

Enunciative Fan Production and Social “Flows”

Curating Fan Identity on Etsy

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Broadly speaking, I’m interested in how fan production and fan talk fits within the larger contextualizing flows of online culture and contemporary digital popular culture, from Etsy to Tumblr to BuzzFeed. For this Flow piece, I’ll be focusing on fan talk within the online e-commerce marketplace, Etsy.

Looking at fan merchandising on Etsy is a tricky question that stirs up copyright concerns and also arguably violates the long-standing (though possibly changing) fannish taboo against making money off of fan art. Etsy originated in 2005 as a marketplace for handmade and vintage goods. It touted itself as an online space that restored a sense of human interaction to shopping and valued handmade craftwork and the repurposing of vintage goods. The larger Etsy brand conveyed an intimate feel, and this extended to the circulation of fan-based goods on Etsy. A few years back, when you searched Etsy for goods connected to a fan-favored character, say Harry Potter, or Castiel, or Doctor Who, you would not get very many hits. Fan artists and crafters concerned about copyright would only allude to the fannish associations and were thus quite creative about how they offered fan goods, from fan-themed wools for knitting to fan-themed teas. These fan goods seemed to hide in plain sight and speak in code (or in “cultural passwords,” as Mark Stewart called it in a recent piece in Flow).¹ Or sometimes, you might purchase, say, a piece of jewelry from a seller and request to have it personalized to include a fannish code, wondering whether the creator knew what the code meant, or assuming that he or she didn’t.

Since 2010, Etsy has grown larger and more visible, with reports of it being “too big” to sustain itself, and possibly facing death from an overpopulation of poorly kept up shops, or inversely, from the introduction of factory-made goods in 2013 (with the CEO arguing that “handmade” could encompass factory-made pieces). Now, when you search for Etsy for fan-themed goods, the results combine allusion-based fan code with overt imagery explicitly named, from a “unicorn blood” scented candle to a bookmark featuring a cell from a Harry Potter film. But advice to Etsy crafters hoping to sell fandom-related goods online still instructs them to avoid copyright infringement by removing any direct imagery and naming, transforming say, a “Harry Potter Owl pendant” into a “wizardly wisdom owl.”

So fan allusive coding still exists, and is still preached as a best practice by those coaching copyright safety. But overall, fandom is much more out in the open, a visible part of the Etsy culture. Fandom on Etsy is no longer just about coding, but rather, it is about curating. It’s about curating a life style, and not one necessarily specific to a particular fandom or fan text, but that speaks to a larger millennial multifannish identity. Over its nine-year existence, Etsy has

incorporated various social networking elements, allowing you to follow particular users, and allowing users to curate “treasuries.” These treasuries combine items around a named theme, like “Fall Romance” or “Hipster Backpack Choices,” or, on the fannish end of the spectrum, “I’m a High Functioning Sociopath,” and one of my favorites, “Mother’s Day, Fandom Inspired,” (which includes, deliciously, a winter is coming bath bomb). Treasury authors bring together multiple allusive items, making the collective allusion more explicit, or combine allusive items with explicit ones, or include other items that were not listed with any fan intent at all, to together convey a larger sense of an aesthetic material expression of either a particular fandom, or a fannish lifestyle. Even more fascinatingly, these treasuries make an argument for the way in which our investment in popular media can be translated into at least the images of hand crafted material goods, the thought of the scent of what unicorns blood might smell like held in juxtaposition with a hand knit scarf and a vintage desk to build a digital vision of a material Harry Potter world. Throw in a Winter is Coming bath bomb and some Endverse Castiel chai tea, and you have a curated way of being in the world, one that not only translates popular commercial media into handcrafted material goods, but that synthesizes fan allusions from multiple worlds and texts, insisting that we live in a boundary-less multifandom universe.

ⁱ Mark Stewart, “A Black 1967 Chevy Impala: Fan Shibboleths as Cultural Password,” Flow TV (August 4, 2014)
<http://flowtv.org/2014/08/a-black-1967-chevy-impala/>.