

Review

Brigid Cherry, *Cult Media, Fandom and Textiles: Handicrafting as Fan Art*, London: Bloomsbury, 2016. 214pp. ISBN-10: 1350071331.

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Fan studies, since its conception in the early 1990s, has tended to privilege textual over tactile fan engagement, and, with the exception of costuming and cosplay (Scott 2015), the small body of literature on fans' material practices often positions material fan production as a masculine practice (Hills 2014; Rehak 2014). The gendered and feminine nature of fan handicrafting prompts Brigid Cherry to reconsider these normative claims. Cherry's *Cult Media, Fandom and Textiles: Handicrafting as Fan Art* (2016) investigates fans' increasing engagement with handicraft as a way of reworking, reimagining, and transforming cult media texts. Cherry adopts an interdisciplinary approach to her research which demands consideration of fan handicrafting in the context of fan studies, gender studies, textiles studies, and material culture.

Existing at the conjunction of cult media, hobby, and fan production, Cherry's in-depth ethnographic research explores the interrelating network of creative, social, and affective experiences for fan handicrafters on Ravelry (an online user-driven social network and organising tool for handicrafters and fibre artists - although Cherry's research reveals that it is particularly popular among knitters and crocheters). Cherry structures her findings around a series of case studies inspired by contemporary Anglophone cult media texts such as *Doctor Who*, *True Blood*, *Firefly*, *Harry Potter*, *Outlander*, and *Sherlock*. Additionally, Cherry's personal history in relation to handicrafting and fan culture is vital to her research, and she positions her work within the autobiographical and autoethnographic tradition of fan studies.

Chapter 1 introduces the concept of fan handicrafting, and locates it on the boundaries between textile arts and fan culture. For Cherry, fan handicrafting cannot be seen as straightforwardly connected to fan culture (and, by extension, fan *studies*): 'it is also embedded in social and domestic contexts, as well as the creative, artistic, feminist, and political practices of the textile arts' (14). Cherry presents a broad overview of the relationship between fandom, textiles, and gender, and she aligns the resurgence of DIY

culture (namely through the lens of the 'knitting revival) over the past decade with the increasingly widespread nature of participatory fan culture in the twenty-first century. She argues that the DIY ethos of communal 'making and sharing' (Gauntlett 2011) connects fandom and handicrafting culture. Additionally, Cherry argues that both female fan cultures and feminine handicrafting are similarly devalued, and that fan handcrafters are subsequently rendered invisible to fan *culture* and fan *studies* alike, having been routinely obscured in 'accounts of (male) collectors and prop builders' and '(female) fan fiction writers and vidders' (35). This provides the basis for one of Cherry's fundamental arguments: that, firstly, fan handicrafting is located on the boundary between affirmational and transformative fandom, and, secondly, that fan handicrafting problematizes normative binaries that are prevalent within fan studies.

Chapter 2 establishes Cherry's research design and preliminary findings for her empirical ethnographic study of fan handicrafting that forms the findings of the book, and in this chapter she presents a demographic profile of the fan handcrafters using Ravelry. Developing this, Chapter 3 explores the ways in which handcrafters construct and perform fan identities through their online profiles and craft-related fan activities, examining in particular how fan handicrafting intersects with the construction of the domestic, the personal, and the feminine in everyday life. I would have liked to see race, and particularly whiteness, given further attention in this chapter, especially during Cherry's discussion of the competing and oppositional femininities represented in her 'shabby chic' vampire fandom case study (77-83). Unpacking the entanglement of whiteness, respectability, and consumerism in the 'shabby chic' fan handicrafting aesthetic has important ramifications for Cherry's broader claim throughout *Cult Media, Fandom, and Textiles* that fan handicrafting is closer to feminist acts of craftivism (which have been aligned by Close (2018) with White feminism) than it is to 'New Domesticity' and the 'dark side' of the knitting revival.

Chapter 4 introduces three key types of handicrafting Cherry identified through her research: mimetic, emblematic, and interpretative. Cherry's examination of a range of artefacts (which are reproduced in a number of images featured throughout the book) reveals how different handicraft projects invoke and transform the storyworlds fans are invested in, not only embodying affective responses to texts but also creating narratives in their own rights. Cherry subsequently argues that handicrafting enables fan handcrafters, like fan fiction authors, to 'remediate and rework the text in order to bring it closer to their tastes and desires' (95). This extends Cherry's discussion of the ways in which handicrafting can be transformative, mimetic and non-mimetic, and can operate as both overt and concert performances of fandom (depending upon the degree of incorporation of material-semiotic meanings). In this chapter, I found Cherry's definition of interpretative fan handicrafting as projects which 'loosen, but do not sever, connections to the text' (120) particularly compelling, and would be interested to see this framed through Thornton's (1995) concept of subcultural capital (although Cherry does, admittedly, examine this concept in Chapter 6). In Chapter 5, Cherry extends her discussion of the ways in which handicrafting, through the connection between narrative, storytelling, and crafting, can be

viewed as transformative work. Arguing that, within fan handicrafting, ‘textuality and materiality are often enmeshed’ (126), Cherry explores the ways in which ‘handicrafting and writing intersect’ (148), enabling fans to use their handicrafting to construct personas and build storyworlds. Once again, here Cherry interrogates normative binaries within fan studies surrounding materiality and textuality.

In Chapter 6, Cherry adopts a Bourdieuan framework to examine various levels and degrees of capital in relation to fan handicrafting, revealing how different types of capital allow fan handicrafting culture to operate. For fan handicrafters, fan cultural capital is, Cherry argues, in many respects inseparable from handicrafting cultural capital (although, as she notes, they at times can exist as competing forces), and both are integral to social and symbolic capital within the community Cherry examines. In turn, Cherry spends much of this chapter revealing how fans convert their cultural, social, and symbolic capital into economic capital through fan handicrafting’s ‘micro-economy’ (164) on e-commerce websites such as Etsy. She subsequently examines difficulties regarding copyright and intellectual property which can bring mimetic fan handicrafters into conflict with the culture industries, claiming that these conflicts ‘challenge the relationship between fan culture and the culture industries’ (178). Cherry concludes that fan handicrafters’ investments in their own micro-economy, rather than officially sanctioned materials provided by the culture industries, problematizes concerns within fan studies about the culture industries commodification of fannish cultural production (Jenkins 2007). Although, admittedly here I feel the utopian potential of the peer-to-peer micro-economy of fan handicrafting is somewhat overstated.

At the heart of *Cult Media, Fandom, and Textiles* is Cherry’s argument that fan handicrafting crucially represents a number of negotiations – material versus textual, affirmational versus transformational, mimetic versus non-mimetic, crafts versus arts, text versus textile, fibre art versus fan art. These negotiations structure and inform much of her research, and she uses them to interrogate the inherent separation of textual/transformational/female and material/affirmational/male fandoms within fan studies. Cherry’s work is highly valuable in this respect, and she offers a compelling and original challenge to existing notions of participation and production within fandom. *Cult Media, Fandom, and Textiles* therefore sparks new questions about the mobile, fluid, and hybrid nature of fannish production, consumption, and material culture in the digital age, as well as the semantic and theoretical use of the term ‘fan’ itself.

To conclude, Cherry offers an insightful examination of fan handicrafting which would prove an informative resource for students, academics, and researchers working across a number of disciplines such as gender studies, fan studies, media studies, and textiles and fashion. Fans and handicrafters alike will also no doubt find much relevant and appealing in Cherry’s work.

Biographical note:

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