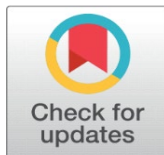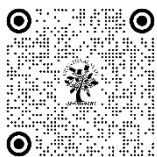# DEFIANT DEVIANT IMAGES: SCANNING *A SONG OF ICE AND FIRE* FANART

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ABSTRACT

Fan studies is the scholarly analysis of fans and fandom. The engagement of individuals or groups with a particular text or cultural phenomenon with which they have formed an emotional attachment becomes the focus of study. The object of fandom can be any work of literature, film, music, or other media; an activity such as a sport; or even a famous person. Fans move from being mere consumers of the culture industry to becoming producers in their turn or "prosumers". They produce stories and songs and art centred around their fan object, which are circulated and critiqued by other fans in the safe space of digital fandoms. In this process fans also become performers. Fan art can be anything from portraits of characters to depiction of meaningful moments in the source text or images of wish fulfilment. A Song of Ice and Fire is a series of five fantasy novels by George R.R. Martin published from 1996 to 2011, which has become a cultural phenomenon and has spawned several fandom sites online. This paper examines the fanart produced by A Song of Ice and Fire fans, which are circulated in tumblr.com, deviantart.com and reddit.com to understand the subversive messages they convey.

Keywords: Fan Studies, Fanart, Digital Fandom

1. INTRODUCTION

A large section of the population, surveys reveal, has created and shared media content online. It is not a surprise to discover that a majority of these contributors are young people, as they are the natives of the digital world. The expansion of the internet has unleashed a creative storm online. This creativity is often centred around participatory cultures. Henry Jenkins and his colleagues provide a comprehensive definition of a participatory culture. They characterize it as a culture that possesses limited obstacles to the expression of artistic endeavors and civic involvement. Furthermore, it is a culture that strongly encourages the creation and dissemination of various creations. Additionally, this culture fosters an atmosphere of informal mentoring, where seasoned participants impart their wisdom and expertise to inexperienced individuals. Jenkins et al. (2009) The diversification of

cultural expression is one of the prime benefits of participatory culture with the members believing that their contributions are meaningful and accepted. Fandoms are a form of participatory culture, which have been proliferating online in recent years.

The term 'fandom' refers to a community built around a shared appreciation for, or emotional investment in, an element of popular culture. The fan object might be books, TV shows, movies, sports, sports teams, music, or celebrities. Earlier, fans laboriously copied and circulated fan magazines, and fan activity was limited to attending conventions and engaging in cosplay. Fans accumulate knowledge regarding their object of interest. Fandoms existed before the internet era, but their visibility and chance for interaction became heightened manifold since they went online, drawing huge numbers to their folds. Fans are often negatively stereotyped as obsessed and isolated. The media has persistently presented them as the "other". Academics and fan theorists have strived to prove this image wrong.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Henry Jenkins' book titled "Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture" had a significant impact on the advancement of fan studies when it was published in 1992. Interestingly, it also introduced numerous new fans to media fandom. What set this book apart from others in its genre was its celebration of fandom, rather than depicting it as pathological. Jenkins (1992)

The term "textual poaching" was formulated by Michel de Certeau in his work The Practise of Everyday Life De Certeau (1988), which was published in 1984. This concept aims to convey that audiences are not merely passively consuming the text or source material, but rather engaged in active interpretation. This perspective aligns with Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model of communication, wherein individuals generate distinct interpretations of the same text based on their unique backgrounds and contextual circumstances. Michel de Certeau compares audiences to nomads who wander across lands which belong to other people, enjoying the wealth which those lands provide. The elite section comprising of academics, teachers, authors, etc., monopolise the readings of texts and establish the dominant meaning. However, audience members individualise the interpretations of mass culture by going beyond the dominant meaning. The wealth they mine is refined for alternative uses. This is a strategy of resistance for individuals, despite its inherent weakness in comparison to the dominant culture, and its inevitable relegation to the peripheries.

Henry Jenkins extends the meaning of textual poaching to include fanfiction. Fans poach from their favourite texts to spawn new works such as fanfiction, fanvids, fanart, filk etc. Jenkins (2006b) Jenkins (2006a) Fans are capable of concurrently interpreting a text using both dominant and oppositional readings, thereby enabling readers to adhere as closely to the canon as desired. Fans, often considered to be subjects of easy manipulation by agents of the official culture industry, are in fact subversive readers who operate outside the traditional framework of the cultural industry. "Within the cultural economy, fans are peasants, not proprietors, a recognition which must contextualise our celebration of strategies of popular resistance". Fiske (1992) John Fiske conceives of the popular text as polysemic, capable of incorporating a variety of different meanings. This allows fans to construct alternate readings or interpretations. To Fiske, fandom is subversive and the pleasures of fandom are rooted in its subversiveness. Fiske (1989)

Fiske highlights three primary characteristics of fandom, namely discrimination and distinction, productivity and participation, and capital accumulation. Both enthusiasts and occasional viewers utilize specific criteria to determine what qualifies someone as a fan, particularly emphasizing that the subordinate culture must serve a purpose for them. Fiske further argues that fans will seek to validate their attachments by comparing them to culturally accepted norms. Fiske categorizes productivity into three types: semiotic, enunciative, and textual. Semiotic productivity involves creating meaning from cultural commodities as resources for social identity and experiences, while enunciative productivity refers to the public expression of shared oral culture. Participation also plays a crucial role among fans. Regarding capital accumulation, Fiske suggests that fan cultural capital is not as easily converted into economic capital as official cultural capital. Fiske (1992) Performance is an integral aspect of fandom and fan experiences, as stated by Lucy Bennett and Paul J. Booth. Performances can be overt, such as cosplay, or covert, influencing both fans and the text itself. Through performance, fans are able to project images of themselves and their world. Bennett & Booth (2015)

Schechner defines performance as "twice behaved" or "restored behaviour", which is behaviour treated as a film director treats strips of film. These strips can be arranged and rearranged without taking into consideration the origin or source of the behaviour. Schechner (2002) According to Francesca Coppa, fanfiction is a textual attempt to make certain characters "perform" according to different behavioural strips.

"Or perhaps the characters who populate fan fiction are themselves the behavioural strips, able to walk out of one story and into another, acting independently of the works ofart that brought them into existence. The existence of fan fiction postulates that characters are able to "walk" not only from one artwork into another, but from one genre into another; fan fiction articulates that characters are neither constructed or owned, but have, to use Schechner's phrase, a life of their own not dependent on any original "truth" or "source"." Coppa (2014)

Matt Hills, in his discussion of the fan site alt.tv.x-files *alt.tv.x-files.* (n.d.), asserts that the digital community of enthusiasts must assume their role as spectators with the awareness that their fellow fans will serve as an audience for conjectures, analyses, and critiques. Hills (2004) He goes on to say that rather than considering fan community as an imagined community, it may be more adequately regarded as a "community of imagination" – a community which constitutes itself precisely through a common affective engagement. The collective reverence for creative content dictates the specific storylines that continue to define the collective and analogous creative encounters establish the foundation of collective identity. Hills also suggests that this community of imagination may be a specific defence against the "otherness" of the inexplicable intensity and emotionality of fandom. The fan experience can be restaged and reperformed in the community which validates this affective experience. Hills (2002)

3. FAN PERFORMANCE

Books and television shows offer resources for imagination. Readers and audience identify with characters or actors playing certain characters and their imagination places them in different situations and different interactions with other characters and sometimes they even play with the author ascribed attributes of the character. The performance of fans is also a show of defiance to the canonical work

and the dominant meaning it tries to send out. This paper attempts to understand the ways in which fans negotiate the dominant reading of the highly popular novels of A Song of Ice and Fire series. The fan practice I have focused on is the creation of various types of images, including portraits, visual renderings of critical moments of the story, collages, posters, banners and gifs. I have limited this study to the fanart available on www.tumblr.com, www.reddit.com and www.deviantart.com. ASOIAF Art: A Collection of Fan Art that will be Gathered to Make a Database. (n.d.), Deviant Art. (n.d.), Tumblr. (n.d.) These are analysed using the tools of cultural studies. Fanart or fan-art is the graphical equivalent of fanfiction. My hypothesis is that these images tell tales of the fans' affiliations, preferences, disagreements, dislikes, acquiescence and resistance.

Visual culture is that aspect of culture which is expressed in visual images. Even as the depiction remains a central focus, the field of visual culture studies examines the connections between depictions and consumers for their cultural importance. As per Nicholas Mirzoeff, visual culture strives to discover methods of operating within the modern realm of virtual reality in order to identify areas of opposition in the dilemma of excessive information and visual stimuli in everyday existence. He modifies de Certeau's phrase and suggests that visual culture serves as a maneuver rather than a plan, executed openly in the face of the adversary, the society of control in which we reside. The sensual immediacy of visual culture makes it distinct from texts. Mirzoeff (2013)

The validity of fanart as true art is a hotly debated topic. Since it is based on someone else's work and is not the creator's own artistic expression, many feel that it should be kept out of the hallowed hallways of art. The opposite camp argues that even though the concept is based on another work, the creation itself is individualistic. Copyright vests all rights to profit with the original creators. Legally, derivative works have good standing if they are shown to be transformative enough. Most fanart creators and sites abide by a non-profit policy which keeps them immune from legal entanglements. Because of the importance given to free speech, parodies are legally permissible. This leads to the ironic situation where those who want to mock a work get protection whereas those who seek to honour the work are liable for prosecution. In science fiction fandom, the best fan artist has been given the Hugo Award since 1967. The broad availability of digital image processing has eased the production of fanart. Most introductory books on Art list; to beautify, to express, to mediate, to persuade, to record, to redefine reality, and to redefine art itself as the functions of art. From such a perspective, fanart does seem to be legitimate.

4. A SONG OF ICE AND FIRE FANDOM

A Song of Ice and Fire books make up a literary phenomenon with its astoundingly huge fan base and innumerable fan fictions covering several genres and exploring several tropes. A Game of Thrones is the name of the first book in A Song of Ice and Fire, a series of fantasy novels by American author George R.R. Martin. It was first published on August 1,1996 and won several awards including the World Fantasy Award. Subsequent books in the series are A Clash of Kings (1998), A Storm of Swords (2000), A Feast for Crows (2005), A Dance with Dragons (2011) with two more being anxiously awaited – The Winds of Winter and A Dream of Spring. Martin (1996), Martin (1998), Martin (2000), Martin (2005), Martin (2011) The stories take place in the fictional continents, Westeros and Essos. The story is presented through the point of view of an assortment of characters changing from chapter to chapter. The success or survival of point of view characters is not

assured, keeping fans on tenterhooks. The apparent protagonist, Ned Stark, is famously killed off in the very first book. A dynastic war is being waged for the right to sit upon the Iron Throne and rule the kingdoms while the growing supernatural threat of the "Others" is being kept at bay. Four houses - Stark, Lannister, Targaryen and Tyrell are at the forefront of the empire, commanding the most wealth and loyalty. Each character has a complex history extending beyond the ambit of the novels. There are several enduring mysteries which slowly unfurl throughout the course of the tale. Considering the medieval societal order of the fantasy world, most of the female characters are, though initially in compromising and subjugated positions, portrayed with astounding strength of spirit and are often shown to be able overcome their situation and gain control of their own fate. The series has been praised for the realistic character development that almost every character undergoes. The moral universe is ambiguous and questions of religion, sexuality, loyalty and the morality of violence frequently arise.

5. ANALYSIS OF FANART

Art can be appreciated even as it challenges you to question your expectations and ideas, whether these be philosophical, ideological, aesthetic, sociological, political or moral. Belton (2001) A Song of Ice and Fire and Game of Thrones, its TV adaptation, have a vast, dynamic, world- wide fan following perceived to be the most dedicated community in popular culture, leaving Justin Bieber's, Lady Gaga's, Harry Potter's and Star Wars' fans trailing behind. The making of the TV adaptation superimposed the real-life images of the actors on to the well-loved characters in the fans' minds. But many choose to steer clear of this almost inevitable identification, and prefer to propagate the unadulterated images the books conveyed to their minds through pencil drawings, paintings and digital images. Some fans opt for Chibis, an artistic style in which a normally realistically proportioned character is portrayed in a more compact, curvier form. The disproportionately large head and short underdefined torso and appendages make these pictures cute as well as humorous. Sansa Stark is often pictured in this style, referring to her cuteness as well as to her naiveté during the initial stages. Fanart created in manga or anime style is also quite popular. Most of the main characters have their anime avatars that inhabit alternate universes as well. One of the most popular ones is set in the Last Airbender universe with each character having their own malleable element. This shifts the dominantly western cultural orientation of the story world.

The books abound in battles and fans have produced several magnificent battle scenes. The landscape and society of the seven kingdoms are also frequently portrayed by fan artists. Deep bold colours are used to paint the dramatic scenes. Majestic, realistic portraits of characters rivalling the ones of actual historical figures adorn the fandom spaces. The alternative readings of the fans clearly shine through in the genderbending art. Several key male characters are shown to be female. Khal Drogo, the ultra-masculine Dothraki ruler who marries Daenerys is portrayed as a female alongside a shy, retiring male Daenerys. A stereotypical dominant male enjoying the right to rule over others is transformed into a female, while still displaying all the confidence traditionally attributed to a male ruler.

Another telling instance is the portrayal of the Stark children in reversed genders. The matter of succession, and the perceived helplessness of the daughters is one of the issues which take up a lot of time and space in the novels. Jon Snow, the illegitimate son, goes away to the Wall to "take the black" and join the brotherhood of the watchers. Stark allies welcome this as it ensures that he doesn't put forward

a claim to Winterfell, the seat of the Starks. The eldest legitimate son Robb is later crowned King of the North. The daughters are seen as pawns and victims by both sides, but as the story progresses, they are shown to be developing into strong characters. Nevertheless, they have to contend with the entrenched patriarchy all around them. They have to be more vigilant and more tactful and more resourceful than all the men around. Fanart makes Sansa and Arya males and the rest, females. The body language evinced in the family portrait makes it abundantly clear that they are in charge of the destiny of the family.

Daenerys, who comes to claim the iron throne, is seen as an upstart not only because her father had once been deposed, but also because she is "just a woman". She is eventually taken seriously only because she is accompanied by three fierce dragons. When she is married off to Khal Drogo, she is completely powerless. She is actually the price her brother pays the Khal for his promise of assistance in his quest to claim the iron throne. When the brother dies, the current ruler's advisors write off the chance of any further threat from that quarter.

Cersei Lannister, the one who comes closest to the stereotype of the evil queen, is always careful to maintain her power through someone else. She has to lose her husband, her father, both her sons and be terribly tested before she finds the strength to flout the conventions and rule in her own stead knowing that she is stronger than everyone around her. Earlier, she was controlled by her domineering father. A meme depicts all his children protesting against the matches he has made for them while he holds them on tight leashes. Another artwork shows Cersei in armour, referring to the bold and active role she takes in matters of the country.

The romantic pairings of the book which follow the normative heterosexual trend come in for deviant representations in the fandom sites. Moreover, the medieval setting of the books also means that a high born/ low born divide is also sometimes maintained. These customary requirements of a partner are done away with by some fans. Such homosexual pairings are known as shipping. The brothers who are revealed to be cousins later on – Robb and Jon - are shown as romantically inclined towards one another. Similarly, Sansa and Margaery Tyrell, who takes her place and weds King Joffrey, are shown as a couple. Rhaegar and Lyanna – the mysterious union which crops up indirectly again and again, and is the cause of so much havoc and heartbreak all around is portrayed in vivid, glorious colours by some. Others envelop their picture in dark shadows signifying both the unhappy circumstances of their union, and its unfortunate consequences. Jaime Lannister, the handsome knight, who nevertheless doesn't live up to the honourable, knightly image is captured in the moment of his greatest infamy which earns him the title of kingslayer. He is shown turning aside after having killed the man he was sworn to protect, the Mad King Aerys, a mixture of resolve and resignation on his face. A beam of sunlight catches his glittering armour and white cloak from behind, leaving his face in the shadows. The series of gruesome deaths in the series comes in for visual commentary from fans. A series of charcoal drawings depicts grim figures being done to death in multifarious ways – a death for every letter in the alphabet. A family scene of the three Baratheons – the three who clash over Kingship – sitting at a table together, brings out their dissimilarities.

Sandor Clegane, valued for his strength by the Lannisters, has a traumatic past and is scarred on one side of his face. Yet, his pairing with the beautiful Sansa is one of the most popular among the fans. Social station and the quality of birth are superficial considerations which are easily surmounted by fans in their appreciation of a loving couple. Sandor is known as the Hound in the novels, and he often addresses Sansa as "little bird". The Hound and the Bird or San-san are the names

given to their pairing. Echoes of Beauty and the Beast seem to linger around them. Some of the romantic pairings are depicted in Disney style art, hinting at the fairytale nature of their pairing.

The dominant representation of race is mostly seen to be white. Fanart celebrates images of dark-skinned Daenerys, whom the canon shows to be the fairest with her silver hair. Portraits of major characters as Asian also gain wide acceptance. Ygritte, a wildling woman who loves Jon Snow, is shown as more or less undifferentiated from the so-called civilized folk in the TV adaptation. Fanart showing her as a true wild woman seems to resist such tendencies to gloss over differences.

6. CONCLUSION

An analysis of the most popular fanart in tumblr.com, reddit.com and deviantart.com reveals that fans, while engaging with the novels that they are emotionally invested in do not conform to the canonical text while performing their fan identity by producing fanart. They deviate from the canon in significant ways that reveal their defiance of the norms that bind conventional society, which are reflected to an extent in the characterisation and the interactions that take place in the novels. Through juxtaposition of various images and deconstruction of power positions, fanart makes us aware of cultural blindspots, question our own positions, and creates a network of possible meanings. Fan artists assert their dissent with such normative delineations through their creative performances.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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