NEO-INTERTEXTUALITY: FAN FICTION AS A CONTEMPORARY PHENOMENON

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Abstract: Fan Fiction presents itself as a form of creative expression in which fans of various forms of media contribute to their communities with engaging stories. With the rising popularity of this genre as a vibrant and dynamic aspect of contemporary popular culture, this paper will provide an overview on its emergence, its particularities, and its roots in fan communities with the purpose of understanding how it shapes and reflects contemporary media landscapes. Further, the implications of Fan Fiction's ties with intertextuality for notions of authorship, creativity, and participatory culture in an age in which the concept of authorship has begun to lose its meaning and value.

Keywords: Fan Fiction, authorship, intertextuality, pop culture, contemporary literature

Fan Fiction is a literary genre that comprises of fictional stories, sometimes even of other artistic expressions, inspired by existing stories, characters, settings or plots from popular culture belonging to canonical novels, movies, TV shows or video games. At the same time, it can be considered a subgenre of a "larger, older genre of literature that is generally called 'derivative' or 'appropriative'." [1] Its diversity also extends to its format, as 'fanfics' can take the form of poetry, short stories, multi-chapter novellas or sagas with multiple entries, but also blend with fanart for the purpose of creating comic strips.

The origins of Fan Fiction may be older than presumed[2] if approached as retellings of other stories, but in modern media it can be traced back to the 1960s, once the Star Trek community of fans began writing new stories featuring the characters and plots from the television show. These stories were integrated in the zine "Star Trek Lives!"[3], which further persuaded the fans into forming a proper community and into creating more content based on their favourite world and characters. Later, with the rise of the internet in the 1990s, access to such retellings became more accessible to audiences and fans, gradually reaching an impressive level of popularity through blogs, social media platforms and websites created specifically for Fan Fiction content, which allowed not only the publication and promotion of such stories, but also different levels of engagement between members of the communities.[4]

The most popular platforms, FanFiction.net, Wattpad and Archive of Our Own (AO3), have gradually transformed into central hubs for writers to distribute their contribution to the fandom and express their creativity freely. The interaction between authors and readers is also allowed through comments, through which the readers "produce their own critical accounts"[5],

[1]Abigail Derecho, "Archonic Literature: A Definition, a History, and Several Theories of Fan Fiction," in *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*, edited by Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, McFarland & Company Inc. Publishers, 2006, 63
[2] Ibid, 67
[3] Francesca Coppa, "A Brief History of Media Fandom," *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*, edited by Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, McFarland & Company Inc. Publishers, 2006, 41
[4] Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson, "Introduction: Work in Progress," *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*, edited by Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, McFarland & Company Inc. Publishers, 2006, 13
[5] Matthew Hills, *Fan Cultures*, Routledge, 2002, xxxiii

and various feedback systems such as likes and kudos, but also through indirect feedback such as the number of views, saves or bookmarks. Depending on the type of website, writers also face certain challenges. FanFiction.net admits users of various ages, yet its reachable content has forced stricter guidelines for users in what concerns the structure and content of the texts, imposing a formatting style, rejecting in-text forms of communication such as annotations and opting for private inboxes, and leaning towards heavy censorship. On the other hand, Archive of Our Own With, a volunteer-run project, became more accessible with its freedom of expression and more developed tagging system, as well as a larger control over comments and the possibility to directly engage with the readers through replies or annotations. However, reaching an audience is not as easy as it seems and, while some users may rely on the algorithm to allow help promote their work to potential readers from their own community or from outside it, considering the topic of choice or the tagging system, the large inflow of stories does not support new or less popular users, many taking the route of advertising on other social media platforms such as Tumblr, Twitter (now X), or even Facebook groups to get the attention they need[6]. A similar situation occurred for the Wattpad users, where the initial conflict occurred between mediocre Fan Fiction writers and experienced unpublished storytellers, the first group benefiting from more visibility. However, Wattpad has attempted a mediation through the integration of a monetization system and also through the possibility of awarding the writers with official book releases and film deals, as long as they achieved the transition from mere Fan Fiction to thoroughly original content that would avoid any copyright claims. Nevertheless, online communities build an environment based on support and collaboration environment that further stimulates the growth of Fan Fiction into an integral part of mainstream pop culture.

Apart from the audience's engagement, the interactive and creative effort is the focal point, although Fan Fiction's status as a phenomenon of the 21st century pop culture can be attributed to various factors. As writers transform established characters and further explore new scenarios or relationship dynamics, they provide their own interpretations of the canon, extending the original narrative beyond its boundaries. It reflects the "desire to add to an existing story, to ensure the continued "lives" of its characters, or to enter into a dialogue with a preexisting narrative for purposes of acclaim or criticism."[7] Considering that Fan Fiction writers reinterpret existing material, adding their own perspectives and ideas, this genre can be perceived as a form of literary remixing, blurring the lines between creator and consumer and challenging traditional notions of authorship and originality.

Fan Fiction often follows certain compositional and narrative patterns and structures, especially when it comes to the usage of recurring tropes which have become customary in the Fan Fiction community. One of the most popular tropes is 'canon divergence', also known as 'what if', which includes any story deviating from the canon events of the source material, be it new plot twists, character dynamics or plain rewritings from different perspectives or from outside the text's timeframe. Starting from this divergence emerged parallel or, more commonly known, 'alternate universe' stories (shortened as AU), "where familiar characters are dropped into a new setting"[8], which also have their own subsections such as 'contemporary alternate universe' or 'dystopian future alternate universe', based on the era they are set in, or more specific setting around which the whole story unveils ('amnesia AU', 'body swap AU', 'reverse

[6] Kristina Busse, *Framing Fan Fiction: Literary and Social Practices in Fan Fiction Communities*, University of Iowa Press, 2017, 141

[7] Maria Lindgren Leavenworth and Malin Isaksson, *Fanged Fan Fiction: Variations on Twilight, True Blood and the Vampire Diaries*. McFarland, 2013, 1

[8] Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson, "Introduction: Work in Progress," *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*, edited by Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, McFarland & Company Inc. Publishers, 2006, 11

AU', 'fantasy AU'). Other fan writers prefer approaching their favourite narratives and provide a new ending or solution to an unresolved plotline or inconsistency, these new additions being known as 'fix-it fics'. Overall, the tendency in this field is to borrow characters and transpose them in texts that focus on their relationship, regardless of their status in the source material. 'Shipping' stories focus on the romantic aspect in contextual tropes such as 'enemies to lovers' or 'fake dating'. Once established the timeframe, setting and dynamic, regardless of the repetitive tropes for which the secondary author opted, the new story becomes its own entity and becomes "not lesser than the source text" and it does not "violate the boundaries of the source text"[9]. In many cases, with minor changes in details such as appearance and names, the story can achieve its own canonical level and be published, further becoming the source for other pieces of Fan Fiction.

In recent years, the controversial book series *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011-2021) by E. L. James was published following support from fellow readers of the fanfic *Master of the Universe*, a divergent tale of the Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* Saga (2005-2020). Although stripping away the vampire element, aging up the characters, moving the setting and constructing a more mature-oriented plot, the similarities were still obvious to connoisseurs, visible enough to make the connection between the two series and for E. L. James rely on the already built fanbase, but also different enough to create its own universe, highlighting that "such an attempt to distinguish fan fiction from pro fiction is futile."[10] The 2020s also marked the rise of a niche in the romance genre with a significant number of new novels originating as 'Reylo' Fan Fiction. 'Reylo' refers to the pairing of Rey and Kylo Ren, the protagonist and antagonist of the sequel trilogy of the *Star Wars Universe*. Although the fans have shown interest in this potential couple since 2015 with the release of the first part of the trilogy, once the final movie was released in 2019 and received rather poorly, just as the Covid pandemic was emerging, the isolation encouraged the fans to provide their own versions of their dynamic. Amongst the most popular are *Go Hex Yourself* (2022) by Jessica Clare, *Knives, Seasoning & a Dash of Love* (2023) by Katrina Kwan, *My Roommate is a Vampire* (2023) by Jenna Levine, *You, Again* (2023) by Kate Goldbeck, *The Hurricane Wars* (2023) by Thea Guanzon, and others, with more to be published, while *The Love Hypothesis* (2021) by Ali Hazelwood being perhaps the most successful.[11]

It is worth noting that Fan Fiction does not trace its material strictly to the world of fiction, an example being Anna Todd's *After* series (2014-2015) which began as Fan Fiction inspired by the boy band One Direction. Whereas the story itself relies strictly on romance tropes, the otherwise popular choice of building an imaginary story around a real human is rather problematic. With Fan Fiction based off other fictional universes, the main problem is authorship, but when the source material revolves around real human being that are still alive, the matter becomes one of consent, its lack leading to an ethical questionability, and the boundaries of privacy, which can easily be interpreted as having been invaded and violated.[12] Therefore, Fan Fiction writers need to consider the potential impact of their work on both the easily influenceable community and the individual's rights, feelings, and reputation.

On the subject of the previously mentioned authorship, it is a debated and complex topic amongst writers and guilds, the main question being who is the owner of the final products: the

[9] Abigail Derecho, "Archonic Literature: A Definition, a History, and Several Theories of Fan Fiction," in *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*, edited by Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, McFarland & Company Inc. Publishers, 2006, 65

[10] Kristina Busse, *Framing Fan Fiction: Literary and Social Practices in Fan Fiction Communities*, University of Iowa Press, 2017, 141

[11] Elizabeth Held, "From Friends to Lovers: The Fanfic-to-Romance Pipeline Goes Mainstream," *Vulture*, Vulture, 29 Aug. 2023, www.vulture.com/article/fanfic-romance-reylo-publishing-trend.html

[12] Kristina Busse, "My Life Is a WIP on My LJ," *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*, edited by Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, McFarland & Company,\ Inc. Publishers, 2006, 214-216

original author or the one behind the Fan Fiction text? From a legal perspective, Fan Fiction belongs to the derivative works sphere, which allows the original author rights over any adaptations, translations, possible sequels, and transformative works. Even as an ethical consideration, fan writers build upon the foundation established by the original author, regardless of their contribution and interpretations to the source material and how much have they borrowed. Even though they may have in theory the right to the texts written by them, the copyright law, and the possibility of infringement, depending on jurisdiction and the stance of the copyright holder, are threats to their boundaries of creative expression. This is not an act of foul play, but a concern deeply rooted in the history of copyright as a necessity as "the idea of copyright, which had started to come into being in the early eighteenth century, offered writers a way to establish ownership over their words and the possibility for a livelihood. Before, copyright simply did not exist; or, where it did, it lay with the printers rather than the authors."[13] Consequently, in 2000, writer Anne Rice sent a cease-and-desist letter to the FanFiction.net platform, demanding the removal of any derivative text and forbidding its users from using her copyrighted characters. Although Rice wrote a book series which is an erotic approach and retelling of *The Sleeping Beauty*, the fairytale qualifies as public domain, unlike her *The Vampire Chronicles* series (1976-2018), which at the time was not yet public domain. Prior to her passing, Rice's stance changed with the growth in popularity of Fan Fiction. However, the guidelines of FanFiction.net do feature a list of authors and publishers whose property are not allowed on the platform, such as Rice, Archie comics, Dennis L. McKiernan, Irene Radford, J. R. Ward, Laurell K. Hamilton, Nora Roberts and her other pseudonyms, P. N. Elrod, Raymond Feist, Robin Hobb, Robin McKinley and Terry Goodkind. A similar situation occurred with the now defunct Amazon Kindle Worlds, a publishing service meant to monetize Fan Fiction. Although the idea behind the platform was to support fan writers, unlike the short-lived FanLib, which did not emerge from the fan culture community but as a business strategy prioritising the owners of the platform, the strict guidelines and licensing agreements led to its dissolution.

Touching on the topic of Fan Fiction as an expression of intertextuality, the genre manages to preserve the main inherent feature of being a reinterpretation or narrative expansion of a pre-existing text, character, or storyline. Whereas intertextuality is the wider technique of interconnecting texts and creative expressions through references, borrowings, or reactions, in the case of Fan Fiction, the engagement is solely at the level of existing media forms with the intent to create new fictional literary material and it exemplifies intertextuality through its engagement with the canonical source. Abigail Derecho described the way these adaptations operate in literature as "archontic"[14] from the word 'archive', drawing the comparison that both Fan Fiction and archives are never-ending sources in constant expansion, its intertextual relationship being derivative or appropriative. She further opposed these attributes, arguing that

> *Derivative*, when applied to artwork, has a negative connotation in everyday speech; it usually indicated a poor imitation or even a corruption of an original, pure work. Calling a text based on a prior text "derivative" thus signified a ranking of two texts according to quality and classifies the secondary texts as the lesser one. Similarly, *appropriative* connotates "taking" and can easily be inflected to mean "thieving" or "stealing."[15]

[13] Kristina Busse, *Framing Fan Fiction: Literary and Social Practices in Fan Fiction Communities*, University of Iowa Press, 2017, 21
[14] Abigail Derecho, "Archonic Literature: A Definition, a History, and Several Theories of Fan Fiction," in *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*, edited by Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, McFarland & Company Inc. Publishers, 2006, 63
[15] Ibid, 64

The basic feature that connects Fan Fiction as a literary genre with intertextuality as a technique is the usage of direct references and allusions to the source material. The items incorporated can be characters or identifiable names, settings, plot points and even pieces of dialogue that are either obvious or easily recognisable to the reader. The usage of intertextuality is essential when building the new world as it suggests that "we lose an important layer of interpretation and meaning if we divorce fan fiction from its contexts and equate it with other forms of transformative creativity." (Busse, *Framing Fan Fiction* 142) Of course, Fan Fiction writers have the option to expand upon the starting point of the source, eventually completing the source material with other nuances or depths if not removing these source elements and placing them into a completely new context that would be of interest to the fandom (Kaplan 136). The writer has the responsibility to start from a superficial interpretation of the canon and to juggle with the final product in order to use and adapt characters and to build the world they want, following the reinterpretation and reimagining they seek. These reinterpretations offer alternative contributions, demonstrating an intertextual dialogue between the two texts with the exploration of the different possibilities and trajectories, despite the level of divergences, so that they "create texts that rely on the interplay between knowledge of the source text and knowledge of the fanon."[16]

As an intertextual response to the original material, some fanfics may take on the mantle of parody, the satirical tones providing either a humorous or a critical commentary, or the homage one, the purpose being to pay tribute to a character or storyline. When doing so, the fan writer also engages in intertextual play as parodies and other stylistic devices encompass their own conventions, themes and tropes that only require a creative perspective. A similar approach can be observed in stories that explore gaps or ambiguities, filling in the unaddressed plot points or background for certain characters, or even when the narrative comes to end or just fails to satisfy with its plotlines[17]. Busse also addressed this matter by pointing out that

> The existence of the source text offers a framework of requirements that most fan writers choose to obey—to a degree, at least. For example, fan authors writing stories inspired by Supernatural must contend with the source text's unfolding narration of the Winchester brothers' childhood and young adulthood, told through intermittent flashbacks. Similarly, fans of Harry Potter must take into account a complex rubric of details regarding the laws, policies, and history of the universe set forth by J. K. Rowling in her seven novels while at the same time seeking inspiration, if not canon specificity, from what many perceive as the second-order Harry Potter films.[18]

Although once again the process relies on the creative aspect, and it is up to the author to choose the tone and the context they want to portray, further intertextual engagement is required when extrapolating information from the established canon as the additions still require connections to the source or information that aids the construction of a new context or plot. After all, a closer read can lead to "considerations of where inspiration may come from, which intertextual links are retained, and explorations of in which new directions the story is led."[19] When creating a crossover story, intertextuality is highlighted by the unity of different

[16] Deborah Kaplan, "Construction of Fan Fiction Character Through Narrative," *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*, edited by Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, McFarland & Company Inc. Publishers, 2006, 136

[17] Julia Elena Goldmann, *Fan Fiction Genres Gender, Sexuality, Relationships and Family in the Fandoms "Star Trek" and "Supernatural,"* Vol. 29, Transcript, 2023, 80

[18] Kristina Busse, *Framing Fan Fiction: Literary and Social Practices in Fan Fiction Communities*, University of Iowa Press, 2017, 125

[19] Maria Lindgren Leavenworth and Malin Isaksson, *Fanged Fan Fiction: Variations on Twilight, True Blood and the Vampire Diaries*. McFarland, 2013, 3

sources woven together to provide a new text that can borrow elements from various fandoms, be it characters, settings, storylines, or an eclectic mixture.

In contrast, what marks a distinction between the techniques used to build fanfics and intertextuality is the dichotomy between transformative and dialogic processes, with intertextuality being perceived as a legitimate and accepted practice that has existed since early times. Its mere usage in media with enriching purposes does not affect neither author – not the original one, nor the one opting to reference an outside source. The shared material is recognisable as only an individual element that would not cause the author to be denied their ownership, unlike Fan Fiction, which is by default a whole reconstruction of the source and over which the author has no rights legally or ethically, the possibility of a copyright infringement threatening their integrity.

Intertextuality only refers or incorporates to a certain extent various creative expressions and is not limited in its range, while Fan Fiction builds upon an established canon and is limited to text, other forms of media such as fanart acting as its own individual entity. With this borrowed base layer, Fan Fiction depends on specific fandom communities embedded in pop culture, the shared interest encouraging the creation of other such texts and establishing by default a potential audience, which is not necessarily the case for intertextuality. As a literary concept within literary tradition and cultural discourse, the users, audiences, and timeframe are diversified and not limited to any borders.

In summary, it can be settled that Fan Fiction, with its multifaceted engagement with pre-existing texts, embodies the usage of intertextuality in common contemporary and even lowbrow texts thoroughly and properly. Through various retelling strategies, these stories explore principles of transformative works and become a collaborative effort. By drawing on, remixing, and reinterpreting canon narratives, characters, and worlds, fan writers contribute to a complex tapestry of intertextual connections that further enriches and expands the cultural landscape of fandom and storytelling, also establishing this genre as a powerful means of creative expression with impressive influence on popular culture.

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