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THE ART AND CRAFT OF THE VISUAL CULTURE OF ANIME CONVENTIONS: AN INTRODUCTION TO AMERICAN COSPLAY

Cosplay, a shortened term for costume-play, is the practice of dressing as characters from anime, video-games and comic books, at international, national and regional conventions. In this paper I argue that Cosplayers are talented and skilled artists who translate two-dimensional figures into three-dimensional costumes. As artists of imitation they take their own unique place in the world of performance artistry by using their skills in the mediums of painting, sculpture, sewing and acting to faithfully duplicate and even improve upon existing designs. As part of my research, in August 2014 and February 2015 I attended two major anime conventions, Otakon and Katsucon respectively, in the Baltimore-Washington D.C. area. As an avid Cosplayer myself, I have participated in numerous such conventions over the years but this time I attended as researcher. I interviewed and photographed a total of eighteen Cosplayers. I found a wide range of ages, professions, skill levels and motivations among these Cosplayer individuals. Combining these interviews with research on the history and theory of subcultures, I demonstrate that Cosplay is a legitimate and important visual art subculture of the twenty-first century.

[LEFT] PAHB Music Hall, 2014. Photograph by Marlayna Demond, '11.

[RIGHT] UMBC Production of *No Exit* by Jean-Paul Sartre, directed by Alan Kreizenbeck, 1990, University Archives, Special Collections, University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC). Photograph by Tim Ford.

INTRODUCTION

This study investigates the art and craft evident in the practice of Cosplay. Cosplay is the practice of dressing as characters from movies or books. Most often, Cosplay specifically refers to imitating the characters seen in Japanese anime, comic books and movies. Anime, a term short for animation, has inspired a growing group of artists who have developed multiple genres, animation styles and formats to suit their individual inspirations. With anime becoming increasingly popular in popular media, a certain standard of series quality, critiques and fan culture has evolved among the people that consume this animated import. Nowhere is this demographic of fans better showcased than in the hundreds of “cons”, or conventions, held across the United States every year. As of 2013, there were 335 cons held in the United States. The largest con is the Anime Expo in Los Angeles, California, which boasts an attendance count of 61,000. Otakon, held in Baltimore, is the second largest anime convention in the United States. As of 2014 its highest attendance reached 34,892 participants.¹

Arguably, the most famous pastime associated with attending a convention is Cosplay. The term itself is a combination of ‘costume’ and ‘play’, or ‘role-play’. Cosplay is donning a costume of a fictional character, taking on its persona, and acting out their personality. The wearer most often crafts these costumes, sometimes bought from a professional with skills in sewing or even prop making. In many cases, these garments can take months to create. Other than perfecting sewing techniques, sculpting, painting with both brush and spray, applying make-up or prosthetic, and crafting with leather or metal are just a few of the skills that many anime fans have learned and apply to the production of their costumes. By taking on the physical appearance of these fictional anime characters, crafting their garments and props, and then acting out their stories, the costumers are creating a unique subculture of performance artists mastering the art of imitation.

This research investigates the culture, history, vocabulary, and social issues of Cosplay. Most importantly, I argue that the dedicated Cosplayer is an artist who creates a unique form of wearable art,

because in taking a two-dimensional drawing and translating that work into a costume reality, the Cosplayer achieves success in their costuming venture. Furthermore, I argue that Cosplaying is not just copying the original artist's work, but creating a costume that is imagined, crafted, and altered by and for a living person, and thus is unique.

METHODOLOGY

This project included a combination of literary research on subculture theory and anime, a comparison of the American and Japanese fan base, and field research at anime conventions. I conducted my field research at two large conventions: the aforementioned Otakon in Baltimore in 2014 and Katsucon located just outside of Washington D.C in 2015. I created a questionnaire that I used to survey a wide variety of con goers about their experiences in the world of Cosplay, their costumes' construction process, the skills they learned through Cosplay, and their other social and artistic interests. In total, there were eighteen participants in my survey, from young adult to middle age. I chose these attendees based upon a set of limitation I previously set: no more than twenty total, a fair balance of male costumes to female costumes, and a range of skill levels that reflected the environment of the convention. When conducting interviews, I never used the word "art." Only after the interview was complete and the subject was free to ask questions did I elaborate on my project. Some subjects gave short answers while others gave long narratives on their first encounters with the subculture of Cosplay.

In this research I planned to interview a diverse group of people and costumes. Specifically, I looked to find Cosplayers of various ages, levels of experience in the art form, genres, and varying levels of complexity in my sample. Achieving this goal took up a fair amount of time, but I managed to intersperse the interview session with my own schedule of activities while remaining a participant observer. In this paper I have divided my research and conclusions into three academic realms of study: mimicry, gender roles, and the artistry involved within the Cosplay community. In this paper, I argue that Cosplay is an original art through the practice of mimesis, detail the challenges to traditional gender norms brought up within the Cosplayer community, and explain the craftsmanship required for costume construction.

HISTORY

The modern roots of the Cosplay can be traced to the opening day of the very first Worldcon, the shortened name for the World Science Fiction Convention, in New York City in 1939. Forrest J. Ackerman, who would become famous for his collection of sci-fi and horror memorabilia years later, is the first documented convention-goer to attend such an event in costume.² Appearing in a leather jacket, jodhpurs and riding boots, Ackerman was one step away from passing for Buck Rogers. Seventeen years after the first Worldcon, the 1956 Worldcon in New York was a hub of costumed figures among the ordinarily attired fans. The large turnout was due to the rise in popularity of science fiction. Ackerman was an annual attendant of the convention, and described the costumed presence at the 1956 convention as follows: “Monsters, mutants, scientists, spacemen, aliens, and assorted ‘Things’ thronged the ballroom floor as the flashbulbs popped.”³ Ackerman also reports that Olga Ley, wife of writer Willy Ley, “won the Most Beautiful costume.” According to Resnick, Ley was “the first great costumer.” Later in her career, Ley became known for her talent in science fiction circles as well mainstream fashion, and her success is in part due to her attendance at early con Masquerades. Masquerades, held to this day at anime and science fiction conventions alike, are contests where costumes are judged and a kind of talent show is held. Ackerman and Ley were among the first con attendees to embrace costuming, and they were part of the start of Cosplay.

In the 1950s and 1960s, movies such as *Star Trek*, *Battlestar Galactica*, *Fantastic Voyage*, and *Star Wars* drew increasing numbers of science fiction fans to mass gatherings like World Con. In subsequent decades, the hugely popular *Lord of the Rings* trilogy in the 1970s influence large conventions and prompted con goers and hosts to release series of animated films. Gradually, conventions began to increase in size and spawn related events, such as Renaissance Festivals. It was only in 1984 that the anime world intersected with the American costume conventions. A Japanese woman dressed as the fur-bikini sporting alien girl Lum from the then airing show *Urusei Yatsura* attended a Japanese con in costume for the first time. On a trip to California, a young journalist, Nobuyuki Takahashi, now a film editor and director attended Worldcon. What he encountered was unlike the convention scene in Japan. Imitation costumes, original creations, and the famed Masquerade were staples of the American convention but unknown overseas. The Masquerade at a con was not the masked

ball that Westerners associated with the word. Rather, it was more akin to a competitive variety show where groups or individuals performed skits before an audience and judges. When Takahashi returned to Japan he thought of ways to impress upon his readers the magnitude of what he had experienced. However, since he did not already have a word to adequately describe the phenomenon, he created a new word: Cosplay.⁴

With Takahashi's reporting, the concept of Cosplay came to Japan from America. From this spark the two cultures began to combine their love of fiction with the fantasy of dressing up. However, while the Japanese quickly adopted Western titles or styles into their convention culture, Americans were far less likely to watch anime and incorporate titles or styles in their convention culture. A few early shows ran during the late 1950s, under the English titles of *Astro Boy* and *Gigantor*, but anime truly gained its American fan base on the West coast and slowly made its way across the country over the next three decades. In the late 1980s, anime began running on major time slots on television, with popular series such as *Voltron*. However, children's channels in the 1990s, such as *Cartoon Network* with its late afternoon block of action shows called *Toonami*, triggered the explosion of anime fans in the United States. This might very well be one of the major reasons for observers of anime to associate fans with being childish, particularly with the popularity of *Pokemon*, a television series that follows a young boy and his adorable monster companion, as American cartoons are media for an underage demographic. For the majority of their formative years, these viewers followed English dubbed anime aimed toward them by several networks. Three major anime titles were bought by the channel, dubbed in English and censored of any elements that were deemed too harsh for the target audience. Those shows were *Sailor Moon*, a series based on a team of female super heroes, *Dragon Ball Z*, a fighting series aimed at boys, and *Gundam Wing*, a politically focused series based on the giant robot genre called "mech". Each was popular in Japan and slowly gained a correspondingly large fan following in the U.S.⁵ As the *Generation X* grew older, the Internet became an ever-increasing source of facts about these favorite series. They quickly discovered how eschewed the story lines had become in the claws of American censorship.⁶ Changes during translation included the rearranging of episode order, non-heterosexual characters erased with narrative alterations and scenes deemed inappropriate completely cut. Hardcore fans translated the original Japanese scripts and circulated subtitled versions of the popular shows. Even shows that were thought to be simple children's

entertainment contained complex plots wherein young characters displayed adult capabilities. When faced with dire situations whose ramifications could end in a dismal ending, these heroic characters captivated their young viewers, as seen in the growing ratings of afternoon blocks like *Toonami*.

Other than animated features, another medium for popular stories are graphic novels. Most anime are based upon manga, the black and white Japanese comic book more akin to a graphic novel than a standard fiction novel. Manga are unhampered by a strictly youth-based audience. These novels became available in English during the 1990s and could be borrowed from local libraries, giving young fans easy access to yet another unique form of media. In several of my on-site interviews more than half of the Cosplayers stated that in their childhood the easy access to manga, borrowed from their local library, provided access to stories not yet available in English animated form. As time went by, more television stations began not only playing shows from Japan but producing them based on styles of entertainment from that country as well. To this day there is always a new adaptation of Power Rangers to be found on television. The show's premise of a costumed squad of marital-arts-savvy teens in giant robots was taken from the "sentai" genre, a term roughly translated to "squadron", of a similar show in Japan.⁷

Some fans received their first exposure to video games through playing the early incarnations of the *Sega*, *Playstation* and *Nintendo* game systems. Titles of Japanese origin such as *Sonic the Hedgehog*, *Donkey Kong*, *Dragon Force* and *Final Fantasy 7*, all best sellers in the United States, still have avid fans that dress as and parody them. The child consumers of anime in the 1980s and 1990s had their fair share of domestic entertainment but, unlike their parents, they had an unprecedented exposure to foreign media as well. As *Generation X* grew older they carried their childhood favorites into adolescence and adulthood, looking for more mature titles in the animated media with which they had grown up. In particular the airing of *Robotech*, a mech series that originally premiered in 1985, was described as rivaling soap operas with its many story lines and complicated love triangles. For North American fans, shows such as *Robotech* filled a so-called gap in our media, animation for teens and adults.⁸ With the advent of the Internet, these fans began to communicate forming online forums and translations sites and started to plan physical gatherings on the same scale as the science-fiction conventions that preceded them.

THE SUBCULTURE OF COSPLAY

Costuming as art form or business is not a new concept. Hollywood, from its earliest days of silent film, has always been a respected industry for costuming. Broadway, with its world-renowned musical theater, has produced iconic songs with fabulous sets and clothing that make a show memorable. Fans of these musicals have been known to dress the part when their favorite shows premier as feature films, as happened for *Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Halloween is considered the second most lucrative holiday in the U.S. for the reason that Americans spend billions every year on decorations, candy and most importantly, costumes.⁹ In fact, Halloween is not just for children going out collecting candy but also for adults throwing themed costume parties. In this societal context, dressing up for a convention appears not an oddity but as a logical next step in relation to the costume culture already well established in mainstream society.

When one night a year is acceptable for an adult to dress in costume with no repercussions, one can then asses how to spread this acceptance throughout the year. So the question is, what defines an anime fan in the context of Cosplay with the established American costume culture? What does it mean to be a part of Cosplay subculture and what motivates fans to participate? Dick Hebdige, known for his work on the subculture of the punk movement in the United Kingdom, enumerates the various ways and methods by which the greater subculture was defined historically.

“Culture is a notoriously ambiguous concept...Refracted through centuries of usage, the word has acquired a number of quite different, often contradictory, meanings. Even as a scientific term, it refers to both a process and a project...The theory of culture now involved the ‘study of relationships between elements in a whole way of life.’” (Hebdige p.5)

Early ventures into the study of sociology held multiple views on how society was constructed and held itself together. Philosophers such as Georg Hegel argued that that a culture’s groundwork lay in tensions and contradictions and that dialog between opposing sides would produce truth.¹⁰ Previous theories of culture were separated into two main branches: one that strove for a sort of aesthetically pleasing society of hierarchal order and one that sought to bring culture down to one based in equality — a sort of Socialist utopia. Theorists from the eighteenth century onward have debated what creates culture and how it changes over time. By the mid twentieth century the definition of mainstream

culture is an entity preoccupied with social order, where progress in science equaled to the progress of a society. What remains, however, is a concentration on hegemony, an increasing obsession with everyday life that is disrupted by the presence of subculture.¹¹ To belong, to follow the greater rules of how a society should appear and what is considered normal does not allow for the easy integration of nonconformist beliefs. When the first studies into outlying groups living within a larger population began in the 1940s, it concentrated on skin color, religion and geographic region, as the belief was that identity emerged from specific racial demographic. But this manner was limited as it neglected personal values, so a more behavioral approach narrowed the definition of subculture. Individuals who shared like interests actively collected in groups, and self-identified as different became the aspects associated with modern subculture.¹²

In short, mainstream culture derives from a broadly defined set of acceptable morals, practices and beliefs; subculture resides outside of this norm and can take on a wide variety of customs or practices. For many subcultures, they do operate outside of the mainstream ethics, and they work away from the economic, political and social context from whence they came, sometimes deliberately and sometimes not.¹³ Interestingly enough, just as in the mainstream, certain ideals arise when a fringe group starts to take on a life of its own, adapting and changing according to their specialty interest and the world around them.

This fluidity of culture is mirrored in the diverse population of convention goers. During the interviews with anime convention attendees, the answers the cosplayers gave revealed that Cosplay was in fact a subculture that was well established in both the realms both visual social. During the dialogues at the two conventions, Otakon and Katsucon, I found considerable overlap in the reasons why a fan would start the process of assembling a Cosplay. Often, the Cosplayer had friends already immersed in the practice and wanted to give it a try. Fans explained how they would frequent online forums dedicated to a specific anime and stumble upon pictures of costumed con goers that sparked their interest in Cosplay. Others related stories of how they had been brought up attending conventions and becoming immersed in the culture because their parents were fans. Many fans attested that they could relate to the character they portrayed. One attendee, dressed as Jack Frost from the American film, *Rise of the Guardians*, said that he felt drawn to stories of young men discovering their purpose in life. (Fig. 3) This Cosplayer had only been attending cons for two years but also had grown up around costumed events in New York City. For

this study it is significant that Jack Frost is not from a Japanese anime. In my experience it is not unusual to find characters outside of the con's main focus because a fan of anime is likely to be immersed in a range of other media as well. The winter sprite in *Rise of the Guardians* is uncertain of the reason for his existence, going through a journey of self-discovery while battling the forces of darkness. From what the young man said early in his interview about the sort of characters he was drawn to and how welcoming the Cosplay community was to him, one can see why he chose Jack Frost.

Just as some Cosplayers feel kinship with real life role models, so too do they connect to the fictional figures they follow. They seem to find an element of themselves that could, in fact, accomplish what they see playing out on screen. It is for this reason that cosplayers have been known to defend their beloved culture when it comes under attack.

In an article for *The Week Magazine*, James Pethokoukis, a conservative blogger critiqued Cosplay as a sign of the failing U.S. economy.¹⁴ In his opening statement alone, the reader is directed how to feel about the Cosplayers pictured below the title, a trio dressed as Batman, Batgirl and their film version of the villain Bane: "Dressing up like Wolverine or Cersei Lannister is probably more fun than scouring the classifieds for menial jobs."¹⁵ Pethokoukis theorized that the shared economic depressions of Japan and the United States have left a generation of college educated twenty-something's without the means to find a decent job and so they have turned their abundance of free time into the world of make-believe in order to ease the pain of reality. As previously stated, the culture of the mainstream will often be at odds with outliers; the deviant group will then garner criticism from the greater population. If a subculture gains momentum though, the mainstream is forced to allow a space to be carved out upon which the subculture can perform. The convention scene in the United States, though old in its origins, has had a complicated relationship with the mainstream. However, it is unfair to equate the convention scene in Japan to that of America, as the two evolved out of vastly different mainstreams and fan cultures. Whereas Westerners may have begun the phenomenon of convention costuming it was not we (Americans) who promoted it, merchandized and brought it out into the mainstream. On the streets of Tokyo's Akibahara district one finds a multitude of maid-cafes, a kind of tea or coffee shop staffed by waitresses in maid costumes, a popular motif used for cute female characters, and Cosplay-themed restaurants. At the famous Harajuku Station, furthermore, there are large gatherings in public for formal photoshoots with cosplayers of all themes and styles.¹⁶ There are no equivalents here in the

United States. Cosplay is confined to the perimeters of the convention and specialized areas in Japan, while the States the official zone is the con itself but attendees are not held to any special etiquette. Organized photo shoots held by clubs occur in public parks, city squares and unlike Japan; American cosplayers freely patronize restaurants unassociated with the event.

Our contemporary era, deeply entrenched in capitalism, is filled with a mixture of cultural inventiveness and unsolved contradictions.¹⁷ In her work on the teenage music and fashion subculture, known as “Hardcore,” Susan Willis points to this correlation between capitalism and those outside the mainstream culture. Simply put, mainstream society wishes to make a profit while still nurturing creativity. The marketing of creativity can only be accomplished by establishing a set of guidelines with which to evaluate and rank people and their creations, and these guidelines will not benefit nor suit everyone. Therefore, according to Willis, subcultures are predestined to clash with the mainstream culture because it does not follow the set of guidelines. These clashes are seen in the context of Cosplay often in the form of reports that claim the community offers no real value to greater society.

Again, reactions from observing outsiders will often paint an inconsistent picture of a group, stereotyping its community, in the following example this is done yet again by a journalist. Another scathing review, in the *New York Post*, of a reality television series *Heroes of Cosplay* airing on the *SyFy* cable network, described cosplayers as confused, weird, irresponsible and self absorbed.¹⁸ Eliza Melendez responded in the *Cultist*, an Internet magazine, arguing that cosplayers find creative means to fund their costumes, and that most cosplayers hold jobs and contribute to society. Melendez then goes on to explain that Cosplay is not only about the competition. Instead, she states that the world of Cosplay cannot be understood by watching a show geared toward a single aspect of the subculture. Some cosplayers construct their costumes while others buy pieces. It is common that costumes are a combination of handmade and purchased pieces. During her interviews she conducted with Cosplayers, Melendez quoted an interviewee who said, “It’s the challenge of creating an homage to beloved characters. For Jonathan, Cosplay is “the ultimate art form. It combines make-up, sewing, painting, sculpting, crafting, designing, acting, etc.” But you don’t have to be a method actor to Cosplay — you just have to like something enough to dress up as it and have fun.” This quote describes what it means to be a fan, to have passion for something, to let it inspire you to go out amongst others who love the same thing as you. This statement can be validated in one of

my interviews was with a mother and daughter during Otakon. Their costumes were from the horror game *Bioshock*, and the characters they had selected were a frightening little girl called “Little Sister” and a huge almost robot creature, “Big Brother,” (See Fig. 4). It was the daughter who had introduced her mother, a fan of horror movies, to manga, then anime and finally gaming. The mother, a woman in her mid 40s, was a Cosplayer of five years and a dedicated nurse. Much of her costume came from unused; overflow equipment from the hospital where she worked, while the rest of her outfit was comprised of savvy purchases at a flea market. This Cosplayer did not set out to compete in any contest; rather the project was a labor of shared interest between mother and daughter. For the anime fan base, dressing up is not a prerequisite for attending a convention. In my own experience those who come in costume and those who do not roughly divide the population of such an event. Hostility such as these reviews experienced by con attendees experience is nothing new; those with different tastes are deemed eccentric and are many relate to being hazed or ostracized starting at a young age.¹⁹ Words like “nerd” and “geek” that were mean spirited in childhood years are now used with pride to describe the new culture. Being a Cosplayer means that the person donning the costume is proud and confident in their work. In the final hours I spent at Katsucon one Cosplayer caught my eye, because she was dressed so spectacularly. As the Diva Plavalaguna from the hit science-fiction film *The Fifth Element*, this native of Quebec was at first shy to speak to me, citing that her grasp of English might be a hindrance. (Fig. 5) Tall, imposing and beautiful, she eventually explained her craft to me and mentioned her choice in costume. Sometimes the exaggerated anatomy of female characters in the media of film, anime or video games are unrealistic for a living woman to emulate. In mimicking the appearance of the alien opera singer this Cosplayer could not only show off her impressive artistic skills but also feel comfortable and accomplished in wearing the costume.

The subculture of Cosplay has seen a massive increase in exposure during the past ten years. Tutorials of how-to guides for prop making fill *YouTube*, dance clubs host Cosplay-themed nights, competition shows are hosted on national television, and professional videographers use cons as a source for creating stunning music videos starring the costumed attendees. While meeting backlash from the community in its first season, *Heroes of Cosplay*, a reality show on the *SyFy* channel, was the first cable series to document the experiences of cosplayers.²⁰ Several of the participants were more concerned with the competition circuit of the cons, while others sought to use their

hobby as a platform with which to begin their own special effects or costuming business. These examples indicate that the subculture of Cosplay is slowly but surely making its way into the mainstream. Recognition of the artistic aspects of the practice are right behind the general public's acceptance of Cosplay on a whole as many of those interviewed for reports are constantly asked how they made their costumes. Many cosplayers even have their own *Facebook* fan pages where they gather followers, post their progress, and display finished products; such as the Cosplayer Lialina cited later in this article. As they are non-profile pages, some title is needed to categorize these accounts. Significantly, many cosplayers identify themselves as "artist". With this title slowly gaining followers within the community, the attention of the artistic academic world should turn its eye toward this emerging facet of an already popular visual art.

COSPLAY AS MIMICRY

In the contemporary era the concept of originality has been very tightly woven together with the notion of being an artist. In the modern period, beginning in the late eighteenth century, innovations of the Industrial Revolution facilitated the production of ready-made furniture, clothing, and upholstery and just about anything one would need, including prints of famous works of art. All these objects of desire were machine-made in factories, or only partially constructed by workers, without the aid of apprenticed craftsmen. "On a practical level, Wedgwood's assembly-line approach allowed him to divide production tasks among his workforce, and to control the flow and face of work." (Symonds)²¹ Therefore, artists made a point of producing singular works that rode on the talent and imagination of the person who made them. In the world of fine arts originality was a prized value in art while copying was castigated. In Hillel Schwarz's extensive study of imitation and mimicry he argues that all art is some form of imitation. To be precise, all artists are influenced by those who came before them. 'Original' works are born of the appreciation their creators hold for artistic movements of the past. Many works of art in centuries past purposefully emulate one another for the purpose of recognition to the artist's knowledge. There is a constant stream of echoing, quoting, and mimicking that results in the originality of new works of art.²² Beginning in the contemporary period, however, the emphasis has shifted. Artistic merit is now linked to originality, in distancing the artist from their inspiration. An original work of art is often defined as one that 'has not received from others nor one

copied based on the work of others'; this in all actually it impossible as every person alive has received influence from someone else during their lifetime. Even art critics are noting the futility of claiming total uniqueness in creating art, that in truth all works of art are an emotional or intellectual response to the world of the artist.²³

In his book, Schwarz mentions historical re-enactments as an example of an art form based in mimicry that was still valid and respected. He argues that humanity's obsession with replication stems from our constant reviewing of the past. In the case of re-creating history we seek to fill in the blanks left by artifacts, we cannot repeat the past, but we can attempt to reconstruct it as best we can. From there a measure of our playfulness can be examined, what paths we chose in our process of appropriation of original works into something our present culture will find fulfilling or even entertaining.²⁴ Schwartz addresses the phenomenon of reproducing of wartime incidents, such as battles, as well as the more mundane activities in civilian life, by those living generations after said events occurred. Two categories are then assigned to the ways in which something from the past can be reproduced. "Divestment: of the hodgepodge a house gathers unto itself; of that incoherence of styles common to well-off households furnished with a variety of replicas pasts and unique heirlooms. Investiture: of the house as a dated Creation, with artifacts equally and impeccably old; of the house as a *home*, warm bodies taking on its airs. Like other ceremonies and coronation, this is high theater."²⁵ These two methods use the same house, with the same array of objects that range from various eras, but concentrate on opposite interpretations. Divestment presents the visual culture of the building and the histories of its objects while investiture analyzes how said artifacts interact with people. Both are used in historical recreation, though only one engages an observer with how the antiques would have been utilized when they were new. Investiture would then be the method for interactive learning which living history is based.

I have witnessed deeply researched and accurate recreations of history in the American re-enacting community. My parents are specialists in the clothing for re-enactments ranging from the French and Indian War to the War of 1812. For years they have studied the methods by which historic clothing was produced, from the density of the fabric to the way in which a pleat folds into the seam of a skirt. Through careful analysis they aim to recreate garments as accurately as possible. Other re-enactors specialize in the forging of reproduction weapons that are fully functional, from muskets and pistols to swords and spears.

Some reenactments, like those of the battle of Gettysburg and of life in Colonial Williamsburg, are performed almost daily and are essentially moving memorials. The purpose of these theatrical performances, like that of their sculptural equivalents, is to instill general audiences with a dramatic sense of empathy and even reverence for historical or antiquated acts. (Robert Blackson)²⁶

I have known blacksmiths and tanners, whittlers and cobblers who come together because their designs are copied and not original. Because of this re-enactors might be called “imitative artists” or, in the context of their historic or recreational setting, perhaps the term “folk artists” might be applied. The practice of re-enacting is familiar to many Americans. Celebrations on the Fourth of July often have eighteenth-century military demonstrations; Civil War battlefields are filled with tourists every year to see recreations of famous clashes such as the Battle of Gettysburg. Myths of re-enactors who are overly absorbed into their historic hobby or display their knowledge in a stale or boring manner aside²⁷, there is a culture of people defined by their knowledge of certain crafts that enable them to take on the persona of a character.²⁸ In re-enacting we see a form of imitation that is not only acceptable but also expected and respected within our culture.

When thinking of mimicry in the world of high art, Andy Warhol quickly comes to mind. Exceedingly famous in his own time with works worth millions in our own, both historic and contemporary observers have critiqued his art for its lack of creativity. Critics such as Robert Hughes questioned whether taking an already existing image, such as the famous *Campbell's Soup* cans, and changing its color scheme was art.²⁹ In Warhol's defense one would argue that though he did not come up with the label for the product nor the shape of the aluminum can, he utilized them to create his own unique vision. By playing with the color scheme and repeating various versions of the same image, Warhol managed to produce an entirely new idea based on an existing concept. His work introduced a new concept of mimicry in the context of art.

In Cosplay, it is important to know that not every costume is an exact copy of the original anime, manga or game from which it is based. Cosplay is a broad term for a particular practice and inside the community there are many differentiations of costuming. What happens when certain aspects of the object are not clearly defined or the object has gone through several incarnations? Does the present artist then have the right to make corrections or incorporate their own work where originally there was none?³⁰ In the context of Cosplay the matter of changing the visual appearance of canonical characters is a frequent consideration. During my time at Katsucon

2015, I interviewed a woman dressed as Azula, the villainous princess from the popular American animated series *Avatar: the Last Airbender*. (See Fig. 6) In the show Azula is always dressed in tones of red, black and gold as befitting her ethnicity from the Fire Nation. Her garments are styled in such a way that read as Japanese to a Western audience. While striking in hue and design, the only embellishment is the golden trim around the collar, mantel and hem. For her interpretation of the character Azula, the interviewee decided to make some drastic changes. Where once only a central flame decorated the mantel of the fictional character, now two phoenixes flew towards the fire on blazing wings. A plain black apron that hung from an obi belt of the cartoon was now painted with a golden dragon edged in scarlet tassels. At least five different textures, patterns and fabrics made up the voluminous skirts, kimono-style sleeves and trims that comprised the whole costume. Despite these transformations the Cosplayer was immediately recognizable. Even more so, as fans love to see such big personalities brought to life before them, this woman was quite the actress as well. The costume was not an exact copy of the clothing seen in the television series. While waiting my turn to interview the Cosplayer, I overheard many people complimenting her talent in crafting improvements for her costume. This practice of taking an animated character and translating that character into material reality can be a challenge, even more so when the Cosplayer attempts to make alterations. To which of Schwartz's categories, divestment or investiture does this aspect of costuming fit? It would seem that to follow the incarnations a character takes on over time and to recreate it would fall under divestment. However in selecting a character, a specific moment in the character's life to portray, adding accoutrements to one's own taste or original artistic designs, culminating in a display of performance, can be categorized as investiture. Schwartz calls this category 'high theater', giving the example of actors in historical garb leading visitors as in Colonial Williamsburg. Watching the Azula Cosplayer transform for the camera from a giggling young woman to evil incarnate substantiates Schwartz's theory of the theatrical, performative and creative aspect of mimicry.

This element of the theatrical has combined with Cosplay in a mainstream art publication. In March of 2014 *Vogue* published an article on the latest work by artist Laurie Simmons. Her subject was a genre of Cosplay known as "kigurumi" where the Cosplayer dresses in a full body suit, wig and mask that cover the whole head so that their whole body becomes hidden by the character. Shot in a large brick home, the kigurumi cosplayers appear as though they

are toys in a dollhouse, a dominant theme in Simmons' artwork. The "Dollers", as the group is known, explained to the artist that though they may be outwardly expressing one emotion utilizing their bodies through a kind of performance, their faces beneath the mask could very well be displaying an emotion that is completely different. Simmons zeroes in on a feeling many cosplayers experience when posing in their costumes- excitement to take on another identity³¹ The use of Cosplaying as a visual demonstration of this concept is one of great value in regards to elevating the role of this subculture into the realms of fashion and fine art. Masked acting, having long since taken its place among the theatrical arts, is a perfect comparison for how a costumed impression can achieve great heights in performance culture. Simons recalls how the kigurumi masks remind her of the Keane paintings of her childhood that depicted girls with huge eyes staring back at their audience with an almost impermeable expression save for the motion of their bodies. By comparing the iconic art of Keane to Dollers, Simmons elevates art of imitation by arguing that such mimicry is natural state of the evolution in art; with one artist's imagination influencing the next generation. Cosplay can then be placed along this time line, brought into the fold of the mainstream realm of recognition, at least for this particular artist. Convention costuming is not just playing dress up, or merely imitating slavishly the "originality" of another, but creating a new vision and real life presence of a character. The interactions of fans between themselves and those around them bring these fictional characters into reality in a manner, which echoes theater but pushes beyond the stage. The art form should be considered worthy of being considered mainstream, and indeed viable, art.

COSPLAY AND GENDER ROLES

Within the Doller community, another diverse mix of participants exists. Over the last several decades there have been great strides made with the realm of gender identity, the expressing of sexuality and lifestyle choices not previously accepted by the mainstream. Categories arose within the costume world to label these sub-genres, some of the most popular being "gender-bending" and "cross-play." The former occurs when a Cosplayer portrays a character of the opposite sex, the latter actively changes the canon gender of the character to its alternate. The logic behind such changes can be linked to the allure of challenge in redesigning a well-known persona and the need to stretch one's artistic wings. Alternately, the choice can stem from the

Cosplayer's deep-set identification of the characters themselves or to their chosen gender, which they then express through Cosplay.

When it comes to gender-bending Cosplay, the male-to-female portrayals are visibly the more popular choice whereas female-to-male portrayals are more of a rarity. In an article for *The Mary Sue*, an online journal specializing in geek culture with an emphasis on female fans, they gave a specific example. Malcolm Reynolds of the television series *Firefly* was the character; originally a man, the artist portrayed Reynolds as a woman, with the entire devil-may-care swagger for which the good Captain is known.³² The costumed woman is given lots of attention and poses for many pictures taken by fans of the show, the costume is welcomed as a success. At one point the author of the article asks a hypothetical query: if the convention goers were met with a male bending a popular female character, would the reaction be the same? Would the male Cosplayer be met with just as much excitement and be constantly photographed like his female counterpart? The author did not believe so. As there is still a deeply ingrained stigma within Western culture when it comes to constructs of masculinity, a gender-bending male fan is placed into a category that is more humorous than coveted. Based on my research and observations at conventions, there is a mixed reaction, but not a noticeably negative one. Polarization of gender-bending Cosplay has led to some rather loud debates within the geek community. Double standards do indeed exist everywhere. Memes and message boards are filled with photos of female cosplayers gender-bending in costumes, which hype the sex appeal of the character. Gender-bending costumes are the woman's artistic choice, yet many male and female fans question the necessity of sexualizing the character to begin with. The opposite of this can be found in the parody Cosplay of men dressing as women. Again the gender bending is usually done with scantily clad characters, and some viewers find the impressions humorous, others offensive. Whichever side of the debate a person is on, there is never a defining conclusion. What has emerged is a call for acceptance of all costume choices within the community, the effects of which can be found especially in the cross-play demographic.³³

Within cross-play the costume is kept as faithful to the original design as possible, the outlying factor being that the living person wearing the persona is not the gender of the canon figure. When conducting research on sexuality within Cosplay, Alexis Truong interviewed participants in Japan. What she came across an even more complex system of categorizing and gender identification within the community. "Layers", the Japanese term for Cosplay practitioners,

were the subject of Truong's study of male-to-female cosplayers, this specific genre is referred to as "joso" in Japan. From these interviews, a specialized circumstance for the expression sexuality emerged. Of the five men interviewed during her research all identified as heterosexual, with three expressing interest in other men when joso was involved.

"I found that this was not uncommon amongst male layers who had an interest in joso. Heterosexual desire was defined more in terms of performed gender than sex categories, making it possible for these men to desire being with other men if and when one of the partners was doing joso. In other words, accounting for sex categories was not a prerequisite for heterosexual desire." (Alexis Hieu Truong)³⁴

Such is not the mainstream role expected of men within Japanese culture. But within the realm of crossplay/joso a man might be free to experiment with sexuality. In one case Truong documented, a woman who had been assigned male at birth found crossplay to be the hobby which built a bridge to her eventual transition to a female body/female identity. This identity as a woman was internal, not physically displayed outside the crossplay environment until a level of comfort and sense of self was attained. While not the staple of all experiences in joso, the participants in Truong's study differed very much in comparison to those found in the West, at least for those in female costumes. On the opposite side of the globe Leng conducts her own research combined with an interview with a popular crossplayer known by his alias Lialina. In Western Cosplay culture there is a significant blatant difference in sexual preferences between those males in Japan and those in the United States though both practice cross-play. As Leng found, "...unlike drag performers, most crossplayers assert their heterosexuality. For cosplayers, the desire to crossplay derives from their aspirations as a fan, rather than an experience of gender confusion. Lialina, for example, is self-assured about his masculinity, but also very confident about his ability to convey femininity. What makes this transformative process even more interesting is the notion that cosplayers engage in cross-playing not necessarily due to a desire to play with gender identity, but as a means to explore their capacity for artistic expression as a fan."³⁵ For American cosplayers the appeal of crossplaying lies in the challenge of inhabiting the character and producing a faithful reproduction of their physical appearance and mannerisms.

The gender-bending genre within Cosplay subculture seems to include a hyper-feminization for the most popular of male characters turned female, from burlesque-style costumes to swimsuits and

alluring alterations to well known canon costumes. Such changes are not lightly taken but are well thought out designs. As an art, crossplay and gender bending allow for a unique form of performance. The core of the character remains the same but to bend them a new perspective on their story can be acted out with others dressing from the same canon, just as crossing can allow for the artist wearing the costume to up the stakes in mastering their physical portrayal of the opposite sex. As to how this fluidity of outward gender presentation ties into the greater concept of Cosplay as art, one need only look to the fracturing of artistic movements of the past. As a movement grows over time, the basic tenants cease to be applicable to all involved, and so they splinter into smaller movements. In the natural reaction to the group breaking apart into new, smaller, branches, the greater body incites reaction. Gender-bending and cross-play are but two such branch groups in the larger scheme of Cosplay genres.

THE ARTISTRY OF COSPLAY

Throughout this study my goal has been to show that the subculture of Cosplay is one richly populated with artists. However, establishing this connection between artists and Cosplay has not been an easy feat. For most people, art is housed in a museum. To accept a Cosplayer — a geek and a member of an outlying social group — as an artist is an ideological barrier that is hard to overcome. For example, when I studied fashion design in community college, the great majority of my peers aspired to open a boutique or have a gown they designed photographed on the red carpet. I was the outsider, from the music I listened to, the cartoons I watched and the clothes I wore. Moreover, I have Cosplayed, which made the situation even worse. Since none of the costumes I made were my own original design my work had little interest for my peers. The road to acceptance is a long one, but with this study, I am making the first strides in bringing attention to the artistry of Cosplay costumes.

At the heart of Cosplay is the artistry that goes into translating a two-dimensional image into the world of the three-dimensional. A flat figure can have anatomy not likely to be found in the real world; therefore, the garments they wear are not drawn to suit a natural human figure. The flowing lines of animated figures are drawn to be aesthetically pleasing while still retaining the motion of a real human being. Their clothing does not have to obey the laws of physics as they must in reality, and so the artist must craft patterns that will lay on a human body while still retaining the exact image of its fictional

origin. The challenge comes in recreating those effects. Gods or characters with magical powers often have flowing garments that can be achieved with thin, lightweight wires inserted through tiny channels in the fabric. Extreme angles in shoulder pads or tailcoats are replicated with horsehair stiffener and card stock inserts. For the physical attributes many vendors specialize in prescription and nonprescription colored contacts for characters with unnatural or uniquely shaped eyes. A huge industry in Cosplay wigs has risen on the Internet, many of which specialize in custom fibers and styles. These products, along with every accessory one needs from wefts, needles, thread, clip-on extensions and shampoo, are also available for purchase at conventions. For the gravity-defying hairstyles so iconic in anime, there are tutorials on styling or sellers who can be commissioned to create a wig for the buyer. For characters not of the human species, with extra appendages or unique facial construction, special effects makeup became a popular skill to cultivate. Gills, burns, scales, beards and horns are just a few examples of the prosthetics applied for costumes, some of which take hours to complete.

Should a Cosplayer become well known for his or her work, usually through extensive visibility online, the term “cos-famous” could be used to describe their new status. If a Cosplayer’s popularity reaches a high enough point, he or she has the chance of using it to launch a professional career. For example, Yaya Han is an extremely successful Cosplayer based in the United States. Yaya Han has been on television, given interviews, hosted panels and appears in a new costume to every con she attends. Her skill set includes not only makeup, fabric construction and wig styling but armor crafting with worbla, a thermoplastic used in the film industry now common in the Cosplay world. Following her rise in popularity, Han has built a business and serves as both boss and mascot. One can purchase her merchandise, a variety of cat ears, angel wings and accessories, at any con she attends. Not every Cosplayer has goals so high set; most will explain their presence in costume culture is passion for the media instead of craving celebrity. Having pride in their work and earning positive feedback from their peers is often on the minds of those who invest countless unpaid hours on their costumes. During my interview sessions, I found some cosplayers simply expressed satisfaction at the opportunity to dress as nostalgic heroes whereas others offered a complex reasoning for their endeavors. In the paragraphs below I have provided a sampling of voices from the cosplayers I interviewed at Otakon and Katsucon.

“Back when we still had dial-up Internet I was on these fan websites for this anime called Yu Yu Hakusho and my sister and I were looking at it, like, what’s Cosplay? And we clicked on the link and there’s these people dressed as the character Hiei and Kurama. And we were, like, ‘We wanna do that.’ And at first we didn’t know it was called Cosplay, we just knew we wanted to do it.”

“I like heroes, I feel I can relate to them. I’m actually really goofy but when I get serious I feel I can get things done. I’ve been Cosplaying for ten years and I’m twenty-eight. When I got into anime I got into Cosplay at the same time. I remember my first con, I went to Comic Con growing up and transitioned into anime through that.”

“This is our second year Cosplaying and we always do it together. We figured we wanted to do Pokemon, and we decided early we wanted to make them human. So after we picked our characters we started the costumes on our own. Then I go over his house one day and he’s got these huge wings and all these lights and so of course I go home and start from scratch. So now that’s our thing, everything has to light up. The more crazy affects the better.”

“I actually reused an old Halloween costume for this and it’s kinda last minute. The trench coat I already had, the magnifying glass came from a dollar store. For the hat I bought the light from a home improvement store and the helicopter wings I made out of craft foam. I just always liked Inspector Gadget and figured last year’s Halloween costume could get some extra use when I’m at a con.”

“I’m actually a blogger, I love talking to people about the art of Cosplay. This costume is a combination of recycled parts from older cosplays and new pieces my boyfriend and I worked on until the last days of last week. I actually had to learn how to sculpt for this. The reason I chose this character is because I love villains. They’re complex and over the top and I like stepping into a personality so opposite of my own.”

In conducting these interviews with my fellow cosplayers I found that the breadth of their experience surpassed all my expectations. The surface of the subculture hints to the vastness of each unique demographic, parents with children, teens attending their first con, siblings and friends forming clubs and attending in complex group cosplays. But in sitting down with these individuals, asking about the process which drew them into the Cosplay subculture and how they honed the skills involved therein, brought to light just how wide

the range of artistic mastery present in this fan culture. And the ability to gain popularity and satisfaction, the notoriety both inside the convention and the emerging presence in mainstream media are the most obvious evidence that Cosplay has gained its rightful position as an art form. If Pop Art from the 1960s can achieve global recognition, with its paintings of logos and large prints of comic book panels, then why not the wearable art of the anime fan? Costumes from the silver screen are auctioned for thousands of dollars, and their designers hailed as creative masterminds. Are the attendees of conventions not fashion designers themselves? Cosplay is not just a creative outlet, but a new artistic movement which calls on many disciplines, genres, media and talent which no other contemporary scene can compare to.

CONCLUSION

Prior to initiating this project I considered Cosplay to be a form of art. I had spent a good portion of my life in the world of Cosplay and I considered myself an artist. These interviews, literary research and establishment of a historical time line establishes Cosplay as an art form. The participants at the numerous conventions held across the country have been a steadily rising demographic for the last twenty years, the most recent additions to a seventy-five year tradition. Every subculture or artistic movement requires a point of origin, a rise in notoriety and culminates in a meeting with mainstream society. Cosplay has become synonymous with the visual culture of these gatherings, inseparable and iconic, fulfilling this final requirement. As artists, the modern Cosplayer inherits a history of traditional masquerade, artisan craftsmanship employed in fine art and theater in the use of stage masks and impromptu acting skills. Through the imitation of pre-existing designs, the wearer is able to remove him or herself from the mundane world and engage in a new form of improvisational performance. This connection then transforms the fan into amateur actor, completing the circle of applicable arts from tangible costume to theatrical application in a convention setting. This subculture is full of individuals with talents ranging from traditional media, to special effects, dancing and design. In the realm of fine arts today, there is no comparable medium, which encompasses so many creative facets as this.

Art has always been a game of imitation. The aspect of the coveted originality which is used to solidify a person's occupation as artist comes not from a new design entirely, but from a unique perspective on that individual's vision of how that original design

applies to themselves. In expressing oneself through the persona of a fictional character, the wearer becomes an actor of improvisation. Cosplay began in the twentieth century but has truly come into its own in the twenty-first. As the cross pollination between the birthplaces of the convention and anime continue to entrench itself in one another who knows where the fans of Cosplay will take their subculture. Cosplay is becoming increasingly popular and it is only a matter of time before the world recognizes the time, effort, and skills required and thus recognizes Cosplay as a legitimate art.

ENDNOTES

1. "Ten Largest North American Anime Conventions of 2013", Patrick Delahanty
2. "75 Years of Capes and Face Paint: A History of Cosplay", Adam K. Raymond
3. Raymond, "History"
4. "...He could use the word "masquerade" as the direct translation to Japanese is essentially the same as the original meaning in English, "a costume party held by aristocrats." Mr. Takahashi says that there are no people like that in Japan, so the word would not work..." "Costume Acting", "Costume Play" and many others [I can't really remember what they were]. However, everything he came up with was too long and he wanted something short in hopes that people would remember the word and begin to use it. He also wanted something that was neither Japanese nor American, but a combination of both to show the blending of the American costuming tradition with Japanese culture. He finally settled on "Cosplay" by using the Japanese habit of shortening words into easier to say bits on "Costume Play." Thus was born Cosplay. Created by Mr. Nov Takahashi, the founder of Cosplay." Michael Bruno, "Cosplay: The Illegitimate Child of SF Masquerades"
5. Cartoon Network's action-packed weekday afternoon franchise, Toonami (Monday-Friday, 5-7 p.m.), introduced brand new episodes of top-rated Dragon Ball Z and a new anime series direct from Japan that rocketed double-digit delivery and ratings increases among its target kid demos, according to Nielsen Media Research. Among tweens 9-14, the block grew 24% in delivery (734,000) and 21% in rating (2.9), compared to the same time period last year. With boys 9-14, the franchise gained 34% in delivery (629,000) and 32% in rating (4.9).
6. "The 'Japanese Invasion': Anime's Explosive Popularity in the U.S.", Brenda Velasquez
7. "Secret Origins of the Japanese Superhero Show that Became Power Rangers", James Whitbrook
8. Velasquez, "Japanese Invasion"
9. "Americans to Spend \$6.9 Billion on Halloween, \$2.6 Billion on Candy", Paul Auskick
10. "Subcultural Theory: Traditions and Concepts", Patrick J. Williams p.3
11. Hedbigge, "Subculture" p.17
12. Williams, "Subcultural Theory", pp.6-7
13. Hedbridge, "Subculture" p.76
14. "Why the Rise of Cosplay Is a Bad Sign for the U.S. Economy", James Pethokoukis
15. Pethokoukis, "Economy"
16. "Stranger than Fiction: Fan Identity in Cosplay", Nicolle Lamerichs
17. "Hardcore: Subculture American Style", Susan Willis
18. "Cosplay is Creative, Not Crazy: An Open Letter to the *New York Post*", Eliza Melendez
19. Williams, "Subcultural Theory", p.3

20. "5 Things I Learned From SyFy's 'Heroes of Cosplay'", Zac Bertschy
21. "Beyond the Industrial Revolution", James Symonds
22. "The Culture of the Copy," Hillel Schwartz p. 309
23. "The Origins of Original Art: The stepping stone of originality in art", Brian Sherwin
24. Schwartz, "Culture," pp. 311-312
25. Schwartz, "Culture," p. 226
26. "Once More...With Feeling: Reenactment in Contemporary Art and Culture", Robert Blackson
27. "Once More", Blackson
28. Most in the field, men and women alike, do not mean to portray a specific person but a few in fact do. My father's friend has been portraying John Murray the Fourth Lord of Dunmore, Royal Governor of Virginia during the American Revolution, for years now. Everything from his clothes to his bearing is modeled after portraits and written accounts of Lord Dunmore. He speaks and walks, as a nobleman should. When addressing him in the field the men of the British army call him "Your Lordship" and defer to him as head of their contingent to the awe of and curiosity of tourists.
29. "The Rise of Andy Warhol", Robert Hughes
30. Schwartz, "Culture," p. 273
31. "Laurie Simmons Discusses Her New Show On Cosplay – As Well As The Metaphor Of Masking Beauty And Age," Thessaly La Force.
32. Becky Chambers, "The Ol' Switcheroo: A Consideration of Gender-Bending in Geek Culture"
33. Chambers, "The Ol' Switcheroo"
34. "From Cosplay: How 'Layers' Negotiate Body and Subjective Experience Through Play", Alexis Truong
35. "Gender, Sexuality and Cosplay: A Case Study of Male-To-Female Cosplay", Rachel Leng

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APPENDIX

Forrest J. Ackermann - Adam K. Raymond / <https://www.yahoo.com/movies/75-years-of-capes-and-face-paint-a-history-of-Cosplay-92666923267.html>

Lum – created by Rumiko Takahashi / <http://uruseiyatsura.wikia.com/wiki/File:Lum.gif>

Jack Frost – photography by Daniel Holokai

Big Sister – photography by Amy Fowler

Diva Plavalaguna – photography by Amy Fowler

Azula – Lisa Lou Who Cosplay <https://www.facebook.com/LisaLouWhocosplay>



TOP TO BOTTOM, LEFT TO RIGHT

Jack Frost from *Rise of the Guardians*, Otakon 2014

Big "Sister" from *BioShock*, Otakon 2014

Diva Plavalaguna from *The Fifth Element*, Katsucon 2015

Azula from *Avatar: the Last Airbender*, Katsucon 2015