated a 'scalar', 'non-segregationist' conception of narrativity rather than a strictly binary one:

> […] why couldn't […] narrative [be] a fuzzy set allowing different degrees of membership, but centred around prototypical cases that everybody recognizes as narrative? In a scalar conception of narrative, definition becomes a series of concentric circles that spell increasingly narrow conditions, as we move from the outer to the inner circles, and from the marginal cases to the prototypes (2006, p. 193).

Through these concentric circles (and not only at their core), some stable features remain; namely, human or human-like agents, events and the temporal/causal links between them. It is hard to conceive of narrative and narrativity putting aside such features (time, causation), as most scholars acknowledge, and as one of the entries in *The Living Handbook of Narratology* – 'Non Temporal Linking in Narration'–paradoxically testifies (http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/non-temporal-linking-narration). That said, it is true that the notion of narrative has become so open as to almost risk decomposition. On the one hand, the focus on transmedial storytelling and the cognitive turn in narrative studies has produced a significant shift: from narrative as textual to narrative as a mental representation that can be activated by the most *diverse* stimuli (Ryan, 2004, p. 9). On the other hand, what goes under the label of 'unnatural narratology' has enlarged the boundaries of narrative at the level of both story and discourse, focusing, for instance, on the anti-linear and anti-causal plots (Richardson, 2002, pp. 47-63). In this framework, one may rightfully asks if it still makes sense to oppose 'narrative' versus 'non-narrative', or if such opposition is one to be dismissed altogether. Nevertheless, one might also ask if there is still something which is *not* narrative, what it is and how it works.

These are some of the questions I will discuss. Let us posit, for the moment, that the opposition is not completely obsolete and therefore that something like a narrative fan vid does exist. Usually, from the content point of view, it either tells 'a version of the story very similar to that in the original source, or it may read the original story against the grain' (Turk, 2011, pp. 90-91).

A narrative fan vid can take many forms, but – except for rare exceptions – it has one fundamental constraint: it must be short. The standard length of a fan vid is the average length of a pop or rock

song; that is, between two and four minutes, and this follows even when the music is not a pop song but a classical piece or other. This shortness in itself is already a curious phenomenon. In an age when long, disseminated narratives, which spread along several episodes and/or seasons, triumph in mainstream media, fan vidding takes another course: instead of branching off, it focuses; rather than stretching, it shortens and often speeds up. This means that a narrative fan vid is a highly *compressed* narrative, based on the selection and highlighting of certain given features, and on the removal of others. Consequently, it is full of rifts, gaps and blanks as well as temporal and other kinds of ellipses that the viewer is supposed to fill, drawing on their knowledge of the source(s) on general audiovisual narrative conventions, on the power of the editing, and on the conventions of fan vidding itself which has become a 'media language' in its own right. One might say that this is true of any narrative and especially visual narrative, at least if one follows David Bordwell and conceptualises it as 'the organisation of a set of cues for the construction of a story' (1985, p. 62). But in the case of fan vids, such interpretive cooperation at the level of the reconstruction of the storyline is presupposed to the highest degree. In this connection, one should also emphasise that in most cases narrative fan vids remove dialogues altogether, so that the viewer can only rely on the images and the music.

An important example relates to the TV show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* fandom (*When You are Gone*, by artanis, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mKcqJMwUciI). It is a sequel which builds an alternative universe (AU) narrated from Buffy's point-of-view. Buffy, haunted by her memories of Spike, goes back to where Sunnydale once was. She finds him and the two are reunited. Clips are taken from several sources outside *BtVS*, and cut on *When You are Gone* by Avril Lavigne [9]. The storyline is clear, with a beginning, a middle and an end which make for real narrative development. The flashbacks are easily readable (mostly in black and white, as is often the case in fan vids), to the point that even somebody who does not know the show could not only enjoy the vid but reconstruct and follow the different stages of the situation and the configuration (the plot).

Not all fan vids are such straightforward narratives. Some may have a *conceptual* penchant, such as '*Mowgly's Road*'– *Brideshead Revisited* by obsessive24 (http://obsessive24.livejournal.com /2013/02/02/). The vid is a beautiful montage of clips from Julian Jarrold's 2008 film cut to the song *Mowgly's Road* by Marina and the Diamonds. It is a study of Charles' character, told through the rhythm and lyrics of the song. The story emphasises notions such as guilt, conflict and desire in a more abstract or generalised way, thanks to its particular visual effects and the use of strong cinematic conventions including shot-reverse-shot and cut-ins.

Others can be *meta* vids like the much analysed and commented upon *I put you there*, by laurashapiro and LithiumDoll (https://dotsub.com/view/343268fe-74c9-4421-a223-90c7b0e7d027). Through the narratological device 'metalepsis', this vid stages the fan girl's relationship with the remixed source, challenging the boundaries between the real world (the world of fandom), and the fictional universe where the object of desire belongs, thereby performing the collapse of those very boundaries (Turk, 2011, pp. 91-94).

Many fan vids can be branded as 'narrative' in a much looser sense, since the compression almost gives way to a single situation, with no real changes of state. If we contrast two *BtVS* fan vids by heresluck, both focused (again) on the Buffy/Spike relationship, the difference I am pointing to is evident. One (*Real*) shows the development of their relationship, from one state to another, although highlighting symbolic parallelisms between different moments in time and multiple 'echo effects'. The other (*The Space Between*) stages the constant dialectics between the two characters, always in suspense between estrangement and approach, a perpetual backwards and forwards which almost amounts to a stasis, exactly *the space between* emphasised by the title (http://heresluck.dreamwidth.org/371323.html#cutid1).

However, even if my dichotomy were construed as a continuous line, I would want to get to the opposite end of it, where one finds what I have called the associative, serial logic, which presupposes (or conveys) a synchronic, paradigmatic approach to the remixed sources. Here some clarification is in order because such terms as 'serial' and even 'associative' may be misleading. On the one hand, a series does not necessarily imply analogy between its members. If I wrote down the 'series' of all the objects that are currently in the room in which I write this essay, the

result would be a collection of *heterogeneous* items, which are nonetheless linked by the principle of co-presence in the same physical space. On the other hand, a series of similar images sequentially presented is not in itself non- or anti-narrative. On the contrary, as André Gaudreault has pointed out, the cinematic *dispositif* is based on a 'series' of photograms (let us say, conventionally, 24 frames a second) that resemble one another so that a sequence of many similar still images can produce the impression of movement and give rise to one moving image (2002, p. 34 and p. 39). In other words, serialisation produces the movement, although the moving image cancels seriality, subsuming it to a singularity of a different order (Ibid., p. 39) [10]. It is important to keep all this in mind, and stress that the serial logic in this context implies a thematic, trope and/or 'archival' principle that breaks continuity in the unitary diegetic time of an (overall) story.

Numerous scholars, and among them Francesca Coppa (2008, 2012), have emphasised the fetishism that characterises fan vidding and is inherent in isolating particularly loved fragments in order to reconfigure them in a concentrated sequence of short temporal duration, which subsequently increases their visibility and emotional impact. If this is true, associative fan vids express fetishism squared. They get rid of or bracket narrative as the great machine of desire (Brooks, 1984, especially pp. 37-51) to focus on the detail, the single moment, the isolated gesture or word, the one element that is obsessively repeated through multiple variations. The fragmentation of the object, which lies at the basis of fetishism, becomes enhanced, glorified, to become a real structural key. These fan vids have no closure, no beginning, no middle, no end. Instead they present a cyclic character, following one fundamental law: the return of the same.

Associative or serial logic can apply to the most diverse objects: a character, a type, an actress/actor, a highly topical and ritualised sequence [11], a situation, a gesture, a phrase, and a stereotype. Almost all of these 'objects', however, take the form of an 'action' in the broader sense of the term – that is, even if the 'object' is a character, it will be a character doing or saying something, and so forth – and this raises another question in relation to narrative theory. According to scholars such as Ryan, 'the bulk of the definition [of narrative] remains solidly grounded in the content of the representation': narrativity lies in that which is represented, actions, events, states of things, relationships, spatial and temporal worlds, etc (Ryan, 2006, p. 192). Yet the associative fan vids tell us something else; that narrativity lies elsewhere. Action (even *more than one* action or event, for that matter) is perhaps a necessary but not sufficient condition of narrative because actions can be organised and/or presented in non-narrative and even anti-narrative ways that 'block' any development, and challenge 'the non-repeatable nature of the event' (Green, 2016, p. 119, my translation). Most of all, it lies in the fact that an event/action calls for another *different* event/action in order to produce narrative meaning.

Let me give a few examples in this regard, taken from period drama fandom(s). Sometimes it is the song that exhibits the figure, such as in *Then You Look at Me –Romantic Period Films Montage*, by Silver Vintage Videos (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nFJeRocDCvg), where clips from several sources are cut over Celine Dion's *Then You Look at Me* and selected according to the thematic key of the gaze, the exchange of looks as a moment of emotional tension between two characters. In period drama (but in other genres as well), another highly ritualised, emotional/erotic intensive sequence is the kiss between the two lovers. By browsing YouTube one can find innumerable fan vids titled *Period Drama Kisses* or the like where clips from dozens and dozens of sources are cut over a romantic pop song. Such vids are simply an endless (that is, the actual ending is completely arbitrary from a narrative point of view coinciding as it does with the end of the song and the last clip) string of kisses: short, long, tender, passionate, desperate, faltering, determined, there is something to suit everybody's fancy, which is the acme of the squared fetishism I mentioned above [12]. The clips look so similar that after a while one can no longer tell one source from another. Here, the fragment – also thanks to its brevity – loses *any* narrative connection with its original context, which is often impossible to identify, and seems only bound to the law of infinite repetition. Roland Barthes comes to mind when he speaks of the 'figure' as something to be construed not rhetorically, but as 'what in the straining body can be immobilised'. He writes:

> Each figure explodes, vibrates in and of itself like a sound severed from any tune—or is repeated to satiety, like the motif of a hovering music. […] the figures are non-syntagmatic, non-narrative; they are Erinyes […]. Amorous dis-cursus is not dialectical; it turns like a perpetual calendar, an encyclopaedia of affective culture (there is something of Bouvard and Pecuchet in the lover) (1978; p. 4 and pp. 6-7).

Many other similar examples of this 2.0 visual encyclopaedia of 'amorous dis-cursus', which resonate across the web, could be cited. It is not easy to identify the mood of these productions and disentangle oneself from the 'affective aesthetics' double bind. Particularly because when we analyse both the paratext accompanying the fan vid and the online comments, a cleft immediately appears between authorial intentions on the one hand, and the responses which the vid is *potentially* able to trigger on the other. The authorial intention – and many comments as well – often appear to be openly celebratory – just give me one more look, one more kiss … to throw oneself into fetishist perversion without a qualm, an incessant replica and propagation of mass media images for which the fan vid simply becomes a mouthpiece. However, these vids also have another effect: through their very repetition, through the serial presentation, often in a fast-paced montage, they transform the gesture (situation, action) into a stereotype, or make it visible as such, in that the gesture evolves into something like a tic. All this reverberates on the source(s). We then realise that the sources themselves (in this particular case, period dramas, both films and TV shows) are serial in another sense of the term; that is, standardised, made of a set of ready-made blocks that are continuously reassembled and recycled by the entertainment industry. Along these lines, the associative fan vid shifts – even in spite of itself – from the celebratory to the critical mood.

In the age of the supercut: narrative and scrap ecology

It becomes clear then that the fan vid, edited according to the associative, paradigmatic logic, more or less coincides with the supercut. The supercut has 'gone viral' over the web for a number of years, even becoming a popular video genre in its own right [13]. Apparently, the word was coined by Andy Baio in 2008 to describe a vid by Chris Zabriskie which collected many (or possibly all) of the occurrences of the word 'What?' in the first three seasons of *Lost* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GcatQSyRK6c). In 2011, Thomas McCormack published a short but brilliant and well-informed history of the supercut, dating it further back and tracing its multiple overlapping genealogies and/or parallel developments in literature, cinema, artist's books, video art and, more generally, 'the archive fever that has been sweeping the art world since 1990s'. He identified some of the first instances of the internet, web 2.0, prosumer edited supercuts, such as the 2002 *Buffies (First season)*, by Chuck Jones, which compiles all the utterances of the name 'Buffy' in the first season of the show (http://knowyourmeme.com/videos/28150-supercut).

Since then, the phenomenon has increasingly spread, establishing itself as a focus of grassroots production, emerging video art and critical investigation. To give a few examples, the Trans Cinema Express digital project has an archive file devoted to the supercut (http://transcinemaexpress.com/digital-archive/), and in 2013 the New York-based Museum of the Moving Image organised a video exhibition, *Cut up*, where one section was devoted to the supercut (http://www.movingimage.us/exhibitions/2013/06/29/detail/cut-up/) [14]. Dealing with what he calls 'internet supercuts', McCormack rightly stresses the dialectics between 'worship' and 'mockery' (2011), between the fan's obsessive pleasure in endless repetition and the social critic of mass media. As we have already seen, not only can the celebratory turn into its opposite, but the supercut often explicitly claims a critical attitude towards the source, the massive employment of clichés by mainstream media, and the ideological stakes underlying certain images [15]. In some interesting instances, such as *Pure* by Jacob Bricca (https://vimeo.com/12133254), the supercut shifts into a meta vid, it becomes a reflection on cinematic conventions, time, velocity and perception. It is also true though, that in most cases the supercut is little more than a way of exhibiting the passion of the nerd or harmlessly playing with media tropes that are already acknowledged as such by all. Not by chance perhaps, a few years after the release of such supercuts as *Buffies*, a mysterious person Fast Eddie funded *TV Tropes*, a wiki where one can find hundreds and hundreds of TV, film, comics,

literature and other media tropes. They go from 'betrayal' to 'held gaze',or 'break his heart to save him', and users are invited to continuously update the labyrinthine database that is now a multilayered net of tropes, sub-tropes, sub-sub-tropes and so forth.

Some years ago, Manovich published a groundbreaking and much discussed article where he put the database as the new dominant 'symbolic form' against the narrative (1999), drawing, as I have myself done, on the distinction between paradigm and syntagm as it was posited by linguistics and semiotics (Barthes, 1964; Jakobson, 1960). The syntagm is the phrase or the sequence of elements that are connected to one another by grammatical/syntactical laws. The paradigm is the set of interchangeable items from whence one selects each one of the single elements, forming the syntagmatic chain. In this framework, the syntagm is actual while the paradigm is virtual. Although the binary, radical opposition between database and narrative can be challenged and should be softened (as many scholars have stressed and as Manovich himself does in his article), there is no doubt that the supercut is an effective instance of the database logic, for at least two reasons. They are in fact two facets of the same phenomenon: 1) because the supercut makes the paradigm actual and visible, pushing the syntagm back into the virtual sphere; and 2) because it performs a sort of overturning, that is, it constructs a paradigm out of many original syntagms. The supercut literally 'dismembers' existing narratives, disseminating the pieces everywhere in the form of the collection of items linked by analogy-connections.

Interestingly, these are not only grassroots, vernacular practices, or even (relatively, at least on such a scale), representative of a new artistic language. In fact, such practices are mirrored in the business activities of the entertainment industry. The privately held video content producer and publisher WatchMojo.com, which owns one of the largest YouTube channels, offers hundreds of compilations such as 'Top 10 Romantic Movie Clichés', 'Top Ten Horror Movies Cliché', 'Top Ten Videogames Clichés' 'Top Ten Worst Movie Endings', and also plays its part in fostering the dismembering of original narratives (films and TV shows, and also celeb interviews, for example). Companies such as Movieclips, enabled by commercial agreements signed with Universal Studios, Walt Disney, MGM or 20th Century Fox, to name just a few, offer streaming video of movie clips, making it possible for viewers to watch not only a digest of a film but reducing it to a small collection of selected fragments to be fruited as such. Movieclips is particularly relevant in the context of this essay because it also supplies an indexing of contents according to a set of multifarious criteria such as actor, director, genre, action, theme, occasion, setting, and even props – a book, a cigarette, a sword, a glass of wine for example. Here, each criterion is a link that one can follow in order to have access to hundreds of clips of the same kind; that is, an associative thread that cuts across different films and, therefore, different narratives.

Thus, the supercut goes hand in hand with the general 'atomisation' of information which Manovich himself has tackled (2009) and which Edoardo Navas has pointed at as a requisite of remix:

> Sampling is the key element that makes the act of remixing possible. In order for Remix to take effect, an originating source must be sampled in part or in whole. However, sampling favors fragmentation over the whole. (2012, p. 12)

One could rightfully ask if fragmentation is a pre-condition or an effect of remix, but perhaps the question is not so important because it basically is the two things at the same time. More to the point here is how digital media, database logic and software culture challenge the narrative hegemony that has characterised the last few decades. According to this hegemony, narrative is everywhere; everything can be brought back to narrative configuration. Narrativity is one of the most powerful cognitive tools human beings have in order to master reality, and – most of all – a sort of universal a-temporal and a-historical sense-making frame. As Mark Turner puts it, 'Narrative imagining – story – is the fundamental instrument of thought. […] It is our chief means of looking into the future, of predicting, of planning, of explaining' (1996, p. 4). Perhaps this is still the case. But the fan vid environment we have analysed so far shows the emergence of a completely different kind of experience: a scrap ecology, alongside fragmented forms of apprehension, perception and knowledge, which are sprouting up all over the web and defy narrative ways of structuring information. If this is an apocalyptic scenario which narrative can and should resist, or

if it is a way of shaking off the thrall of narrative and experimentation with new perceptual and organisational dimensions, I am not ready to say. Time will surely tell.

Notes

1 For a detailed overview of this genealogy, see Tralli (2014) and McCormack (2011).

2 Remix […] perhaps embodies our more pervasive sense of a postmodern repudiation of artistic principles like originality, authenticity, or aura, to the degree that it can characterise our audio-visual culture as a whole (Coppa & Levin Russo, 2012, 1.2).

3 It goes without saying that YouTube is not the only existing video platform: there is Vimeo, or Archive of Our Own (created by the OTW, Organization for Transformative Works), as well as many others. There are the social networks (Facebook, Tumblr) too, and there are blog or journal platforms such as Livejournal or Dreamwidth, which have played a crucial role in the development of fan vid practices and communities. However, the diffusion and somehow hegemony which YouTube has progressively acquired, and the changes it has produced alongside, cannot be denied, as most fan vidding scholars have acknowledged (Jenkins, 2006; Coppa, 2012).

4 According to Genette, hypertextuality is one of the five types of transtextuality and involvs 'any relationship uniting a text B (which I shall call *hypertext*) to an earlier text A (I shall, of course, call it the *hypotext*), upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary' (Genette, 1997, p. 5).

5 The difference between imitation and transformation may be a more complicated issue in the case of film and the audiovisual text, as the difficulty in classifying the 'remake' shows. Is a remake an instance of transformation or imitation? According to Coppa and Brenez, it belongs to imitative practices, whereas for Genette it would be a case of transformation. Perhaps in film and audiovisual analysis, one should distinguish between *material* transformation (appropriation of pre-existing footage), *immaterial* transformation (for instance, the remake), and imitation (*à la manière de...*). However, Genette himself declares that one can imitate a single text, at the condition of considering it as a matrix, of reducing it to a set of generic traits.

6 It is already so in Genette, to the point that almost half of the book is devoted to the 'serious transformation'.

7 I am not especially referring to classic Hollywood cinema but to something more fundamental. Considered at this level, both Wilder's *Double Indemnity* and Goddard's *Breathless*, for example, could be labelled narrative despite the multiple radical differences between the two.

8 I extensively tackled the hegemony of narrative as an all-encompassing concept in the contemporary cultural environment in Meneghelli, 2012, 2014.

9 It should be stressed that fandom and source(s) do not always overlap, and are not one and the same thing. As we will see, fan vids can be multi-fandom and multi-source, mono-fandom and mono-source, mono-fandom and multi-source, as in the example we are tackling, where clips from movies by actors James Masters and Sarah Michelle Gellar are used 'instrumentally, one may say, in order to build a sequel to *BtVS*, although the focus remains on *BtVS*.

10 I am not interested in discussing Gaudreault's notion of cinema here, but only in showing that a chronological series of similar images can and does in fact exist. The issue is very complex, of course, and I am not even taking into account the problem that any sequence of images is fruited *in time*.

11 And also, for that matter, an actor in a typical sequence, such as in *Dancin' with myself: An ode to Gene Kelly*, by Jetpack Monkey, where clips taken from various Gene Kelly dance numbers are cut to Billy Idol's famous song (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1oxmcJNmvbI& list=RD1oxmcJNmvbI&index=1).

12 See, for example (but many other instances could be cited): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r_QVs9lkiXo; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tAxxcveNdaU; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eCT2pFSGBqM; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XOM9it0wOdQ; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1P9a97l1b7E.

13 I do not have the space here to tackle the serial logic in video art, and the issue of the more and more fleeting boundaries between 'video art' with a capital V and 'popular' video remix practices, which in itself would be worth an essay. For repetition, the loop, narrative and anti-narrative in contemporary video art, see Delville, 2016.

14 Here is the list of the vids on show: 'Buffies' by Chuck Jones (2002); 'Fargo – Yeah' by Alex Kosutic and Antoine Manceaux (2006); 'Big Lebowski – Every Single Dude' by Tanner Stauss (2007); 'I'm Not Here to Make Friends' by Rich Juzwiak (2008); 'Let's Enhance' by Duncan Robson (2009); 'Kramer's Entrance' by Tyler Creviston (2009); 'Holy Robin Compilation' by David Irons (2009); 'Blah Blah Blah' by Alex Brown (2010); 'Star Wars: Chewbacca Supercut' by Curt Hanks (2011); 'Every Single Michael Bay Explosion' by Jimmy Barr (2011); 'Iron Chef America – SECRET INGREDIENT' by MrEh (2011). 'Sorkinisms: A Super Cut' by Kevin Porter (2012).

15. See for instance Surrey, 2016.

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