

Book Review: *Cosplay: The Fictional Mode of Existence***PS Berge**

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**Author Bio:** PS Berge (they/she) is a doctoral candidate at the University of Central Florida. Their research falls at the intersection of queer and trans game studies (especially tabletop roleplaying games, gaming fandoms, and power fantasies) and toxic technocultures (including cross-platform dynamics and white supremacist recruitment). Her work has appeared in *Game Studies*, *New Media & Society*, and elsewhere.  
Website: <http://psberge.com/>

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Frenchy Lunning's *Cosplay: The Fictional Mode of Existence* is a thorough explication of cosplay in the context of performance. Over the course of the 181-page book (excluding notes), Lunning maps the relationship between cosplay and adjacent genres of costumed theatrical performance, maintaining a clear focus on fan practices, cultural evolutions of the hobby, and identity. Newly published by Minnesota Press in 2022, *Cosplay* is likely to be an important text for scholars interested in discussing cosplay in the context of its subcultural movements and fan identity.

Overall, *Cosplay* is less a primer on the practices or communities of cosplay than it is a new materialist examination of cosplay as fandom. Lunning draws heavily from Latour, extending her focus across the entire “assemblage of these multiple modes of existence” (p. 83) through an analysis that spans discussions of cosplay conventions, websites, costumes, masks, anime, gaming, photography, influencer culture, national events, history, skits, rules, and more. Lunning attends to both the Western popularization of cosplay and to Japanese cosplay events and practices, often oscillating between the two diverging scenes to show how they have shaped one another.

Lunning's account is largely ethnographic, drawing from her own direct observations and conversations with hobbyists. She frequently discusses her own positionality as a researcher and describes her experiences attending conventions and observing cosplayers. Lunning's focus, again, remains fundamentally on identity and the experience of the cosplayer. As she writes: “The cosplayer emerges from this maelstrom of *moe* desire. Through the desire to inhabit, embody, and through masking become the characters they desire, in the process, they become actors” (p. 139). In other words, Lunning argues that the cosplayer experiences a kind of becoming through the performance of character. This is the heart of Lunning's project here: noting the ways in

which cosplayers themselves contend with social “masking” and expression (Chapter 2), abjection (Chapter 3), and performance (Chapter 4). While the Introduction and Chapter 1: “A Social History of Mass Culture and Identity” do provide some background on the standard fare of cosplay—including a brief history that addresses LARPs, *Trek* events, conventions, and the emergence of otaku fandoms—much of the book is oriented theoretically as a reflection on identity and performance rather than as an explanatory guide.

Where *Cosplay* is most effective is in the places it links cosplay to adjacent and historical practices of costumed performance. Over the course of the book, Lunning connects cosplay to the traditions of Japanese Noh Theatre (p. 78), costumes inspired by early pulp novels (p. 37), and costumed reenactments in classical Rome (p. 98). Several chapters also explicate the relationship between cosplay and other genres of identity-based performances, especially “sonas” (short for personas) such as furies, ‘pottersonas,’ and ‘gemsonas’ (p. 56). Each of these adjacent cultures is differentiated and put in conversation with cosplay for a richer understanding of fan practice. In this way, Lunning links modern cosplay practice to both longstanding traditions in costume theatre and identity-performance, as well as to other fandom spaces.

Notably, *Cosplay* does approach its subject with what can feel like, at times, a dismissive positivity. At one point, Lunning argues that in U.S. cosplaying communities “no matter your body type, race, gender, sexuality, or age, once you enter a cosplay convention hotel, you are no longer that identity but something other, and thus excused from that troubling mainstream identity and its associated problems” (p. 141). While Lunning does walk this back in the final chapter, checking the danger of slipping into utopianism and “vault[ing] cosplay and fandom to the level of the sublime, creating a

perfect society” (p. 179), the book generally ignores ongoing experiences of racism, misogyny, and queerphobia in cosplay communities. For example, *Cosplay* does begin to contend with the gendered context of costumed performance; there are various points where the book begins to discuss “crossplaying” (when cosplayers perform characters of another gender than their own) but fails to address these in significant detail or critically unpack them. Similarly, in Chapter 3, Lunning notes the connection between queer and feminist politics and cosplay, but provides a troubled account of gender and cosplay, even at one point asserting that “androgynous characters can be played by anyone” (p. 100). I was particularly frustrated to note that Lunning’s one dedicated section on queerness and cosplay in Chapter 3 awkwardly juxtaposes queer identities and fetishes in such a way that problematically reinscribes queerness as deviant, taboo, or hypersexual. I also struggled with the organizational elements of the book—especially the way new terminology is introduced. Much of the cosplay-specific vocabulary those unfamiliar with the hobby will need is scattered throughout the text—whether specific Japanese cosplay terms (such as *animegao kigurumi* [a masked cosplay tradition]) or common fan practices (such as hall contests or “cospa” [stores dedicated to cosplay]). More frustratingly, there are a handful of important theoretical terms that are used for entire chapters before they are defined. For example, the term “transversality” is used extensively in Chapter 4 but is not actually defined until Chapter 5. Readers who are less familiar with cosplay or theory around assemblages may find themselves having to play catch-up, while others may find themselves wishing for a more critically-oriented consideration.

Ultimately, *Cosplay* is a wide portrait of fan practices meant to bridge disparate disciplinary approaches. Despite some organizational complexity and slippage into

utopianism, Lunning's work is a good reminder that "cosplay as a cultural practice fits into no clear academic discipline" (p. 160). Lunning rightly points out that cosplay is a vast "constellation of existences" in which cosplayers can be found "exploring identities known and unknown, constructed, and imagined, memorized and improvised" (p. 178). Scholars interested in contending with such a complex portrait of identity and theatre will find *Cosplay* a useful mapping of the assemblages of people, culture, and technology at work in fan culture.

### Work Cited

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