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Grassroots Creativity or *Database* Commodification in the “Everyday Life” of AMVs?

Abstract:

As creativity can be considered one of the most valuable commodities in the 21st century (Harris 2014), its grassroots implications at a global level, especially in regards to fandom practices, provide a fertile ground for academic debate and analysis. One particular case is the popular activity of making animated musical videos (AMVs) in the universe of the Japanese animation (*anime*) fandom worldwide.

Considering this particular type of fan made object in the wider context of the remix culture, L. Manovich argues: “(...) the great majority of AMVs consist of segments lifted from commercial anime shows and commercial music. (...) To use de Certeau’s terms, we can describe the process of creating new web content as a tactical creativity, which “*expects to have to work on things in order to make them its own, or to make them ‘habitable.’*” (326). The current paper addresses the case of AMVs both as grassroots creativity and as tactical creativity in order to tackle with issues such as the local/global divide in fandom communities and the self-exploratory/self-performance value of AMVs.

Analyzing the case of Romanian AMV “producers”, the paper will also further explore to what extent is this practice a form of creative subversion or just another form of creative commodification? Are anime fans grassroots activists or just *database animals* (Azuma 2009)?

Keywords: Japanese popular culture, animated music video, grassroots creativity, performance studies, commodification.

Instead of an argument

“The creativity turn may be urging us toward a merging of embodied (performed) with disembodied (digital) spaces, ritual acts and identities (...)”, A. Harris argues in *The Creative Turn* as she discusses creativity as one of the most valuable commodities of the 21st century. When considering fan practices and fan subjectivities this creative turn sheds a new light on what H. Jenkins has termed participatory cul-

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ture, as boundaries get blurred and identities become fluid constructions and reconstructions. Considering the ever growing fandom of Japanese popular culture on a global scale, the fan practice that I would like to address is that of animated music videos production, in short AMVs, a fruitful case to analyze in terms of creativity, identity and the appropriation of cultural products in everyday life. As Russo and Coppa underline in their study "Fan/remix video (a remix)": "Vidding, political remix, DIY media, trailer mashups, tribute videos, memes, machinima, fan films—we are in the midst of an explosion in vernacular creativity that appropriates, celebrates, critiques, and transforms commercial entertainment." (1.2). It is clear that AMVs are a special case in the already long history of fan vidding and remixing, pertaining to the growing fandom of Japanese popular culture. The current paper proposes to address this practice in terms both of grassroots fandom and creative commodification, inscribing it in a series of academic debates on user generated content and piracy (Hawkins), the elements on convergence culture and online communities (Burgess, Russo, Coppa), and questions on online identity and performance (Lamerichs).

Defining the animated music video (AMV)

Animated music videos are fan-produced music videos, starting in the 80's as an amateur practice, that draw their source material from Japanese animation (*anime*, as they are widely known) and that represent a mix of scenes and different editing techniques, can be attributed to a certain genre, can be a critique of the fandom itself and so on, while also being combined with a sound/musical track. According to the popular site AnimeMusicVideo.org, T. Park, the first recognized AMV appeared in 1983, remixing *Gundam* footage and the then famous "Mr. Roboto" song (Knobel, Lankshear, 211). M. Ito defines them in his study on the AMV community in the US as eclectic forms of creative fan appropriation: "One of the most popular events in any major North American con is the AMV competition, featuring videos in which fans edit anime to a soundtrack of the editor's choosing. Generally this soundtrack is popular Euro-American music, but it could also be the soundtrack to a movie trailer or dialogue from a TV show, movie, or fan-created script. (...)" (275). Ito, also, comments on the community aspect of producing AMVs that pertains to a common practice in the remix culture environment: fans commenting on each other's works and appropriation of the popular culture content, giving advice, voting or creating a sense of closed connoisseurship, which is highly valued in the specific fandom.

A different take on AMVs by D. Milstein inscribes them in the larger concept of unofficial music videos (UMVs), defining them in terms of a "self-referential genre of UMVs" (29) that are the work of ultimate fans and that exist at the gray border of piracy and free marketing for the anime industry. Thus, Milstein's analysis of AMVs takes into account their types considering the content which can be exploratory, storytelling centered or focused on character development, to name the main, but also tackles with their specificity in the fan-made videos environment in terms of self-referential-

ity as homage to the anime industry and self-homage in terms on fandom and technical know-how.

In the exploratory volume on do-it-yourself media edited by Lankshear and Knobel, AMVs are considered in terms of their genres that range from comedy, romance, drama to horror, tragedy etc. (just as *anime* themselves), and moreover in terms of “two general forms: AMVs that remix clips from a single anime series (e.g. *Naruto*, *Evangelion*), and AMVs that remix clips from multiple anime series and movies” (212), and sub-forms: non-narrative and conceptual, celebrations of anime series, alternate or stand-alone stories and so forth.

Thus, one can observe the complex universe in which animated music videos are created and circulated, whether considering a close reading or this fan practice inside the online community. I propose to address all these definitions, while also joining a different frame, that of transcultural grassroots and tactical creativity, following the lines proposed by Manovich, also having de Certeau in sight: “the great majority of AMVs consist of segments lifted from commercial anime shows and commercial music. (...) To use de Certeau’s terms, we can describe the process of creating new web content as a tactical creativity, which ‘expects to have to work on things in order to make them its own, or to make them ‘habitable’.” (322).

By following the idea of a tactical creativity in the transcultural fandom ecology, I would like to shift the perspective towards the concept of the AMV fan practice *per se*, while also drawing insights from a rather specific point of view, that of Japanese sociologist H. Azuma. Azuma’s critique on *otaku* culture, *otaku* being the Japanese word for fanatic or geek, sheds light on various fan practices in the Japanese popular culture environment: from fan art to cosplay (fans costuming as their favorite characters), fansubbing (fans creating online subtitles for current anime series and movies) and more. Azuma terms fans as *database animals* who consume copies of copies, sometimes not even being aware of the original, transforming their world into a large database, dubbed by a shift in their consumer behavior: “from the supremacy of narrative to the supremacy of characters and from myths of authorship to database of affective elements (*moe yoso*)” (181). Furthermore, these affective elements are exchanged and remixed over and over again.

So, focusing on the grassroots, tactical and habitable on the one hand, and on the affective database consumption on the other hand, I propose to further investigate the AMV production with a case study on the Romanian convention *Nijikon* and the AMV contest winners from 2009 onwards. I have chosen this corpus as *Nijikon* is one of the most popular conventions in Romania, having an active AMV producers’ community that competes, sometimes even more years in a row, and, for the purpose of this paper, I will focus on the winners of the first place in the competition from the last 5 years, but also some other producers will be mentioned as to be able to underline certain local patterns in the practice.

AMVs as tactical creativity and self-exploration

The concept of tactical creativity presumes another point that Manovich raises, that of the remix as an almost day to day practice: "People build their worlds and identities out of these readily available objects by using different tactics: bricolage, assembly, customization, and—to use a term that was not a part of de Certeau's vocabulary but that has become important today—remix". (322) Yet, precisely in this customization the self-exploration or even self-performance lies, as pointed at the beginning of this paper when discussing the creative turn at the crossroads of the embodied and the virtual. And the Romanian AMVs producers are no different than the rest of the community, using *anime* clips and local or international music to appropriate their favourite Japanese popular culture products, to share experience with other producers, to join competitions at local and international conventions, and, in the end, to explore their identity at the intersection of online and offline. Taking a look at the subscriptions for the *Nijikon* AMV competition in the last 5 years, some of the patterns defined by Ito, Milstein, and Knobel and Lankshear underline the concept of a transcultural community: conceptual AMVs with Euro-American or Japanese music, parodies with scripts created in Romanian or with local music (for self-referential purposes in the *otaku* culture), action AMVs with dubstep, romance AMVs, or even AMVs created by the producer for a fellow member of the fan community. The local scenery seems to be no different than the US counterparts, for instance. Moreover some of the producers chose to enter other international competitions with their *Nijikon* winning AMVs.

Thus, going in more depth and focusing on the first place winners of the AMV competition in the last five years, one can observe the prevalence of conceptual AMVs with themes like war, society, suffering or love, having titles like *A generation of war* (2009), *Of course, they all died* (2011) or *Scraps of radiance* (2014). Most of them take footage from various *anime* series and movies, having different editing techniques, and being uploaded on visual social sites like Youtube or Vimeo for further considerations. Usually, producers add a number of details to the description section, from technical to conceptual, also mentioning the place they won in a certain competition. For instance, the 2011 winner, *Of course, they all died*, is described by the producer on YouTube as: "The idea of this video is based on the intro sequence of the movie 'Incendies'. The actual movie deals with the theme of emotional burns caused by (civil) wars. In this video, there are no actual characters, thus, riots/poor society affects a collective person (rioters), not one or two" (English in the original). This commentary is, in fact, a good example of the tactical and the habitable, as the fan offers the key to his own perspective of the world that he is exploring. Also, going even further with the self-exploratory scenario, the 2014 winner, *Scraps of radiance*, is accompanied by a dedication-description on Vimeo as follows: "This was a little something for the birthday of my precious friend, kittychriss, later retouched for *Nijikon* 2014. For her colourful mind that is always an inspiration for me." The self in exploration and performance uses Japanese popular culture products to create the habitable. From this point of view, the local AMV pro-

duction is a different form of the vernacular, as defined by Burgess in his study on creativity and the digital: “Vernacular creativity is a productive articulation of consumer practices and knowledges (...). Above all, the term signifies what C. Atton calls ‘the capacity to reduce cultural distance’ between the conditions of cultural production and the everyday experiences from which they are derived and to which they return.” (206). This reduction of cultural distance is even more important in an emerging fandom practice that is inspired by a distant culture (from a geographic point of view), but made available through the transcultural online community. It is the point where the tactical and habitable join the grassroots creativity in local AMV production and local fandom all in all.

Ito further explores this line of thought: “What is unique about AMVs though is the fact that the practice centers on transnational cultural remix, that localizes foreign visual content to popular local music.” (Jenkins, “Otaku Culture in a Connected World: An Interview with M. Ito, D. Okabe, and I. Tsuji (Part Three)”). Or even foreign music, I would add, as some of the Romanian AMV producers choose Japanese songs as well. Yet, the winner from 2012 titled in Romanian *Negru* (*Black* in translation) after the song by local rapper Deliric1 that is remixed with the *anime* footage is a perfect example of both the transcultural practice and a type of grassroots creativity functioning as self-exploration. The producer’s comment on Youtube: “Listen to the song and let the images flow” (*Negru*). This AMV can be “read” as a social critique of the local society and humanity through in through, as each line of the rapper almost perfectly synchs with the *anime* scenes.

In other words, it is probably no coincidence that the predominant type for the winning AMV is conceptual, as this production becomes a form of grassroots creativity in accessing the transcultural community and legitimizing the local fandom as a mature and critical type of fandom. As mentioned earlier, some of the local AMV producers, winners or not, also join international competitions, proving that the global/local divide in the age of the digital may as well be an irrelevant issue in addressing fandom.

AMVs as habitable and self-performance

The perspective of fans as creators/producers manifests itself in various ways in Japanese popular culture. These forms of *otaku* culture can be seen as blurring the line between fictional and real, between popular culture and everyday life. As fans appropriate the product and make it “their own” as de Certeau and Manovich both argue, fandom gets closer to performance. S. Napier states that Japanese popular culture and, *anime* in particular, is a *fantasyscape* that allows fans to explore not an imagined reality of Japan, but endless possible identities (293-294). Consuming becomes a form of play, fandom becomes a form of play. Producing AMVs transforms into a form of play, a performance of a possible identity: “In many cases, fan-created transformative works give voice to marginalized subjectivities and viewpoints and offer alternative interpre-

tations of popular texts." (Ito, 288) Thus, it becomes a self-performance, though not as "visible" as the practice of cosplay, for example.

On the other hand, one must take into account that addressing AMVs made for the competition section of a fan convention that are, also, screened during that convention, implies what A. Hawks terms "the creator-as-star status" (10) of the AMV producer. "Update: 1st place at Nijikon 2014. I have no words. I'm happy it sent its message across well, but to be above such many other good AMVs is totally unexpected *bows to her fellow competitors*" (*Scraps of Radiance*, Vimeo) – this comment update in the description section of the AMV *Scraps of Radiance* gives a sense of both the trans-cultural online community and the local community of fan producers, underlining the *stardom* and the identity of the fan creator in self-performance. This is the same AMV that was made for a close friend of the producer and that is further described as: "For the imperfect beings that we are and how we can still manage to love perfectly with all the little pieces that we are made of." The conceptual AMV becomes the self-performance understood in the sense proposed by Bennett and Booth as "fandom" looked at through the lens of performance studies which "appears to be more a part of one's behavior—an identity enacted through certain rituals." ("Performance and performativity in fandom"). Also, another AMV producer, a winner in a different year at *Nijikon*, comments on *Scraps of Radiance* by adding that the technique has improved, the producer has grown in its practice and that it is an impressive work, further enhancing the sense of community and identity in performance. Of course, both the AMVs producers have nicknames that, also, contribute to the identity building which is becoming the norm in digital environments.

Let's take a closer look at the other AMVs as well through this new lens, by further expanding the habitable in terms of self-performance. *Filter the colours*, the 2010 winner named by the song it is using, refers to "Finding my way / Through a world far away / Filter the colours away" (as the lyrics go), while cross-cutting between characters struggling, fading, searching almost literally through the colours. It is a quest of defining oneself, of playing with the possibilities. *Love me!*, the 2013 winner made by the same producer as *Scraps of Radiance* also comes with an illustrative description in terms of self-performance: "Words are too little to express what this song means to me. I'd rather you understood by yourself by watching the video, instead of reading it in this box. (...) This was my present to my boyfriend for our one year anniversary and describes what our first year meant for me – a pleasant journey towards healing and joy and light." Also, a conceptual multi-anime AMV, this one is accompanied by Sheeran's *Give me love* as it presents different kinds of love, relationships and their emotional implications. The *habitable* everyday translated into a mix of *anime* scenes that evoke the self and its quest. *Of course, they all died*, the 2011 winner, goes into a different kind of play, that of a connoisseur exploring his knowledge: "The first part of the video (until the drums kick in) is marked by a pale tone with shady borders. The second one (presenting the actual street fighting) is marked by the Y jitter, a little flicker,

spots and stripes - to increase the violence and long-term existence of a 'third-world society'." The self-performance is marked by a critical look in this case, as the AMV is also a critique of war and its consequences on society.

"This process of fan creation which leads to fans treating other fans as stars and creators in turn changes the convention culture, as fans begin to demand creators from their own ranks rather than or in addition to industry professionals" (10), A. Hawks adds in the study. Such is the case with Romanian producers as seen with some of the comments above, but I propose to expand this fan creator status in the sense of self-performance and legitimization of a fan identity inside a transcultural community, also as seen in the examples above. Each fan creator explores possible identity/identities in performance, while using what Manovich has termed tactical creativity in order to develop his status inside the community.

AMVs and the *database* commodification

"Indeed, if twentieth-century subjects were simply consuming the products of the culture industry, twenty-first century prosumers and "pro-ams" are passionately imitating it." (321-322), Manovich adds while also raising an important point – to what extent is this fan creation driven by the industry itself, along with the social media global players, gadget producers and music entertainment as well? Thus, what was termed earlier as self-performance and tactical creativity can be seen, from a different perspective, as enhancing the professional content and transforming fan creation in free marketing.

Is this the case of Romanian AMV producers as well? In order to offer a productive insight into the critique raised by Manovich, I would like to draw on the concept of the *database animal* as developed by Japanese sociologist Azuma. "Such a 'databa-seification' of the world is supported economically by globalization and technological-ly by the spread of information technology (IT)." (181), he argues, while considering Japanese popular culture fans or *otakus* in terms of *animals* consuming a database of elements that generate *affective* emotions. It is what popular culture theorist H. Jenkins has, also, argued about convergence culture connecting it with a new form of economy, the affective one. Considering this line of thought, the AMV production fits to a certain degree as it presumes a remix of elements that the producer chooses, from the music and its emotional message, to the scenes and special effects that together form a database of technical and *anime* know-how. So, the same practice that legitimizes them can be seen in the postmodern frame proposed by Azuma as consuming simula-cra for instant affective gratification. He goes even further by affirming that "the data-base becomes the center of the creative process in the computer age" (227), a fact that can be stated about the ways AMVs are produced, screened at conventions and consumed as well. The process implies smart software for processing, cutting and creating the montage, a deep knowledge of the *anime* series for both the fan producer and consumer, and, also, a musical database at hand.

Thus, the AMV production as *database* commodification supports the main point that Manovich, Ito and others address: the grey line between piracy and fan creativity, as the Japanese popular culture industry is, in the end, promoted and enters new markets. Such is the case for the Romanian fandom, for there are no local distributors at the moment, only a few scattered shops for the fans to acquire their favourite products. If this type of commodification is more nuanced in the case of the five AMVs discussed so far, the competition entries at *Nijikon* can be analyzed from this point of view as well, as they range from single *anime* series homages to a glorification of dub-step and so forth.

In a postcolonial reading, it is what academia has termed the Japanese popular culture's *soft power* in a sense. The transcultural becomes the economical tactic for entering new markets as the grassroots creativity of fandom converts into economical gain for producers. Yet, even if this critique stand and needs to be further inquired, I believe that it cannot undermine the tactical creativity and the habitable value, especially at a local level, both from the self's identity building as a fan creator, and the online community as a whole. Thus, the affective turn and the creative turn complement each other in a complex ecology of marketing and legitimization. Yet, it may be a win-win situation for the industry and fans alike, or a constant struggle between the creative fan practices and a new type of mainstream behaviour.

Conclusions

If one searches YouTube for Romanian AMVs, one finds a user account named Your Best Romanian AMVs that showcases these fan creations that were presented at various conventions, that inscribe themselves in all the definitions presented in the first section of the paper, and, that on some occasions can hint to important insights into the local fan community. It is in this world of simulations and collected identities that the AMV community functions, as although for the purpose of localizing the fandom I have termed them Romanian, the local/global divide is a lot more fluid, the fan creators functioning in a transcultural online community, using English as *lingua franca* and transcultural nicknames.

Thus, in this complex environment, AMVs become a fan practice that further represents the creative turn and the affective turn, being both a way for fans to appropriate Japanese popular culture products and remix them in combination with Euro-American cultural products and a way to make the industry grow even more. Also, as shown by analyzing the first place winners of the local fan convention *Nijikon* in the last 5 years, AMV production has various implications, from exploring identities and performing the self as fan and more to legitimizing a niche and enhancing grassroots creativity to affectively consuming elements of the Japanese popular culture *database*.

Yet, if these various points of view may seem to contradict each other, I propose to consider them alternative elements of the same continuum in which fans are seen as co-creators blurring the boundaries between amateurs and professionals, prosumers

and stardom, local and global, affective consumption and tactical creativity, the habitable and the database. *AMVirus*, another fan creation found on Your Best Romanian AMVs, can be a point of discussion in further studies, as this is an emergent and challenging topic all in all. This AMV shows how the elements of the database invade the user's screen, while remixing cute (in the sense of *moe* and *kawaii* cultures) *anime* elements and the song *Microsoft Windows Rap*. It is the perfect example of the complex combination between the creative critique, the subtle homage to the fandom and the impersonation of the *database animal*.

Other points that need further explorations are the link between fandom practices and performance studies, as briefly shown in the analysis of the AMV as a form of self-exploration and self-performance, the self-referential values of the AMV practice and the ways in which transparency functions in this transcultural online community in order to further legitimize it, create a certain status for the creator-as-star fan and so forth.

As for the apparent clash between the subversive and the commodifiable, I propose to address them in terms of different outcomes of the fan practice that should be further developed and complemented with an analysis of the fans' intentions during the creative process.

List of animated music videos:

A generation of war (Notorious, 2009)
AMVirus (xDanDJ, 2010)
Filter the colours (WhiteDragon195, 2010)
Of course, they all died (Horia Șerban, 2011)
Negru (HanwellInsaneAsylum, 2012)
Love me! (Nezumichan, 2013)
Scraps of Radiance (Nezumichan, 2014)

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