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Agency in Fan Studies. Materialities, Algorithms, and »Tiny Ontologies«

1. Introduction

There are few topics in fan studies that are more diffuse than agency. While the field highlights the performative, communicative, and transformative functions of fan culture, agency is seldom conceptualized further than as a creative practice or a choice. What can a conceptual ›lens‹ like agency bring to a domain like fan and audience studies? How can its connections to networks, affordances, and capacities help us understand fandom better, not just as a community but as a system? These questions are not only relevant for the field itself but also for related disciplines such as new media studies. While fans are often understood as active audiences, the nature of their activity, and how this activity interlaces with other entities such as technologies, is undertheorized.

Agency is not just a buzzword but a critical concept with methodological implications. It captures the dynamics of networks and communities that take shape around stories and platforms. In such a paradigm, action and practices are less foregrounded in favor of interaction and relationships within complex systems. This contribution interrogates the concept of agency and what it can bring to the study of audiences. I explore how agency has been framed in fan studies and dive deeper into what discourses like ›new materiality‹ can add to current research on active audiences. In doing so, this contribution offers a lens to examine characters, interfaces, and other types of actors that are in networks together.

In this contribution, I argue that we need to examine agency as a foundational concept in key areas of media studies. While I apply the term to fan studies, I believe that the importance of agency is exemplary for a turn in media studies towards systems, networks, and new materialities. In an increasingly complex media landscape, co-constructed through code, algorithms, and interaction, we need a paradigm shift. The focus of this contribution is largely theoretical and concerned with a conceptual turn in media studies and its sub-fields. Through different case studies drawing from fan culture, I illustrate the need for agency in media studies. One of the cases, for instance, discusses the material aspects of cosplay, a practice in which fans recreate the outfits of existing fictional characters. Agency is a difficult concept in this case, which involves different technologies, materials, and narratives. Studying such practices requires new methodologies of close-reading as well as a type of literacy that moves beyond the textual.

Overall, agency is framed in three ways in this contribution. First, the concept can be applied as a ›tiny ontology‹, which acts like a prism and allows us to study different aspects of a network. Second, it evokes a *posthuman* approach, thus including non-human actors, such as algorithms. Third, agency has the radical potential to include imaginary and virtual actors, such as characters and interfaces. I conclude by framing fandom as a practice best captured as a ›dance of agency‹ (see PICKERING 1995). Several small case studies act as theoretical probes to reflect on this ›dance‹. Costumes, Tumblr algorithms, and fictional characters demonstrate the importance of studying agency in fan studies more systematically.

Though the focus of this contribution is on one field within media studies, I hope that its attention to systems and materialities can create crossovers with platform studies, gender studies, and character studies. In the new media landscape, having silos will not do. What we need is interdisciplinary work that goes beyond traditional divides and boundaries.

2. The Discourse of Agency in Fan Studies

While fan studies implicitly address agency, it is seldom conceptualized and theorized in the field. Rather, agency is commonly used as a colloquial term that denotes the subjectivity of the fan and moments where the fan self-consciously engages with the object of their devotion. There are different interpretations and discourses of agency within the field.

First of all, the agency of fans is often implied or evoked through other concepts (e.g. creativity, community-building). In a study of porn consumers as fans, for instance, Alan McKee brings agency into the picture. He argues that agency is often associated with the concept of *fans*, which denotes active consumers and communities. Typical porn consumers, in contrast, are framed as the opposite of fans in popular discourse, namely as passive, addicted, and lacking agency. In McKee's study agency acts as an analytical lens that normalizes viewers of pornography and turns the spotlight towards their activities, communities, and practices. In general, thinking through agency in fan studies is essential for McKee: »Fan studies is the study of agentic cultural consumption« (2018: 518).

Agency in such cases is used to denote the conscious practices, choices, and acts of fans. For example, in a plea for autoethnography and longitudinal approaches to fandom, Ross Garner (2018) writes that scholars should consider »the intersection of a variety of factors including personal biography and demonstrations of agency, as well as wider contextual factors« when studying fan culture. Agency here is equated with moments of a fan's capacity to act rather than to passively consume media content.

Moreover, agency in fandom also pertains to characters and their fictional bodies. Francesca Coppa frames agency as having a degree of creative choice within fan criticism and fan productions to rewrite characters. In her analysis of slash fan fiction, Coppa argues (2018: 198): »Canon matters and fans make choices.« Through case studies of different slash pairings, she reveals that audiences mediate complex and intimate feelings through characters and their bodies. Coppa discusses the body of Bucky Barnes from the Marvel Cinematic Universe, for instance, which is ambiguous and sports an »eye black« that can be interpreted as a double-coded »war paint and mascara wrecked from crying« (COPPA 2018: 197). Characters such as Bucky offer different points of identification to the female fans that she studied. The bodies of characters in self-created homoerotic fiction are then not ›neutral‹ bodies but bodies that capture a range of interpretations and feelings that women can relate to. The agency of a character – understood in Coppa's work as related to subjectivity and embodiment – thus affects the fan.

While agency is understood as paradigmatic of fan studies, it is important to consider whose agency is being studied. Rhiannon Bury understands participatory culture as a continuum and argues that the agency of many subjects is forgotten in fan studies. She writes: »Those fans who are not part of a community are also legitimate subjects of study as are those

practices on the ›less‹ participatory end of the continuum« (BURY 2017: 130). A crucial question is indeed whose agency it is that fan studies considers and what groups might be excluded from the analysis on the basis of identity, language, or culture.

In contemporary critical theory, agency is not only associated with human subjectivity, embodiment, but also with related practices. Anne Jamison has touched upon this topic in her analysis of fan fiction as assemblages, a term used by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987) to describe collections of things and their interactions. Jamison theorizes the networks and infrastructure that underpin fan fiction, which is not a stable archive. She writes:

> »Fan fiction as assemblage allows us to imagine a system too heterogeneous to be accurately characterized from within a single discipline. Assemblage theory can help identify instances in which component parts of the fanfic assemblage ›exercise their capacity‹ and therefore enable new assemblages not previously possible [...]. We can talk about tropes as having an agency and influence in a story without erasing the writer's sense of telling her own story and consider how different platforms produce different kind of stories, pages, and organizational conventions« (JAMISON 2018: 537).

As Jamison rightly argues, creative networks and assemblages are crucial to fan fiction. I would even argue that other parts of fandom equally function as assemblages, where different actors are configured in ways that go beyond the textual, such as interfaces and code. In this sense, the idea of ›assemblage‹ comes close to what I am arguing in this contribution, namely that we need a turn towards agency to explore the multi-sided aspects of today's media culture.

What is important to consider in my argument is that I read systems like fandom not just as socio-technological assemblages but as socio-technological *imaginaries* given shape by narratives. This includes not just the narratives that exist but also the fans' imagination and consensus (›fanon‹), individual fantasies (›headcanon‹), and paratexts that the industry releases, such as spoilers. Some ideas about characters and stories are sticky and lead to affective responses and tension in reception. These imaginaries are a golden thread in this argument. In this sense, my understanding of systems or assemblages is a material landscape that is always connected to narratives and rich with affective potential.

3. The Value of a Material Turn in Fan Studies

The material turn in the humanities is particularly inspiring to think through for fan studies. Broadly speaking, we need to consider approaches to new materialism which cross over into science and technology studies (STS), physics, and other domains (LATOUR 2007; BARAD 2007). In these approaches, heterogeneous entities are framed as having agency and are understood as *actors*. These actors are not passive but purposely configured and related to one another. Barad even describes them as having »a fundamental inseparability« from each other (BARAD 2007: 128).

Perhaps the most promising aspect of agency is that it helps us shed light on both human and non-human actors within complex networks and systems (see LATOUR 2007). These approaches conceptualize agency not as a human capacity but as a quality of actors, which include non-human entities that cause complex actions and transformations, described by Bruno Latour as processes of *translation*. By focusing on non-human subjects, different types of entities – including software, interfaces, or algorithms – are read as having a capacity to act.

Due to their attention to such non-human entities, these approaches are also often captured through the term ›posthuman‹, which Barad (2007) summarizes as:

> »Posthumanism, as I intend it here, is not calibrated to the human; on the contrary, it is about taking issue with human exceptionalism while being accountable for the role we play in the differential constitution and differential positioning of the human among other creatures (both living and nonliving). [...] Posthumanism doesn't presume the separateness of any-›thing,‹ let alone the alleged spatial, ontological, and epistemological distinction that sets humans apart« (BARAD 2007: 136).

Agency in these approaches is always part of a system in which different actors influence each other. In other words, agency is relational and part of a network or assemblage. As Lukas R.A. Wilde rightly argues in relation to characters (see WILDE 2021), while these concepts have different histories, they have much in common: »One of the most interesting consequences of this approach [...] is that the distinction between ›actors‹ and ›assemblages‹ is itself a matter of perspective« (ibid.: xx).

This conceptualization also implies a turn to relational analysis, which in Barad's philosophy (2007: 140) connotes a deeper understanding of the »ontological inseparability and entanglement of intra-acting agencies«.

This turns our attention away from fixed entities to the spaces between them and how they influence each other, or what Barad describes as »reconfigurings/entanglements/relationalities/(re)articulations of the world« (BARAD 2007: 141).

For fan studies, Barad's insights are highly relevant. Concepts like ›participatory culture‹ might not suffice to study the complexity of all these interactions. Participation, after all, only emphasizes a practice and a community but overlooks how different actors are related and how these interactions come about. Some fan studies touch upon the necessity of theorizing these relationships further. Lori Morimoto (2019), for instance, proposed analyzing different, specific iterations of fandom as a ›contact zone‹ where different people, values, and things meet and even clash. What her model reveals is that fandom is increasingly a complex network where different *agencies* and affordances come into play.

In media studies, and fan studies specifically, it helps to read such communities and their interaction as a ›dance of agency‹, a term coined by Andrew Pickering, who writes that creation is always

> »a dialectic of resistance and accommodation, where resistance denotes the failure to achieve an intended capture of agency in practice, and accommodation an active human strategy of response to resistance, which can include revisions to goals and intentions as well as to the material form of the machine in question and to the human frame of gestures and social relations that surround it« (PICKERING 1995: 22).

Pickering applies the dance of agency primarily to the construction of science and technology. At certain points humans might be passive actors and spectators of the dance, while nature runs its course. At other points, human actors might be active agents who influence non-human actors, for instance in the case of scientific experiments. In this conceptual framework, agency is a dance, a choreography that involves social, cultural, and technological contexts. For Pickering, it is always relational and contextual. It is performative, rather than representational, and best captured as ›mangle,‹ a mix of actors that relate to each other in unforeseeable ways.

This concept also applies to fan and media studies, where different actors co-construct performances in complex ways. Agency consists of voluntary and conscious actions as much as a sphere of influence from other actors that audiences are not always aware of. While agency connotes an ability to have influence over other entities, it cannot be planned, and it is not always easy to say who influences who or what influences what. An

algorithm that we are hardly aware of might influence our behavior on Netflix or YouTube. A particular line in a TV series might spark the imagination of a fan author in unforeseen ways.

Looking through a lens of agency shapes an analysis drastically, because different entities gain affordances and are put in the center of an analysis. In this sense, a material analysis in fan studies can provide us with insights into characters, interfaces, and stories. It hampers our temptation to put human agents, such as fans, in the spotlight as completely autonomous agents. Through a material approach, we can gain further insights into complex networks and communities that increasingly manifest themselves on platforms. In fact, it is through analysis of such multimodal structures that different actors emerge and present themselves, which include fictional characters as virtual ›quasi-actors‹ that influence others within a network (see WILDE 2021).

To analyze objects and other non-humans, from algorithms to codes, looking into materiality is important. Objects are crucial to fans, especially if they are collectors (see GERAGHTY 2014) or creators (see HILLS 2014). ›Stuff‹, whether we consider merchandise or fabric, has meaning. This can show up in multiple things – our relationships with our collections, our fashion and fan apparel, our archives. There is a certain performativity to stuff in and of itself. Think of a comic that turns yellow in the sun, the dust that latches on to cosplay fabric, or a painted fan art that quietly dries on the table. The nature of these objects, and our interactions with them as consumers, can be studied through critical ›thing theory‹ (e.g. BROWN 2010). Such a theory suggests that objects are closely connected to postmodern identity and consumption society. Objects are socially inscribed with meaning by humans. An object that loses its meaning or use becomes disposable, but it also reveals a glimpse of its essence as a thing.

As I have explained before in an interview with Henry Jenkins (JENKINS/LAMERICHS 2019), the creative practices and media that fans use are shaped by their materialities. When a cosplayer chooses a certain fabric to represent a game character, that is an aesthetic choice, but it is also a choice that affects the medium and the structure of the network. Something may seem just a thing, but it is versatile, a semiotic medium used by fans to express themselves. Furthermore, merchandise, objects, and other stuff embody and signify the characters that we love. In this sense, materiality is deeply connected to what I describe as affective reception (LAMERICHS 2018), a process in which fans ground their identity in relation to narratives

and their characters. In this sense, there is a rich life beyond the material, connected to imagination and the construction of identity. As a material reading can reveal, this is always about relationships.

However, it is not that easy to pinpoint exact objects in a material analysis. Especially in cases where narratives and imagination are activated, objects and signifiers linger. For instance, objects can tell stories long after a text is finished. They allow a story to continue in some form and to be remediated as part of a new network. In this sense Rebecca William's (2015) ›post-object fandom‹ comes to mind. The ›official‹ object (such as a Television show or a comic book series) might have ended, but other objects and material will continue to remediate it long after. I personally have a large collection of objects related to Saturday morning cartoons, and they bring back that feeling of safety, family, and homeliness.

Material analysis might be more suitable for some venues and forms of analysis than for others. Some sites are rich with different media, stories, and signs, such as theme parks, film sets, signings, and fan conventions where different rides, costumes, and merchandise can clearly be seen as entities in a more complex, material network. These spaces are not ›neutral‹ spaces of the imagination but are also connected to commerce and capitalism. Again, fandom is increasingly a marketplace, a space of business. Materiality thrives in fan culture. It is important to dive deep into what those Funko pops, Red Bubble T-shirts, and idol photographs in Japan actually mean to people and what they represent. Objects can be keepsakes and toys, but they can also tell a wider personal story that goes beyond fandom (WILLIAMS 2015; GERAGHTY 2014).

Media, in other words, are given shape by their materiality. This is why it is important to not limit fan works to written texts but include forms of play, critical interpretations, and material or embodied performances. Materiality is highly important in fan studies since it helps us to think through different types of media used by audiences (e.g., videos, editing software, fabric, flesh) and how they work together. Materiality, by the way, is by no means exclusively ›offline‹. Even digital texts and fan fictions have their forms of materiality which are related to the platforms that they are posted on. It is important to realize that even digital content has materiality, from pixels and bytes to the algorithms that increasingly shape and filter fandom. Ian Bogost's notion of object-oriented ontology stands out in this sense, an ontology that is largely inspired by virtual worlds. Initially described in his blog as a ›tiny ontology‹ (BOGOST 2010), this approach pays

attention to the smallest things and to the non-human – a favourite button on a digital platform, for instance. Objects are increasingly virtual; yet the materiality of an Instagram picture can also be analyzed. Bogost presses us to consider the experience of objects:

> »As operators or engineers, we may be able to describe how such objects and assemblages work. But what do they experience? What's their proper phenomenology? In short, what is it like to be a thing?« (Bogost 2012: 10)

Bogost rejects fixed ontological categorizations and hierarchies. He argues: »Instead of the plane of flat ontology, I suggest the point of tiny ontology. It's a dense mass of everything contained entirely – even as it's spread about haphazardly like a mess or organized logically like a network« (Bogost 2012: 22).

Such an approach could further our field, which has implicitly put human subjects and their subject positions as fans in the center, when fandom is in fact an assemblage of characters, stories, networks, communities, and interfaces. What would a tiny ontology of fan studies look like? Here are some examples. It could be the analysis of...

- A single comment and how it operates in the network
- A like-button and its affordances
- A specific fan fiction trope and how it circulates
- The journey of a small object, like a Disney pin that was very hard to get
- One move in a game that is highly emergent and almost works like a hack, to upset the entire system (e.g. the rocket jump in *Doom*)
- One feeling, towards a single character, in a single moment of time, captured through autoethnography

As a methodology, tiny ontology is all about details. I understand Bogost's work as a plea to be specific, exact, and highly qualitative, rather than distant and generic. In fan studies, this is of utmost importance. Many studies in the field assume that one group of fans is characteristic of global fandoms as a whole, which is why spelling out the cultural context and local practices is so important. In the section below, I apply the different insights on agency to three different probes: to cosplay, Tumblr, and to fictional characters. Each example foregrounds different non-human actors and systemic approaches through which we can make sense of fan practices.

4. A Tiny Ontology of Cosplay

Different fan practices can be read through an object-oriented approach. What could a tiny ontology of cosplay look like, for instance? While the purpose of cosplay is to re-enact characters, usually at conventions or other meetings, I will focus in this case particularly on the initial costume design as a creative practice. As Garry Crawford and David Hancock (2019) have also argued, this is an art form that can be studied by considering its creativity, design, and performativity. I rely on my own experience in a small-scale auto-ethnography to reflect on the uses of different objects in costume design. These different actors come together, but each can be close-read, from a button to the parts of a sewing machine. Let me demonstrate.

To recreate a costume, different objects and technologies matter. These are tiny networks in themselves. Consider a sewing machine, for instance, which consists of different parts, from the needle to the thread to the individual buttons. The marked needle plate (or ›throat plate‹) is essential for sewing since it tells you where to line up the fabric. The foot pedal of the sewing machine is important for a user's interaction with the machine as well. You can use it to sew faster or slower, press harder through layers of fabrics, or gently tab it to create just a few stitches. Using the foot pedal, for instance, is a rhytmic and affective experience. It is haptic and connected to the sounds of the sewing machine that result from pressing it. The settings and movements of the sewing machine create a dance of agency as well. Do I use a zigzag stitch? How far apart will the stitches be? Each back stitch, straight stitch, or basting stitch has a function and purpose. Much of sewing involves putting parts of fabric together or folding it in precise ways: do I create a dart in the garment here or not? The sewing process itself can be unpacked through a lens of materiality – each stitch that we place or misplace or remove, each part of the embroidery, the trims, the hems, the buttons that we sew on.

Since I have created costumes myself, I know that working with different fabrics is a vastly different experience. Satin is very smooth and thin, and if my machine is not well-adjusted, the results will not be great. Similarly, my specific machine often has problems with leather, and I know that I either need to borrow a different machine from a friend or to hand-sew parts of the outfit if I want to use leather as I did for my Baroness cosplay. Hand-sewing is a different practice again, which involves very different, thimble threads. Like most cosplayers, I am also fond of glue, and a hot glue gun has been essential for making certain props or details of outfits.

Before sewing the outfit, it is important to be aware of your sizes and to measure yourself. After this step, you create the pattern on paper, which may be based on an existing pattern. You put this on the fabric and cut it out. The body is as much an actor in this network as the ruler, the paper, clothes pins, and the fabric. Like many costume designers, I have also often constructed a toile – a mock-up of the outfit in cheap material to make sure that it has the perfect fit. Remember that cosplay can be challenging in terms of design. Many anime, comic, or game designs go beyond what is actually feasible and even defy gravity itself. In this sense, some material only represents other material with different properties, such as ›worbla‹ foam representing an iron armor. Getting this right can be difficult. Creating a huge anime collar, for instance, can be a challenge. Different mock-ups might be needed and all sorts of material to style it, from an ironer to starch.

Reference material enters this network as well, from art books to online pictures. To make your costume look remotely like the original from the source-text, you have to analyze the character design to the fullest. This sometimes means consuming the source-text again to take screenshots, especially if there is little quality reference material available online. Some cosplayers make entire mood boards of the character design, unpacking each part of the outfits, thinking through fabrics in detail and even through what a character would *potentially* wear. Even though we cannot see what kind of fabric Kuzco uses, we can think through what fabrics best represents such an eccentric, rich, queer-coded character.

Materiality is also related to consumer culture. Many parts of an outfit can be bought, such as zippers. Other objects are not for sale. A cosplayer might have to recreate a certain button or put a lot of effort into finding the right type of zipper. The same goes for shoulder patches, armor, and details like broches. Worbla and other materials are necessary to recreate such bits and parts. To create the right proportions and shape of their own bodies, some cosplayers use padding. Personally, I was never as aware of my body as when I was cosplaying. I needed contact lenses to hide my poor eyesight and padding to create a more female silhouette, or a binder to flatten my chest when portraying a male character. In other words, a costume is never neutral but also encoded with social scripts, which are also tied to our own bodies, including our gender, sexuality, and ethnicity.

All of this is just the tip of the iceberg. Cosplay is a deeply material process where different things come together. It involves many media. And the ultimate medium is your own body which is wrapped in all these things to

deliver a stellar cosplay performance. To read it as a network means that we can pay more attention to the different phases of the costume and its performance. They all influence each other. When I sting myself with a needle, as I often do, I spill a drop of blood on my outfit that might still be visible. When I misuse my hot glue gun, there are parts of an outfit that I have to throw away. When my sewing machine is on the wrong setting, the stitches might not look that great and I have to remove them. It is a dance of agency.

In my tiny ontology of cosplay, based on my own experience, I thus consider different actors that matter in costume design:

- The sewing machine and its parts, from the pressure foot to the pedal to specific needles and settings
- The type of stitches we place
- Each fold, crack, or tear in the outfit, conscious or unconscious
- Different version of an outfit, from a mood board to the dummy and finally to actual costume
- Hot glue guns, worbla, foam, and other essentials to create tiny and large props
- A small object in a cosplay that took a lot of effort – the button or zipper that was so hard to find or create
- The body, which is measured, fitted, analyzed, and disguised to impersonate a character

Thus, a tiny ontology of cosplay allows us to consider not just the finalized outfit but its different parts and the individual media and technologies that are used to construct it. A tattoo that you have to hide is included in a network just as much as a flower that you embroidered by hand. Each part is rich with affect. Each part can be a creative challenge. Each part is meaningful.

5. Systems and Algorithms on Tumblr

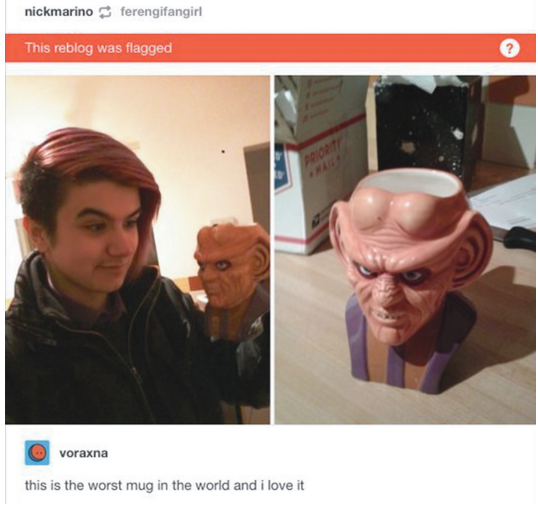
Contemporary audience cultures are not just characterized by their creativity but also by their communication on various platforms. These interfaces have different virtual, non-human actors, such as algorithms, that shape the agency of fans. The current section uses Tumblr as an example where recent incidents with algorithms impacted its users.

When the popular platform Tumblr announced on December 3, 2018, that it would ban all »sensitive content«, users were worried. Since its

launch in 2007, the social networking site had become a site for diverse subcultures to share content. Activists and sex workers used it as a blogging tool to freely express themselves. Fans used it to upload different types of fan art, including mature content. Tumblr, however, had also been targeted by bots. Unwanted accounts were pushing ads and posts with porn to the entire user base. As a result, the platform had been banned in the Apple store and needed to quickly change its policies.

By introducing a new algorithm, Tumblr hoped to make its platform safer. However, the algorithm was a tough gatekeeper. When it suddenly started flagging baking tutorials, pink art, and characters hugging as »sensitive«, users knew that this new algorithm was not working properly (see KNIGHT 2018). When the user Voraxna tried to upload a mug sculpted as the face of Quark (a character from *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*), for instance, she was stopped. Tumblr identified the two frontal lobes of the alien as breasts.

ABBILDUNG 1
Screenshot of censored Tumblr post (2018) by N.L.



Users quickly criticized the algorithm and related policies on Tumblr and other platforms such as Twitter, where they started cross-posting the user-generated content that Tumblr had prevented them from uploading.

There were two main problems in this cultural and technological debate. First, the algorithm did not work properly and often flagged things as ›sensitive‹ which were not. Even though the results could sometimes be considered amusing, it also meant that users could not upload their content. Moreover, Tumblr was one of the very few platforms that had allowed mature content before. In its policy on adult content from 2018, ›adult content‹ was defined as:

> »Adult content primarily includes photos, videos, or GIFs that show real-life human genitals or female-presenting nipples, and any content – including photos, videos, GIFs and illustrations – that depicts sex acts« (TUMBLR.COM 2018).[1]

Particularly note the use of the term ›female-presenting nipples‹ in this message. While the staff perhaps meant this as an inclusive term to include non-binary and trans persons, this policy also implies that female nipples are always sexual, in whatever context. This is of course not the case, and it is a culturally sensitive topic. A nipple can represent a historical artistic nude or a woman breastfeeding. A nipple can belong to a transgender woman. A male-presenting nipple can also connote sexual behaviour. Many users responded to the ›female-presenting nipples‹ statement and ridiculed it on Tumblr and other social media. Both #male-presenting nipple and #female-presenting nipple became common search terms on Tumblr. Needless to say, the algorithm had problems differentiating the most basic content from NSFW (not safe for work) content and could not moderate or filter on this basis. Critique of the new policy flourished online. Scholars of internet, platforms, and fandom were also quick to respond to the controversy and its implications. In a series called Tumblrpocalypse Jordan L. Thevenow-Harrison (2019), for instance, writes: »I learned more about identity through queer & POC teens on tumblr than in any other context. A lot of the defining work in queer communities was done on tumblr, often in response to some suggestive or horny art. All the threads that contain this work are going to disappear.« This post describes the finesse of data that is now considered invalid and adult on Tumblr, and it captures how valuable data is slowly erased and filtered.

This example tells us a lot about materiality and agency. Some data is erased or never uploaded in the first place; other data might be adult but

1 https://support.tumblr.com/post/180758979032/updates-to-tumblrs-community-guidelines [February 1, 2021].

belongs to marginalized groups. In this case, too, agency is influenced by tiny things like a nipple that is contextualized by an algorithm as belonging to a female body. Much of the data in this case was banned. Perhaps we even need to account for the actors that never-came-to-be, that were never uploaded, censored, or erased. For instance, a banned piece of fan art is not a virtual or an imaginary actor but rather an actor that never made it to a certain node within the network or never reached a significant sphere of influence. For instance, a user may not have been able to upload her lesbian fan art on Tumblr, but it still exists on her desktop and maybe on other platforms like DeviantArt. Agency is as much influenced by what is there as by what is not; by presence and by absence; by who has the right to speak up and who is marginalized or silenced.

Invisibility of content is then a key issue in more ways than one. Content was moderated too strictly by an algorithm. As the algorithm on Tumblr did not work well, users made many screenshots of what was flagged as sensitive content and uploaded these on other platforms such as Twitter. The fact that platforms like Tumblr are ›walled gardens‹ implies that we, as scholars of networks, sometimes have to look elsewhere. Sometimes an approach to materiality means inevitably turning to multiple channels to reveal the ›Tumblr data that never was.‹ While the algorithm is invisible, it could be influenced. Users deployed different tactics to circumvent this algorithm such as editing the HTML to bypass the adult filter (see ARORA 2018). Even though the staff found out about it and changed corresponding settings, this example says a lot about the agency of users in such a network – which is more complex than it seems at first sight.

In other words, networks often black-box non-human actors like algorithms. There is little transparency around how they are trained and how they influence user-generated content, hashtags, and recommendations. Since platforms are becoming more and more crucial for fandom, it is important to consider what actors they consist of and what their relationships are towards one another. While many new materialists would argue that networks are without hierarchies or ›flat‹, to use Bogost's terminology, there is tension. Perhaps the algorithm speaks louder than I do and misinterprets my content, leading to erasure and in some cases maybe even to a platform ban. In some networks, unevenness is part of the game.

As the case of Tumblr shows us, it is important to consider algorithmic agency and systemic literacy (see BRIDLE 2019). To fully understand agency, non-humans need to be at the forefront of our analysis. However, this poses

problems in terms of approach since their agency is not always accessible. Since certain actors in this data-driven media culture are largely invisible, fan studies needs to reconsider its methodologies.

6. The Relational Qualities and the Reception of Characters

In this final section, I again draw attention to the fact that agency is relational. Agency is always an interplay between different actors. This interaction is revealed in the reception of fans, which is not just a relation with different texts but also with different characters. In their reception, fans draw from a felt and embodied response towards the text and its characters; in other words, being a fan is an experience that is grounded in a feeling – an admiration of texts that are used to connect to others and to the world itself. Thus, affect is closely related to social formations online and offline. This is what I describe as *affective reception* in my work (see LAMERICHS 2018). As I have argued before, this type of reception is not just emotional but strategic and constructive. For fans, consuming and transforming a fictional text, world, and its characters is a purposeful and reflexive activity, in which they consciously reiterate their feelings toward the source text.

That is to say, fandom is a way of making sense of the world via felt and shared experiences toward various materials, texts, and meanings. This type of reception is by no means stable. Today's fictional texts are often part of a larger, transmedia world (see TOSCA/KLASTRUP 2011). Fans may not always agree with each version of a character or a story. They may purposely exclude certain texts from their network. In fact, negative affect characterizes today's active audiences as well, which involves trolling, gate-keeping, and hierarchies (SCOTT 2019). A fan might say: ›This version of Luke Skywalker that I grew up with is perfect, but the iteration in *The Last Jedi* is not him.‹ It is impossible to generalize our feelings towards characters, and yet understanding them seems to be the key to unlock contemporary media.

For instance, when the trailer of the film *Sonic the Hedgehog* (2020) was released, many gamers were upset. The character shown in the trailer was not ›their‹ Sonic. He looked too human, too uncanny, and not cute enough. Sonic's human teeth and animal fur, in particular, ruffled feathers. In a tweet, user Powerhoof writes: »Finally someone had the guts to give David Cronenberg control over the Sonic franchise« (April 30, 2019), referring to

a director whose aesthetics in body horror stand out. The tweet suggests that this version of Sonic seems to stem directly from a horror film and has monstrous connotations. Within a week, director Jeff Fowler announced on Twitter that Sonic would be redesigned: »[Y]ou aren't happy with the design & you want changes. It's going to happen. Everyone at Paramount & Sega are fully committed to making this character the BEST he can be...« (May 2, 2019). In other words, Sonic would be revised due to the concerns that fans raised.

For fans, characters are not just fiction but have meaning on a personal, emotional level. This reception can turn sour, especially in the current transmedia landscape where different iterations of a fictional world may conflict with the expectations and imagination of their audiences. After HBO aired the final season of *Game of Thrones* (2019), for instance, many viewers voiced disappointment. A petition demanding a remake of *Game of Thrones* by ›competent writers‹ was signed by 1,692,833 fans (July 22, 2019) in a grand display of emotional ownership.

The agency of fans, in other words, is intimately related to characters, storyworlds, and emotions which circulate together in different systems. Any approach centered on agency implies going beyond the narrative to see how characters have affected different consumption spaces, including social and urban spaces. Roberta Pearson (2007) emphasizes that characters are networked and that the study of characters should always be relational. Pearson speaks, in particular, of the televisual character, who is confined to a consistent text and whose production context needs to be taken into account. I would argue that they also relate to reception, in particular affective reception as a mode of intimate and constructive engagement with a text. While analyzing character features and their development has its own merits, this cannot be done without a focus on the social environments that characters belong to and that shape them. Characters, then, must be read as *social actors* that are networked and move beyond the narrative. Wilde argues that characters in Japanese culture are not just fictional protagonists or mascots but can function as these »social actors« that have cultural influence (WILDE 2016: 639; see WILDE 2021). The study of characters relates to reception as a broader process that goes beyond narrative and tabs into social and political discourses.

Understood from this networked perspective, the agency of characters becomes a complex question that relates to authors as well as audiences. For instance, fans may develop a ›headcanon‹ about a character, a per-

sonal narrative or fantasy that they attribute to the characters and their affordances themselves. A writer of fan fiction, for instance, can explore the personal narrative and agency of characters in the form of headcanon. Writing about avatars, John Carter McKnight (2017) argues that the term allows us to examine fan imagination and works and to dive deeper into the systemic qualities of games:

> »[Headcanon] also provides a means of analyzing complex processes of feedback among players, game designers, and transmedia authors, both amateur and professional. Headcanon is an origin point of a network of the psychological and social, designed and emergent, creative and critical, forces shaping players' reactions to character and narrative. In other words, we can explore the network of play through the key node of the player-character, or avatar« (MCKNIGHT 2017: 139).

Through headcanon, fans give shape to ›canonical‹ texts – such as Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories or the BBC *Doctor Who* episodes – , negate them, and even subvert them. This is a complex, networked process which involves the individual fan, different iterations of a text, and the interpretive communities that fans engage in. The notion of headcanon shows us that reception is more than just making sense of a text; fictional characters are felt, imagined, and believed in.

But character networks extend beyond human imagination, fiction, and media. As characters become more interactive through new interfaces, emerging systems, and machine learning, their affective relationship with us will undoubtedly become more complex. For instance, I explored the different qualities of data-driven characters in my previous work (see LAMERICHS 2019) and found that such characters relied on different interfaces, codes, and storytelling to give them recognizable, identifable personality traits. Such characters are complex actors and may even be considered as networks in and of themselves.

Consider the start-up Eternime[2] that lets you create an avatar of yourself – a chatbot based on your texts that is preserved after your death. Their motto is: »Who wants to live forever?« These characters of the future go well beyond the standard definition of characters as an agent within a *fictional* setting. An Eternime chatbot is a networked, data-driven character based on actual humans and their digital footprint embedded in an interface. These

2 Official Eternime site: http://eterni.me [February 1, 2020].

chatbots (your late grandma, your late sister) re-enact a human that you loved and surprise you with their messages. How does this relate to affect, to mourning, to grief? When these technologies become more advanced, what kind of actors will they be? Stating that they are a network and analyzing the different parts of that network will not be enough. To further our research, we must assess these systems and perform close-readings of the relations between data, human, and a human-like interface. What are these characters based on, and what do they represent? Cases like Eternime might require a more radical, philosophical approach to theorize what makes us human. By using a new materialist approach, virtual actors like characters can be studied as parts of a network co-inhabited by us.

7. Conclusion

As this contribution shows, fandom consists of complex systems, characterized by distributed agency. A material approach allows us to study fandom as a system or assemblage in which different entities relate to one another. Its value lies in studying non-human entities, such as the objects, algorithms, and fictional characters that influence and captivate their audiences in deeply affective ways. Objects and narratives are crucial in fan practices, making fandom a unique assemblage, perhaps best understood as a socio-technological imaginary.

While agency has been discussed in fan studies in a colloquial way, a deeper understanding of the concept can reveal the systemic nature of fandom. Agency has a performative and relational quality, like a choreographed dance. This dance of agency allows us to think through systems and relationships between different actors as well as between unique entities and parts. These actors range from the tiniest objects, such as digital like-buttons, to the largest networks, such as vast databases and omnipresent transmedia characters. This posthuman perspective allows us to study different types of materials as well, from stuff and code to fictional characters and interfaces.

Overall, today's media culture is rich with participation and activity and cannot be understood without speaking of agency. While the concept of agency haunts fan studies, it is seldom made explicit. A turn to agency is much overdue in our field, not just to scrutinize fan practices and materiality but above all to criticize the algorithmic tensions of contemporary platform fandom.

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