

Kevin Pratt

Dr. Flail

Visual Rhetoric

October 3, 2008

Challenging Convention at Dragon*Con: The Visual Rhetoric of the Costume

In *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Dick Hebdige uses the examples of homosexual and punk subcultures to reveal the use of style as a carefully built “Refusal” against cultural norms. The participatory subculture of popular media fans takes

this one step further. These fans enjoy the irony of being imaginary characters in the real world. Just as gender bending by the gay subculture challenges normative visions of gender and exposes it as illusory, the fandom subculture challenges the normative visions of everyday reality as real. Participants also often challenge the hegemonic notion that products of the imagination belong only to the author or producer of a text. Instead, they engage them on their own terms and modify them to suit their needs

through avenues like fan fiction, role play, and costuming. The Dragon*Con convention in Atlanta, like similar conventions around the world, serves as a place where fans use these textual appropriations to embody their fandom with others who can both appreciate the effort and read the visual cues. The convention brings together a diaspora of fans each year to enjoy a few days of spectacle and community.



Figure 1 - A female Mandalorian warrior from the *Star Wars* universe. Janga Fett and his son Boba Fett are the only Mandalorians in the live-action films.

Henry Jenkins, an academic and self confessed fan, defines fandom as "a subculture that exists in the 'borderlands' between mass culture and everyday life and that constructs its own identity and artifacts from resources borrowed from already circulating texts" (Jenkins 3). By costuming, members of this subculture use these already circulating texts as lexicons of style. They create a shared visual vocabulary



Figure 2 - A motorcycle gang of Klingons from the *Star Trek* universe.

that allows for an orgy of visual pleasure as each costume, look, or item is identified, deconstructed into its different elements, and categorized according to its media property. Some costumers adhere strictly to authorial intent and are impressive in their authenticity, others interpret and build a visual “bricolage” of different texts, and still others take on personas that are not tied to any particular text but to nebulous genres like steampunk, furies, or mad scientists. “Humble objects” like stop watches and goggles work much like the safety-pins of punk and tubes of vaseline for early gay culture; they’re “pregnant with significance” (Hebdige 18). For example, using just a colored parasol, a mechanic’s coverall and a dual-bun hairstyle, two different girls (Figure 3) are able to embody the same character easily recognized by viewers familiar with *Firefly* as Kaylee, the sexually frustrated ship’s mechanic. The girl on the left adds additional authenticity with facial smudges she could have gotten in an engine room.



Figure 3 - Two versions of *Firefly's* Kaylee, the ship's mechanic.

Fans of popular media (unlike sports fans) move beyond the simple pleasures of community and visual recognition, and disrupt hegemonic ideas of taste. Dressing up in Civil War uniforms and reenacting battles or performing on a stage are fringe but accepted forms of costumed play. Walking down the streets as Pikachu or a Storm

Trooper violates the everyday norms of good taste. This idea of adults reveling in the visual styles of fiction dressing up as characters from the stories in popular media challenge “particular class interests,” and because taste is defined by this hegemonic class, the “boundaries of 'good taste'...must constantly be policed” (Jenkins 16). The subculture has found more support from the general public over time as it gained popularity, but its affiliation with popular media still comes with a “harmless buffoon” dismissal. However, with a few notable exceptions, those with a stake in the ideology of intellectual property view them still as “threats to public order” (Hebdige 2).

Jenkins explains,

Unimpressed by institutional authority and expertise, the fans assert their own right to form interpretations, to offer evaluations, and to construct cultural canons. Undaunted by traditional conceptions of literary and intellectual property, fans raid mass culture, claiming its materials for their own use, reworking them as a basis for their own cultural creations and social interactions. Fans seemingly blur the boundaries between fact and fiction, speaking of characters as if they had an exis-

tence apart from their textual manifestations, entering into the realms of the fictions as if it were a tangible place they can inhabit and explore.

Fan culture stands as an open challenge to the "naturalness" and desirability of dominant cultural hierarchies, a refusal of authorial authority and a violation of intellectual property (18).

This inherent refusal in the various forms of participatory culture works to elevate (cultural) crimes (copyright/trademark infringement) to the level of Art (Hebdige 2).

For example, the Mandalorian warrior (Figure 1) both honors and subverts the authorial intent of *Star Wars*. Male versions of this character exist both in the movies and in the official books based in the *Star Wars* universe. This female version adds to the cannon. Instead of embodying an authorial vision of a Mandalorian



Figure 4 - A family of orcs.

warrior and gender bending as a male, she appropriates the form and adds a female chest plate, a top knot of long hair, and a strong but definitely female posture with shoulders back and hands held together below the belly button. One can imagine her agreeing with an editorial by C. A. Siebert in *Slaysu*, a fanzine that included slash erotica, about Lucasfilm's legal attempts to control fan publications:

Lucasfilm is saying, "you must enjoy the characters of *Star Wars* universe for male reasons. Your sexuality must be correct and proper by my (male) definition." I am not male. I do not want to be. I refuse to be a

poor imitation, or worse, of someone's idiotic ideal of femininity (qtd. in Jenkins: 31).

The older gentleman as Pee-wee (Figure 5) also challenges textual assumptions not with gender but with age. The outfit, glasses, bike and facial expression effectively code for Pee-wee Herman (at least to me, I have heard some think he's from an ad somewhere), but his baldness and age forces the viewer to imagine that Pee-wee has been able to maintain his optimism and enthusiasm into old age, something that wasn't certain given his experiences in the texts. The player challenges the ideology of age and makes us smile all the while.

The Klingon biker gang (Figure 2) illustrates another approach to costume play. The other examples



Figure 5 - Pee-Wee on his bike from *Pee-wee's Big Adventure*.

given all seem to be characters (albeit modified) visiting reality from the imaginary worlds. The Klingon players, extend the Klingon idea into the cultural reality and mix it with American biker culture. By doing so, they invite direct comparison between the two subcultures, one fictional and one

imaginary. With little thought, the correlations are revealed as ideological. Klingons on Hogs seem to make perfect sense. Of course! Klingons would ride Hogs if they were real! As a symbol of power and independence, the Hog seems just as imposing as the fictional Klingon Bird of Prey, and the goatees and long hair codes for both Klingon or Biker men. The biker on the far left also adds authenticity by sporting a Klingon symbol to the windshield of his bike. This brings not just the character but the bike itself into

the intersection of two cultures. All of this together accomplishes exactly what subversive styles hope to accomplish—force the viewer to reexamine the normal.

Finally, the orc trio (Figure 4) directly challenges ISA strategies used to transition people from the child play world to the adult “real” world. Each year, as more fans become parents, more families attend as fictional characters. Everyone, including the parents, have costumes, and the characters often inhabit a single textual world. From the Fantastic Four to The Incredibles to the orcs in this example, the adults participate on the same level as the children, and the arbitrary distinction between child and adult play falls away. As far as these parents are concerned, the kids will never be too old to play dress up, and to them, textual interpretation is fluid and subjective. In the educational ISA/RSA of school, these children might be more likely to see outside an ideology where “[t]he teacher’s red pen rewards those who ‘correctly’ decipher the text and penalizes those who ‘get it wrong’” (Jenkins 25). They may be able to resist the institutional bias towards educators as authority figures whose subjective interpretations of texts become the “correct” objective interpretation that students are expected to examine. This “know-how” of literary analysis is formed to “ensure subjection to the ruling ideology or the master of its ‘practice’” (Althusser 133). In this case, the ruling ideology’s interest is to ensure that childlike play and mindful blurring of the real and imaginary seems abnormal to adults/workers. This mindful blurring (for now) is all too close to “dangerous” critical examinations of cultural norms.

Perhaps the most remarkable part of costuming is what motivates the players. I believe that most of those who dress up at Dragon*Con, do it for the simple fun of it. The subversive aspect of these costumes challenging hegemonic ideology is a happy side effect of envisioning a reality where imagination is more than just a mental filter. Even those who don’t dress up participate as observers—teasing apart visual puzzles posed by stylistic cues. They delight in the unexpected and enjoy spending time away from the realities of home. I’m sure one attendee, Ross, wasn’t alone when he said at this year’s convention, “I wish it was Dragon*Con all year long.”

Works Cited

Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*.

Trans. Ben Brewster. New York, NY: Monthly Review Press, 1971.

Hebdige, Dick. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. New York, NY: Routledge, 1989.

Jenkins, Henry. *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture*. New York, NY: Routledge, 1992.

