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Cosplay and the Art of Play

*Exploring Sub-Culture
Through Art*

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Performance and Performativity

Probably the most obvious, and most widely used, theorisation of identity in the existing academic literature on cosplay is the idea of identity as social *performance* or *performativity*,¹ with the two key theorists here being Judith Butler and Erving Goffman.

The work of Erving Goffman, and most notably his highly influential book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1969), is utilised, or at least referenced, by several writers on cosplay, such as Gunnels (2009), Rahman et al. (2012), and Peirson-Smith (2013). For Goffman, identity consists of, and is constructed through, repeated and numerous social roles performed in a variety of social contexts. In particular, what Goffman was interested in was how individuals use social performance to interact with each other and maintain what he referred to as the ‘interaction order’. Goffman saw interaction as a ritual, which has rules and meaning beyond the individual. Of importance here is the

¹Performativity is a concept most commonly associated with Butler, but it is worth noting that she uses the terms performance and performativity interchangeably.

social context in which social interactions and performances take place, this Goffman (1974) referred to as the 'frame'. Put simply, a frame is what allows the participants, or social 'actors', in any particular situation to understand 'what is going on here?'; it is the rules, the norms, the expectations, the possible roles, and so forth, which are available to the actors to make sense of any given situation or encounter. Though one may assume that anything is possible within a given social encounter, Goffman argues that this is not the case. Social interaction works on the basis of shared expectations, accepted roles, patterns of behaviour, codes of interaction, and so forth; they are quite structured. Social actors, to use one of Goffman's own metaphors, are like players of a card game, drawing from an already set and ordered deck (Goffman 1961, p. 25). Even by actively choosing not to follow expected social conventions, individuals are simply choosing a different course of action, a different card from the deck (to continue the metaphor), and observers may well react to this in ways that seek to diminish its impact and maintain the social order. For example, as Lawler (2014, p. 126) writes 'if someone acts completely out of an acceptable frame — if, for example, they shout when silence is expected...others may try to make a joke, or pretend that nothing untoward is happening'.

In particular, Goffman places a great deal of emphasis on how social actors, and those around them, work together to maintain the interaction order and fit in. This is highlighted by Rahman et al. (2012, p. 326) in relation to cosplay, where they (drawing on both Goffman and Butler) argue that:

[In] the performative act, most people are concerned about how others or significant others perceive them. The degree to which cosplayers see themselves as connected with or separated from others is important. With this perspective, it is not difficult to understand why cosplayers...would want to be accepted and recognized by their friends or fellow members.

However, Lawler (2014) suggests that the word *performance* is probably poorly suited to describe the work of Goffman, and as we shall discuss in a moment, also Butler, as performance seems to suggest that an

individual is putting on an act or a front, acting in a way that is not their *true self*. Certainly, many pick up on the key ideas of ‘front stage’ and ‘backstage’ in Goffman’s work. For some, such as Doniger (2005), the front stage is read to be where the social performance takes place, it is the front, the mask that we wear in different social situations, while the backstage is the self unmasked, the *true self*. As Elliot (2014, p. 43) writes ‘Goffman, to be sure, maintained that there is a self standing behind the multitude of roles that any individual performs in daily social interaction’. However, Lawler (2014) disagrees with this assessment, for two key reasons. First, she suggests that for Goffman, rather than the various social roles we play hiding our true self, it is these roles that make us *who we are*. As Lawler argues (2014, p. 121) ‘we are constantly playing various parts, but what those parts add up to is *ourselves*’ (emphasis in the original). That is to say, there is no real or true self behind the social performance, but rather, who we are is the construct of the various roles we play. Hence, following the likes of Mead (1974) and Blumer (1962), we can see our sense of self as created and maintained through the roles we play and how others see us in the roles we play, or more precisely, how we *think* others see us in those roles. This leads to Lawler’s second argument that Goffman maintained that we should not seek to distinguish between true and false performances, but rather between convincing and unconvincing performances. Key concepts here for Goffman (1961) are the ideas of ‘role embracement’ and ‘role distance’. Role embracement is where ‘an individual is attached to the role and spontaneously involved in it’. That is to say, they embrace it and accept it as *their* role (Smith 2006, p. 105). Role distance constitutes a ‘wedge between the individual and his [*sic.*] role, between doing and being’ (Goffman 1961, p. 97, cited in Smith 2006, p. 105). With role distance, the performer attempts to create a distance (a ‘wedge’) between themselves and the role. This is not to say they are denying the existence of the role, but rather ‘the self it implies’ (Smith 2006, p. 106). They are not *who* or *what* the role would appear to suggest they are.

An example of both role distancing and role embracing in the context of cosplay can be seen in *The Squee Project* video ‘costuming,

cosplay and identity' (2018). In this, the cosplayer Kimberly Brighthouse suggests that in cosplay 'there can be a lot of erasure of the identity I hold in everyday life'. Kimberly continues, 'because people look at me and they want to gender me, and say "oh you're a girl", but that's not me'. This cosplayer suggests that therefore cosplay allows them to distance themselves from certain societal labels, such as gender, and to 'embrace those pieces that are not accepted in day to day life'.

Lawler (2014, p. 118) refers to our creation of identity through social performance as 'self-impersonation'. Social actors play out roles that they think reflect themselves, or similarly, try to distance themselves from other roles that they do not want to be associated with—and by doing so, actively creating a sense of self. Hence, for both Goffman and as we shall now see, Butler, identity is not about *being* but rather about *doing* (Lawler 2014, p. 116).

Pandora's Tower

Pandora's Tower (Nintendo, 2012) (Fig. 5.4) is a video game developed exclusively for the Nintendo Wii. In the game, you play Aeron, a soldier who volunteers to undertake a dangerous and emotional mission to save his beloved friend, Elena. Elena has been cursed and mutates into a demonic abomination. Aeron must kill and remove the hearts of thirteen demons in Pandora's Tower and return with them to Elena for her to feast on in order to break the curse before her mutation becomes permanent.

The role-playing aspects of *Pandora's Tower* allow the gamer to decide whether to develop a romantic relationship with Elena or not, which then proves pivotal to the game's multiple endings. In between levels, Aeron is able to return to Elena to inform her of his progress, present her with gifts, and seek her assistance in solving puzzles. These actions assist in strengthening the bond between the two characters and ultimately impact on how the game ends. Hence, each player makes choices as to how they wish to develop the character of Aeron; for example, a player who is merely interested in completing the thirteen levels of the game may not develop a romantic relationship with Elena.

During a science fiction and fantasy convention in Birmingham in 2013, David Hancock filmed and photographed the (female) cosplayers Stephanie and her partner Tanya dressed as (the male character) Aeron and (the female character) Elena, as they acted out their roles on a small green area by an ornamental fountain outside the main exhibition centre. Later, to add to the filmed footage's narrative, Hancock inserted various



Fig. 5.4 *Pandora's Tower II*, watercolour on paper, 56 × 76 cm, 2013

cut scenes from the original video game. The inclusion of sections from the game draws attention to how Stephanie has developed the character Aeron both in the game and in her cosplaying of him in a particular direction, which emphasises his romantic relationship with Elena.

Stephanie and Tanya were already in a relationship, and their cosplaying of these characters emphasises the romantic relationship between the characters, but also themselves. We, therefore, see here a complex web of identities, performances, and relationships laid on top of each other and intersecting. Here, a same-sex couple, who are in a pre-existing romantic relationship, use cosplay to act out and expand a male–female romantic relationship that they have also chosen to develop in a video game. Their cosplay is, thus, an amalgamation of their own relationship and a video game relationship, but also more than the sum of these individual parts. It is a performance, built upon existing performances, but one that takes on a life and narrative of its own in this moment and space (see Chapter 7). These relationships, performances, and narratives, are expanded by Hancock through his use of both film and watercolour paintings. Hence, the artist himself (his identity, his narratives, and his performances) are further added into this mix. Combined, these bring to bear and make visible the complexities of identities at play. There are many players and characters here, all of which highlight the complex and shifting nature of identity.

Undoubtedly, the theorisation of social performance drawn on most frequently in the existing literature on cosplay is the work of Judith Butler, and in particular her highly influential book, *Gender Trouble* (1990). The key term typically associated with the work of Judith Butler is that of *performativity*. Sometimes a rather clumsy distinction is made between Goffman and Butler, which casts Goffman as a structuralist writer, who sees a true self behind the performance, and Butler as a post-structuralist, who sees the idea of the self as a (fluid) fabrication of repeated social performances. However, as we have already argued, this probably unfairly suggests a false rigidity in Goffman's work, and as we shall see, also possibly reads more fluidity into Butler's work than is originally present.

Though there are many similarities between the work of Goffman and Butler, Butler does not directly draw on or reference the work of Goffman. In particular, Butler in her book *Gender Trouble* has, as the title suggests, a specific focus on gender. Though Goffman does consider gender, such as most notably in *Gender Advertisements* (1976), it is apparent that gender is not his primary area of interest. One of the most important contributions Butler makes is to question the association of gender labels with the idea of sex. While feminists have for some time argued against the idea of gender as biologically determined, Butler asserts that similarly we should see sex as a social construct. Why, Butler asks, must we limit sex to male and female and divide the social world down these limited and dichotomous lines? Following Foucault (1978), Butler sees ideas of gender *and* sex as a 'discursive effect'. That is to say that both gender and sex are the product of and are continuously remade through social performance, which adheres to dominant discourses. As Elliot writes (2014, p. 126):

Rather than understand the self in terms of inner desires, psychological capacities or emotional needs, Butler says that the self is produced in the act of performing sexuality, doing gender and enacting desire. There is for Butler 'no doer behind the deed'; people only come to see themselves as possessing inner lives and psychological identities through a set of repeated gender performances.

Hence, similar to Goffman (or more precisely, similar to how some read Goffman), for Butler there is no real self behind the performance, but rather our sense of self becomes reified through repeated social performances. For example, Lotecki (2012) argues that we should not see cosplayers as seeking to escape their identity, but rather by drawing on Butler, we can better understand this as playing out another performed character.

For Lawler (2014), the key difference between Goffman and Butler is that while Goffman focuses on the stability and maintenance of the social (interactive) order, Butler is more interested in how this can be disrupted, and in particular, how gender can be challenged and transgressed. For example, Butler pays a good deal of attention to what she sees as subcultural forms of gender resistance, such as ‘drag’ and ‘gender blending’. For Butler, drag can be ‘a postmodern tool with which to radically reassess universalized and reductionist feminist thought’ (Coles 2007, p. 9). As Butler (1990, pp. 137–138) writes:

In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself — as well as its contingency. Indeed, part of the pleasure, the giddiness of the performance is in the recognition of a radical contingency in the relations between sex and gender in the face of cultural configurations of causal unities that are regularly assumed to be natural and necessary. In the place of the law of heterosexual coherence, we see sex and gender denaturalized by means of a performance which avows their distinctness and dramatizes the cultural mechanism of their fabrication. (emphasis in original)

It is worth noting that Butler is referring to only certain forms of drag, and she suggests that not all drag is inherently subversive, and some may serve to reinforce heterosexual power structures. Moreover, as Lamerichs (2018, p. 212) writes:

Rather than showing how cross-dressing can erase existing boundaries of gender identity, Butler emphasizes how it reconfirms heteronormativity, or the categories that define man, woman and heterosexuality as the norm (Butler 1993). Drag exposes all of these notions as constructed, but it is not subversive because it also reconfirms them.

However, the question of what is subversive and what is simply gender parody is left largely unanswered by Butler (Salih 2002).

Several authors, such as Norris and Bainbridge (2009), Lamerichs (2011, 2018), and Lunning (2012), make direct comparisons between cosplay and drag. Lunning (2012) suggests that both cosplay and drag can be seen as mechanisms for creating and playing out identities that 'secure for the cosplayer a temporary symbolic control and agency' (cited in Bainbridge and Norris 2013, p. 18). Furthermore, Norris and Bainbridge (2009, p. 9) argue that:

Unlike other fannish dressing-up, cosplay is closer to drag. We would argue that it is not merely an act of becoming a particular character, or marking out a particular alignment, but of *disruption*. This is the 'play' in 'cosplay', a play with identity and, more often, a play with *gender* identity. (emphasis in original)

Of course, cosplay can literally be drag, in the form of crossplay, where male cosplayers dress as female characters, or more commonly, women dress as male characters, and could therefore provide a means of gender disruption and gender play. Certainly, it is evident that some, possibly many, see the cosplay community as a (relatively) friendly and safe environment in which to more openly express, and play with, certain sexual and gender identities. However, the degree to which cosplay and science fiction and fantasy conventions might provide a liminoid space (Turner 1969) where traditional sexuality and gender roles might be subverted and recede has, at times, been somewhat exaggerated.

Bainbridge and Norris (2013) are keen to point out a key distinction between disruption and subversion. They argue that cosplay is not subversive, as it is rarely political, but it can be disruptive, such as playing with ideas of gender and gender roles.

Most cosplayers are women, and unsurprisingly then, most crossplay tends to be female to male. The number of men doing crossplay is far less than women playing male characters. Moreover, the majority of female crossplayers usually take on characters that follow the Japanese popularity for feminised 'cute boys' (*shōnen*), such as those that appear in the popular anime and manga series *Hetalia*. Hence, female-to-male

crossplayers tend (most commonly) to play characters that already express (certain) feminine characteristics. Then, when, on the rare occasion that female cosplayers do play a more 'masculine' character, they often portray them as a 'feminised' version. For example, a popular female-to-male cosplay is for women to dress as Mario and Luigi from the video game series *Mario Bros*; however, most typically here, female cosplayers tend to adapt Mario and Luigi's traditional outfits to make them more feminine, such as by adding a skirt.

Most male cosplayers tend to portray male, and often hyper-masculine, characters, such as superheroes. Male-to-female crossplay is rare, and, as Leng (2016) suggests, male-to-female crossplayers do not typically seek to challenge accepted ideas of femininity and masculinity, but rather tend to play out female characters as hyper-feminine parody, which reinforces dominant ideas of acceptable femininity. For example (as highlighted above), Amon (2014) discusses the example of male cosplayers dressing as 'sexy' Disney princesses. Moreover, many of the characters cosplayers play are already hyper-sexualised in their original source material, such as 'slave' Princess Leia, or the majority of comic book female superheroes.

Of course, parody can be a powerful subversive and political tool; exaggerating and caricaturing the taken-for-granted can cast a new light and questioning eye on accepted social conventions—but this is not necessarily always the case. Certainly, decades of sociological and media studies analysis have argued that the often exaggerated portrayal of femininity and masculinity in mainstream media has done very little to challenge our socially accepted idea of sexuality and gender norms, but rather, play a crucial role in creating and reinforcing social structures and patterns, such as hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005).

As Leng (2016) argues, most crossplay is not political; often this has more to do with expressing a fan's affiliation or interest in a particular character or text, rather than seeking to subvert or play with gender or sexual identities. Moreover, Lamerichs (2011) is clear about the limitations of using Butler to theorise cosplay as a form of identity subversion. As she writes 'subversion becomes a slippery process because the subject is always subjected to social forces' (Lamerichs 2011, 5.5).

Butler's work is therefore advocating the transgressive, the disruptive, and those acts that cause (as the title of her book suggests) gender trouble. However, as Elliot (2014, p. 129) suggests, by setting out certain performances, such as drag as transgressive, this involves 'the spectre of normal or routine performances of sex in social setting'. That is to say, Butler helps reinforce binary oppositions, such as normal/transgressive, which she sets out to challenge. Moreover, it is important to reemphasise that for Butler, our identities are not voluntary. For Butler, identity is not as fluid as many read it to be. As Lawler (2014, p. 131) writes:

As with Goffman's work, then, it is important to think of Butler's framework for the performative doing of sex or gender as set within a wider social world; it is not voluntary on the part of the subject, nor does it start with the subject. The performativity of gender is compulsory and set within the confines of what Butler, borrowing from the North American Feminist Adrienne Rich (1980) calls 'compulsory heterosexuality'.

As Lamerichs (2011, 3.3) adds, 'performing one's identity is not a voluntary act... but rather one that is always confined to discursive practices in a certain society'.

There are also others, such as Hood-Williams and Cealey Harrison (1998), who question the compatibility of combining speech acts theory with psychoanalytic theory, as Butler appears to attempt to do. As, on the one hand, speech theory suggests, there is no 'I' behind the discursive, while the 'I' is central to psychoanalysis. And Butler in her preface to the 1999 edition of *Gender Trouble* admits that there are omissions in her theorisation of performativity (Salih 2002); an issue she attempts to address in her later work, such as *Bodies that Matter* (1993). In particular, in Butler's later work, such as *Undoing Gender* (2004), the role of others in shaping (and challenging) our identities becomes even more evident. As Lawler (2014, p. 185) writes 'as well as seeing our selves, our identities, as relationally produced — as produced within matrices of social relations — Butler wants to consider the ways in which they are also *undone*'. As we perform our identities, those we are bound to, have the power to challenge and even undo this. As Butler

(2004, p. 49) writes ‘I am nowhere without you’, and Lawler (2014, p. 186) argues, this highlights how “identity” is a profoundly social entity’.

The work of both Butler and Goffman are important as they (even taking into consideration their critics) allow us to move beyond simplistic and common-sense ideas that there is one real, true, self. Cosplay is not a performance of identity that sits on top of a deeper, more real identity; these performances are part-and-parcel of *who we are*, and they are *part* of our identity. This is not to deny that through cosplay the performer can *become someone else*; as through all performances our identity and sense of self are always evolving and changing. Through every performance, we become someone else, most often in very subtle ways.

Certainly, cosplay is useful in helping us understand the performative and playful nature of contemporary identity. According to Hills (cited earlier), a common criticism of fan-impersonators is that they lack a ‘strong enough’ self-identity (Hills 2002, p. 171). However, cosplay reveals the complex and multifaceted nature of identity performances.

For many cosplayers, their cosplay is not primarily (or at least not wholly) about playing another character or identity, but rather (similar to the arguments of Hills 2002, set out above) using cosplay as a mechanism to explore aspects of their existing identity/identities. Cosplayers will often play a wider variety of, sometimes quite diverse, roles; and often these characters are chosen as ways of living, exploring, and performing identities. For example, one cosplayer we interviewed, Sophie, discussed her portrayal of Boris, a variation on the Cheshire Cat from *Alice in Wonderland*, who appears in the manga and video game *In the Country of Hearts* (Quin Rose, 2007–2009). The character, Boris, is a highly sexualised individual who attempts to molest Alice throughout their meetings. But Sophie also cosplays Sonic the Hedgehog, Sora and Demyx from the video game *Kingdom Hearts*² (Square Enix, 2002), as well as ‘around fifty’ other male and occasionally female manga characters. In particular, Sophie found portraying male characters, ‘more

²Sora and Demyx are characters from *Kingdom Hearts*, a video game that incorporates Disney characters with a specially created world by Square Enix, the designer of *Final Fantasy*. Originally released in 2002, there have been several sequels and spin-offs.

relaxed. I don't have to be girly because I'm not a very girly person. I'm more chilled out, can't be bothered, male. It's more natural for me to be a boy than a girl. It feels like so much more effort to be a girl'.

We recognise that a sense of self, even the idea of a real, deeper, self, is important to many, such as trans people. For Sophie, Kimberly Brighthead interviewed in *The Squee Project* (2018) video (cited above), and many others, cosplay, and in particular crossplay, provides an important way of playing with, and maybe even, disrupting gender. Hence, as with Butler's and even Goffman's theorisations, we are not attempting to deny others' subjectivity or agency, but rather, recognise the multiplicity and compound nature of identity, and the role of social performances and social expectations in shaping these. However, the question to which we now want to turn is to ask if, in an increasingly fluid social world, identity still matters?

The Individualised Self

Zygmunt Bauman (2008, p. 54) in his book *The Art of Life* writes that:

As Foucault suggested only one conclusion follows from the proposition that 'identity is not given': our identities (that is, the answers to questions like 'Who am I?', 'What is my place in the world?', 'What am I here for?') need to be *created*, just as *works of art* are created. (emphasis in original)

For writers such as Zygmunt Bauman, Richard Sennett, Ulrich Beck, and Anthony Giddens, in modernity, identity became a constantly evolving project that needed to be worked on by the individual. This is linked to not only ideas of *self-improvement*, but also the modern search to find and become one's *true self*. It is in modernity then that identity acquires its full meaning and becomes the 'quest of self-identity' (Giddens 1990, p. 121). However, these are identities that individuals need to pursue. As Bauman (2004, p. 49) argues, their trajectories are 'unambiguously laid out'. Hence, though identity becomes a project, it is a project one has to pursue, to set ends; it is about becoming who we were *meant to be* (Muriel and Crawford 2018).