

# Embodying Narrative, Staging Icons<sup>1</sup>

## The Liminal Space of Embodied Performance

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### **Abstract:**

*The cultural practices of contemporary cosplay and medieval mystery play are showcases for the phenomenon of narrative liminality in that they are clearly and necessarily tied to narrative sources but have a tendency to deplete the narrativity of these sources. The argument will move along four aspects of the practices that mark their movements from narrative into a liminal space. These aspects are first of all the storyworlds from which the practices draw their significance. Iconicity is the second aspect that is the connector between the storyworlds with their recognizable existents and the performance that is at the core of the cultural practices. Performance is therefore the third aspect, which directly leads into the final aspect of embodiment, the significance of the real body of the performer, which further removes the practices from their sources. The notion of ‘moe,’ or adoration, is introduced as a way to understand the motivation for the phenomena described.*

### **Introduction**

What I want to sketch in the following is the way in which certain cultural practices, like cosplay and medieval mystery plays, can be understood to occupy a particular liminal space between narrative and other symbolic forms, such as play, spectacle, performance, and ritual. To understand the distance that has to be travelled to get to this space, we will pass through four sites that will lead from the center of narrative to a place that is related, but also distant. These sites are storyworlds, icons, performance, and finally embodiment.

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1 The following essay is a substantial reworking and refocusing of a text that originally appeared in *Acta Sapientia*, vol. 9, 2014, pp. 125-139, under the title “Staging Icons, Performing Storyworlds—From Mystery Play to Cosplay.”

But before we can look at these stages, it is probably necessary to first characterize the two objects of inquiry and to explain in what respect they are comparable, since they will appear at first glance to be as far apart from each other as possible. But all historical, cultural, and religious differences aside, both medieval mystery plays and contemporary cosplay take elements of a storyworld well-known to its audience—we will focus mainly on characters here—and then use a live performance to visualize these elements or characters by having them embodied through actors.

To start with the mystery plays, these are biblical dramas that were staged all throughout Europe from the thirteenth to the later sixteenth century. They were the only form of dramatic entertainment at the time, and they were usually produced each year by a town and its different guilds on the occasion of special religious holidays, most importantly the feast day of Corpus Christi. The purpose of the mystery plays was to instruct the laity about the essential features of the Christian faith, but they were also very elaborate, highly spectacular, and logistically complicated affairs. They surely provided as much entertainment and aesthetic pleasure to their audience as they did divine instruction, something that contemporary critics lamented (Aronson-Lehavi 2). After having endured almost unrivaled for centuries, the mystery plays vanish as theatrical practice in the course of the sixteenth century. The most important reasons for their demise were the introduction of the Reformation with its hostility to the creation of icons and, especially in England, the emergence of a mimetic stage with the theater companies of William Shakespeare and his contemporaries.

Cosplay, on the other hand, is a compound of the words ‘costume’ and ‘play’ (with play additionally referencing role-play). It describes the activity of fans dressing up and posing in a *visually recognizable* way as characters from popular media franchises such as manga, anime, TV series, or superhero comics. Arguably, this recognizability is a crucial difference to other costuming activities, such as Halloween or Mardi Gras and one that is of great importance to our concerns: Whereas for Halloween you might dress up as *a* cowboy, Cosplayers always represent a *specific* character that preexists in one or, more often, several stories. Like the mystery plays, cosplay is not an everyday activity but also usually happens on designated ‘feast days,’ most often conventions about comics or video games where there are designated areas for cosplayers and often also cosplay competitions. This significantly adds to the ritualistic character of the performances.

Cosplay is a truly intercultural phenomenon in which especially American and Japanese cultures interrelate in a complex and intricate way. Both cultures have developed their own source iconography. American fans dressing up as characters from the *Star Trek* series in the 1980s were the original inspiration for manga and anime cosplay in Japan, which has developed by now into a whole subculture (cf. Winge 66f.). On its way there cosplay has also developed its own performative rituals.

## Storyworld

As has already been stated, the first thing that makes mystery plays and cosplay comparable is the source from which the characters are taken for the embodied performance, and it is this that roots both practices firmly in narrative. This is because the *source* from which the performative remediations take their material are narrative storyworlds. In the case of mystery plays, their sources are the traditional stories of mythology as codified in biblical narrative. All mythologies and religions have used narrative and stories to communicate their ideas, their explanations of the origin, and the purpose of life. Thus, they have always created narrative worlds: stories of titans, gods, and the sons of gods. In the case of cosplay, these are the consciously created narrative worlds of large story franchises like superheroes and manga.

Without this source, both practices would remain pure spectacle without (narrative) signification. Traditionally, narrative and spectacle have been understood to be at odds with each other (cf., e.g., Bukatman) but in this case only the combination of the spectacular and the narrative source generates the complete form. They derive their meaning in this way, both for the producers and for the spectators. But this relation between the narrative source and the resulting performative practice is not a straightforward case of adaptation; in fact, the narrative source does not even have to be a definably concrete text, which is why it is more accurate to say that they derive their meaning from storyworlds (rather than concrete stories). We make sense of our world, of what we come to know about our world, by narrativizing it (cf., e.g., Boyd 131), and therefore by mentally projecting storyworlds in which events take place and things exist. That is, we constantly construct storyworlds, and we relate all medial representations of existents (be it people, objects, or events) to the storyworlds that we construct. Both the religio-mythological worlds of the mystery plays and the franchised serial worlds of superheroes and manga are notably complex and multiple in their source texts.

Mystery plays and cosplay thus both operate by invoking storyworlds, and these storyworlds are rooted in narrative (and derive their meaning from being so), but, as we will see, these practices only activate partial, narratively depleted aspects of these storyworlds. They are not adaptation nor even necessarily story-telling. Thus, both mystery plays and cosplay have their origin in narrative because they establish concrete references to characters from narrative worlds that pre-exist the performance. The main purpose of the representational aspect of their performance is therefore recognizability: You have to 'get' the performance for it to really work: *That* must be Jesus and *that* must be Megaman. The interesting question for our purposes here is: When do the existents that make up the respective source material (need to) take on iconic properties?

## Icon

As long as every single story creates its own storyworld, elements do not have to be memorable in the sense of being recognizable. Hemingway can call the protagonists of his short story “Hills Like White Elephants” simply “the American and the girl”—making them virtually indistinguishable from millions of others—because they exist only in and for this one story and, more importantly, this one text. But as soon as characters *reoccur* in *several* stories or when the same story is being told in different ways, maybe even through several different media (often without a concrete single source text), the reoccurring elements need distinctive attributes to make them recognizable. The easiest possibility to create recognizability is the use of proper names: Don't call your characters “the American and the girl,” but rather Humbert Humbert or Ulysses. Then you can simply say: Let me tell you another story about Ulysses and his adventures, and everyone will know that it is *another* story about the *same* Ulysses. And yet readers will most likely still crave for more convincing proofs of the identity of the ‘new’ with the ‘old’ Ulysses. They might, for example, eagerly wait for the point where he proves his superior cunning and therefore proves that he really is ‘the’ Ulysses.

We can therefore recognize iconicity as a quality that is liminal in the way that it is rooted in narrative texts and their narrativity but is at the same time removing this narrativity to reduce the ‘icon’ to a static, narratively depleted object. Its recognizably iconic nature ties it to the narrative source, but it becomes necessary precisely to the extent that it is decoupled from the original narrative content.

Moving back to our main examples, we can say that only with the Reformation, with its strong emphasis on scripture (greatly helped by promoting vernacular translations) and its emphasis on actual acquaintance with the source text, does Christianity's fundamentally text-based nature become available. In the medieval catholic context the concrete text base was not readily available to the mass of people. And yet the same people would be very well acquainted with the respective storyworlds. They knew the stories and the characters without being able to refer to a single, concrete source. This is where the visual arts come in, creating a vast number of adaptations of the biblical stories in all available media that do not rely on language. And in order to do that, they developed an elaborate iconography, that is, a number of visual signs such as specific colors, forms such as the halo, or objects that are all to be understood as directly referencing specific characters, events, or concepts.

This iconography is also of prime importance to the staging practice of the mystery plays. Certainly, they were never intended to be used as reading matter (cf. Davidson, “Positional” 66f.; Tydeman 1). They were experienced much more like living images than as a modern stage performance. Within the dramatic framework of the medieval plays there was only very little time to establish the numerous char-

acters appearing—from St. Joseph to Herod. Also, the lack of fixed seating made it doubtful that everyone would understand all the words. But then, of course, all the spectators already knew the different stories very well—the only precondition was that they recognized *which* story they were being presented with. The performances therefore had to draw on the vast pool of visual symbols that had developed throughout the history of Christian art in order to ease identification beyond the written word. Elaborate masks, iconic costumes, halos, and the carrying of attributes are all important parts of the performances (cf. Carpenter and Twycross 191-232). Aronson-Lehavi talks in this respect of “religious and iconic personae” as well as “iconic ‘molds’ that can be filled and refilled by different performers” (4f., cf. also 95-106).

When we look to the storyworlds created for superhero comics or manga and anime franchises, we can immediately spot some interesting similarities. First of all, they are also modeled on the structure of mythological narratives: They project complex worlds filled with a large cast of characters that interact but who also fill their individual and independent narrative arcs. They are concerned with origin stories as well as, often, eschatological stories (stories about the end of the world). They are told through multiple texts and often several media by multiple authors that refer to a shared understanding of the storyworld. Indeed, the original understanding of ‘canon’ is regularly applied to discussions of whether a concrete instantiation (like a movie adaptation or a new comic series) is in accordance with the original storyworld. On the other hand (and this is also a similarity with mythical narrative), they are often retold with slight or substantial alterations (‘let’s tell the story of Superman’s origin again!’) to the point where the source text is lost (or at least loses its authority). The ‘canon’ of the Superman story is not defined by its first telling, in the comic book *Action Comics No. 1* from 1938 (where Superman is not even able to fly).

Compared to the invented mythology of superhero narratives or the almost infinite pantheon of manga and anime characters, Christian mythology seems almost reduced in its *dramatis personae*. The website *Anime Planet* is a database of anime and manga characters and lists almost 50,000 different, named characters.<sup>2</sup> And given this incredible number of recurring characters who need to be highly recognizable in order to create fans or followers, it is hardly surprising that iconic properties play as big a role as they do. Considering superhero narratives and their origin in the visual medium of color printing, it is the iconic color schemes that make these characters so instantly recognizable. Just imagine a black-and-white version of one of the larger team ups in the Marvel or DC universes and the difficulty of telling all the characters apart in a fight sequence. In manga, these color schemes

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2 Cf. [www.anime-planet.com](http://www.anime-planet.com).

routinely also include outrageous colors for a character's hair and their eyes, which true cosplayers are eager to imitate as well.

## Performance

Beyond physical trappings such as color coded costumes, masks, or props, mystery plays, and cosplay use another aspect that is especially useful for their chosen medium and that situates them on the fringes of narrative as a symbolic form: the live performance. The limited space of the medieval mobile stages did not allow for much realistic acting but of course actors did not stand still. One thing they used to great iconic effect were gestures. These gestures, many of which were well established in Christian iconography, had to be distinct, visible, and recognizable, that is, characteristic (cf. Davidson, *Gesture* 66-127; Aronson-Lehavi 106-115). The same is true for most cosplay performances, where acting space and viewing time is limited. Like important religious figures, most manga and superhero characters also have their own specific and characteristic pose, and any cosplay performance usually includes these. This bridges the stages of purely visual iconic properties and performance.<sup>3</sup>

Performance can be described for our purposes as an activity of representing a narrative character through a combination of iconic properties, enacting of narrative events, ritual actions, and bodily presence. Since they are staged representations of events, mystery plays are clearly performative. In this case, one rather has to argue that their staging and performance practice actually differentiates them to an extent from theater as we might conceive of it. The most common form was that of a cycle of a number of mini-dramas or pageants. It is important to note, though, that, compared to our own notions of narrative drama, these very much constituted reduced, truncated, or depleted narratives. Devoid of the spectacle of their performance, mystery plays do not make great reading.

The complete cycle of, e.g., the Corpus Christi plays would contain nothing less than a history of the universe from its creation all the way to Judgment Day, but the individual pageants would represent well-known episodes like the temptation

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3 The identity of the person of the performer and the visual, iconic trappings of the performance also highlight the craftsmanship involved (cf. Aronson-Lehavi 90), and this aspect has been and still is a very important part of the practice. Already in medieval plays, the motivation of showing religious devotion became mixed with a strong element of civic pride and artistic showmanship (cf. Twycross 42). The guilds spent a lot of effort and money on their performances, and there was frequently a direct (and sometimes rather macabre) relation between their specific play and their trade. And today, no self-respecting cosplayer would dream of appearing at a convention in a ready-made costume, maybe ordered online. Thus, the act of creation is really and visibly inscribed into the performance.

of Eve, the building of the Ark, the annunciation, or, of course, the crucifixion. The most common staging practice used so-called pageant wagons that were each created and paid for by a different guild on which the mini-dramas that constituted the cycle would be staged. These mobile stages would then be pulled through the city along a predetermined route with a number of fixed stops, or 'stations.' At each of these stations, the respective episode was then performed once before the whole trek moved on. For the spectator, the effect was very much that the whole spectacle took on a processional quality. If the spectator remained stationary the episodes would pass by him like a procession, which after all was one of the sources for these staging practices. And if the spectator moved around the experience would be similar to watching a story unfold through a number of stained-glass windows in a church or the pages of a Book of Hours (see Twycross 45). As Twycross writes, "spectacle can speak more strongly than words" (37)<sup>4</sup>. Both mystery plays and cosplay crucially restrict the use of spoken language and thereby further emphasize physical presence. Cosplayers almost always perform silently, and in the mystery plays the silence of the suffering Christ is both a central performative and doctrinal aspect (cf. Aronson-Lehavi 87, 120f.). This quality is of prime importance here, not the text or even the rudimentarily enacted events, the acting or action, but rather the relative predominance of a tableau-like presentation, of relatively static live performances that were to a large extent understandable merely by looking at them.

Cosplay itself "is understood as a performance activity" (Lamerichs, "Stranger" 0.1) and it is often described as "performance art" (Gn 583; Lotecki). Norris and Bainbridge refer to the cosplayer as a "textual performer" (4). But again, the differences of the cosplay performance in comparison to theater acting need to be emphasized. Even more than in the case of the mystery play, cosplay performers do not base their performance on a clearly recognizable script, they do not speak lines of dialog that could be found in a source text or act out sequences of events. According to Nicolle Lamerichs,

[f]or performers, the point of cosplaying is not role-playing or acting; it lies in more subtle gestures and its connection to fandom. Michael Kirby [...] conceptualized this sliding scale between acting and not acting [41]. He opposed acting to not-acting as a 'non-matrixed performance', which relies on representation and the symbolic power of the stage or costume. However, in this type of performance, the actor is hardly acting at all. Kirby explains: 'When the performers, like the stage attendants of kabuki and no, are merely conveyed by their costumes themselves and not embedded, as it were, in matrices of pretended or represented character,

4 For detailed descriptions of the stage settings, stage effects, and costumes of medieval mystery plays, cf. Anderson 115-170.

situation, place, and time, they can be referred to as being ‘non-matrixed’ [...]. (“Costuming” 118)

I want to argue, though, that cosplay is not simply “non-matrixed” because it is after all rooted in the matrix of a represented character which is acknowledged by the spectator through the act of ‘recognition,’ an act that is in turn enabled through the use of iconic properties. Thus, cosplay performance brings to life this one aspect of the original storyworld—character—but in a way that divests it from more traditionally narrative content such as the events that such a character enacts or experiences. Yet it cannot get rid of that narrative residue without losing its whole identity.

The liminal nature of cosplay and its distancing from adaptation and normal theater performance is also recognizable in the fact that it adds performative elements that have nothing to do with the original source material but instead include the spectator in an anti-illusionist way. This breaking of illusion further divests cosplay from narrative, as it deemphasizes the immersive qualities that are usually understood to be central to narrative.

The spectators of cosplay do not admire costumes from their armchairs in a darkened theatre room, but in a vibrant festival space. They admire them as they pass by and perhaps even hug them. Cosplay is a lively, visceral and haphazard performance. The players and spectators form a similar group and constantly mirror each other since both groups are commonly dressed up. These communal, celebratory aspects of costuming are foregrounded in cosplay. (Lamerichs, “Costuming” 118)

We could call this the ritualistic aspect of cosplay performance or its staging rituals. Indeed, cosplay developed from activities that were closer to role-playing into its current, highly ritualized, and predominantly static form only through its symbiosis with amateur photography. A cosplay performance is of course something that can and should be (passively) watched by spectators but it really comes into its own through the ritual act of taking a picture. In cosplay, the spectator—in the form of the cosplay photographer—is not merely passive; his participatory and performative role becomes obvious. There is, especially in Japan, a very formalized ritual: The photographer approaches the cosplayer and asks for the permission to take a picture, the cosplayer agrees and starts to strike a number of characteristic poses or gestures, the photographer takes one or several images, and *both* participants thank each other in an acknowledgement that they both have performed their function.

The photographer’s presence points to the performer’s awareness that what he or she engages in is a staged representation, made for someone to watch, and not a move into a different world or identity. We can see this also in the fact that the cosplayers themselves very often take pictures of each other. This is a very dif-

ferent emphasis from some of the more extreme forms of role-playing, such as live action role-playing, or Renaissance fairs, where every element that is ‘out of character’—such as a modern camera—would be regarded as an illusion-breaking intrusion.

## Embodiment

When analyzing the performance practices of mystery plays and cosplay, one thing that is notable is a constant doubling of presence and representation: Both the performers and the spectators are constantly and simultaneously aware of the bodily presence of the performer *and* of what he is representing. This is another dynamic of in-betweenness (a ‘blurring’ of presence and representation) that denarrativizes the cultural practices of mystery plays and of cosplaying and places them on the fringes of narrative. Aronson-Lehavi, who has analyzed and theorized medieval performances in depth, stresses particularly that “in late medieval theatre, emphasizing the duality between an actor and a character reflects an aesthetic concept of theatre. Moreover, the relationship between the two entities—the actor and the character—both embodied by the actor becomes a site of special inquiry in religious theatre,” mainly because of “the tension between the liveness of the theatrical event and its enacted/fictional (and sacred) world” (1-2). Similarly, “the construction of the body in cosplay depends on multiple bodies: those of flat, fictional characters and those of the player themselves” (Lamerichs, “Costuming” 121).

In the context of both the mystery plays and cosplay, one element that foregrounds this duality or doubleness is the fact that the same narrative character is embodied by several performers *at the same time*. Within the complete mystery play cycle, multiple actors would perform the same role. In York, for example, where the same cycle of plays was performed from the mid-fourteenth century until their suppression in 1569, there were at least twenty-two actors employed for the role of Jesus Christ because he appears in the same number of individual pageants, who performed simultaneously and therefore could not use the same actor. Thus, all of these actors would be understood to embody and to signify Christ but nobody would have *identified* them with him. They were all merely serving as images—icons—of the character. Something of that medial and conceptual-philosophical doubling is also present in the practice of cosplay. The first obvious similarity is the multiplication of performers of the same character within one setting. At most cosplay conventions one can notice the multiple presence of some of the more popular characters, like Spider Man or Sailor Moon. Obviously, such a proliferation of single characters does not work for narrative, conventionally understood, thus placing these practices on the fringes of the symbolic form.

When it comes to explaining cosplay as an individual activity, the most common assumption for the relation between the cosplay performer and the represented character is identification. The arguments usually run like this: Someone who dresses up as a fictional character wants to *be* that character (and not be himself or herself). Even without arguing against the existence of such a motivation, one can note that the phenomenon goes beyond that, since cosplayers are not only trying to enter into the storyworld (by way of identification) but also trying to bring forth, to embody the storyworld in the actual world. As Erika Fischer-Lichte has argued for any performance, these performances do not escape reality but constitute it (cf. 27).

### 'Moe'

The *motivation* for the remediation that happens in the performance of mystery plays and cosplay lies in the desire not only to make visible the source material in medial representations (as would be the case with illustration, for example) but to embody it, to give it bodily presence in the actual world. The *reason* for this motivation is another anchor back into the realm of the originating storyworld because it has a paradoxical attitude towards it. This attitude understands the storyworld as not only having a symbolic or referential relation to the actual world but as having its own ontological level of existence that is equal or even higher than that of the actual world. In the case of the medieval mystery plays we call this attitude religious belief or adoration, the belief that stories about the transcendental, about angels, miracles, and the incarnation of God in human flesh refer to realities. In the case of cosplay, an important term that we might use is 'moe.'

'Moe' is a Japanese slang word. It is highly controversial, both concerning its origin and its meaning, but it has also become central to discussions of Japan's pop culture.<sup>5</sup> The term and its use in Japan is bound up with debates about subcultures and concrete representational forms but my approach to the term is more abstract, since I am interested in it as a general relation between a recipient and a fictional existent. In this sense, 'moe' is, negatively speaking, a confusion of categories: It means attaching kinds of or intensities of feeling to a fictional object that should

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5 At the Japan Pavilion of the 9th Venice Biennale of Architecture in 2004, Morikawa Kaichirou placed the word 'moe' alongside 'wabi' and 'sabi,' Japan's distinguished aesthetics (cf. Galbraith). In a sense, 'moe' is almost the opposite of the 'wabi' 'sabi' aesthetics: Where one designates the acceptance and celebration of imperfection in reality, 'moe' means the unwillingness to accept that a perceived perfection is unattainable (because fictional).

be reserved for actual objects.<sup>6</sup> The most well-known example would be that of a person falling in love with a fictional character. The person that experiences ‘moe’ therefore regards a fictional object as if it were real—not cognitively (he still knows the character is fictional, he is not yet Don Quijote) but emotionally. The main reason why this ‘should’ be regarded as a mistake is a rational one: because there is no reason to desire something that does not exist.

Of course, we all know that our reactions to fictional events or characters are never purely rational: We have hopefully all been scared when reading a book or cried while watching a movie, or maybe even when playing a video game. In fact, this ‘mistake’ is one of the main reasons why we enjoy fiction, the reason why we *need* fiction. ‘Moe’ just means that the experience is not limited to the actual process of reception (the time spent reading a book, watching a movie, or looking at an image). It is the *continuation* of this experience, of this emotional attachment, that is certainly part of the motivation for cosplay: the desire to make tangible, to give a bodily, three-dimensional presence to a storyworld and its existents *beyond* its original source text or image. This paradoxically supports the object’s perceived claim of actual existence in a very similar way that the ‘staging’ or embodying of the body of Christ is a proof of the real existence of that body and its doctrinal message.

I would therefore argue that the waning of religious belief does not eliminate the emotional relation that has brought forth the desire for embodiment of storyworlds. On the contrary, I would like to argue for the primacy of that relation and the resulting urge. ‘Moe’ attitudes are also often addressed in quasi-religious terms, Galbraith for example talks about “the culture of idolizing fantasy characters.”

In this sense, the doubling of representation and embodiment in the Christian context also serves a real theological purpose; the medial change effected by the performance reflects the reality of a religious belief, the move from word to flesh, from image to incarnation. By giving bodily presence to Jesus Christ, the actors with their own body signify the incarnation, the word made flesh, in what we might call an intermedial performance of transubstantiation (cf. Stevens 38-39). We should remember here that the most important feast day for the staging of mystery plays was Corpus Christi, which has the main doctrinal purpose of celebrating the Real Presence of the body and blood of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist.

In the Christian context, the physical presence of the body of Christ is a central doctrinal element. Interestingly, this element was one of the ideas that were fought by Protestant theology—here, the presence of the text substitutes the presence of

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6 “Takuro Morinaga believes ‘moe’ is a much stronger sentiment, and is about being in love with an animation character [...]. This is not just a strong penchant in the sense of being a fan, but love for and the need to be with the character as if it were human” (Sharp 66f.).

Christ, as can be seen in the reinterpretation of the doctrine of transubstantiation (cf. Beckwith 59ff.). And suddenly, staging icons comes dangerously close to worshipping idols. Thus, in order not to commit a sacrilege, the body of Christ on the stage is substituted with the body of mere mortal man, and the story of a humanist and realist renaissance theater can begin. In terms of media history, it is not least the introduction of printing that enabled the protestant emphasis on the concrete textual basis of Christianity (by making identical copies available), valuing the proper name over recognizable visual iconography.

Some four hundred years later, European theater in the twentieth century—Benedetti, Brecht, Barba, A.C. Scott—becomes interested in Asian theatrical performance practices and actor training, the main difference being the relative emphasis that the latter put on embodiment over “matrixed” performances (Zarrilli 92). Concepts of “total acting,” but also of Antonin Artaud’s “theatre of cruelty” try to integrate the bodily presence of the actor into the representational level, often to the detriment of the latter. We can understand these theatrical developments as shifts away from fictionality, either through illusion—the spectators forget that they are experiencing fiction and start to ‘believe’ the reality of the performance—or through substitution—the performer’s presence becomes more important than what he or she represents. This is for example expressed in Jerzy Grotowski’s notion of an “[o]bjective [d]rama,” as Zarrilli has pointed out:

Grotowski’s work in ‘Objective Drama,’ like his earlier paratheatrical projects, has moved completely away from any concern with performance as a fiction, to a (hypothetically) irreducible and nonrepresentational mode of experience. Grotowski’s use of ‘objective’ suggests the search for an absolute state beyond the Western dualistic separation of the fictive from the real—a movement from theatre to ritual/transformational process where he locates a ‘real’ beyond the representational. (92)

This connects not only to Asian forms of theater performance, but also to medieval mystery plays, who used a similar concept of “total acting”:

Such ‘total acting’ was often required in the Passion sequence and in the performance of the Crucifixion episode. In such cases, the image and idea of the ‘real’ character (Christ) is brought to mind while the corporeal physicality of the performer acquires a strong presence as well. Thus, the actor emphasizes the intangibility or ‘fictionality’ of the character while simultaneously establishing his or her own presence. Such demanding scenes, in which an actor is required to perform extreme physical feats—for example, when an actor is tied to a cross and lifted by four other actors while remaining silent—create a phenomenologically overwhelming theatrical experience. (Aronson-Lehavi 6)

Grotowski's interest in the presence/embodyment of the actor led him to a rejection of most of what is usually considered the 'machinery' of theater, such as spectacle, makeup, or decoration: "Theatre can exist without make-up, without autonomic costumes and scenography, without a separate performance area (stage), without sound effects and lighting, etc. It cannot exist without the actor-spectator relationship of perceptual, direct, 'live' communion" (Grotowski 19). This marks a decisive difference to cosplay. On the one hand, "embodyment plays a unique role in cosplay that should be interrogated closely" (Lamerichs, "Costuming" 113). But, on the other hand, that embodyment cannot exist without the costumes that link the performance, through recognizable iconic properties, back to the originating specific storyworld. In this sense, cosplaying stays truly liminal: The iconic properties of the costume design, the props, and the gestures or poses tie the performance back to the original fictional storyworld, even though it has lost everything that classical narratology would recognize as narrative or narrativity.

The necessity of retaining these ties for the cultural practice of cosplay becomes even more apparent when looking at variations that in some respects move away from the original source, such as playing with the gender of the original character. These are usually described as "crossplay (the performance of a character with a canonically different gender than their own) and gender-bent cosplay (the performance of a character with a different gender than that of the canonical original)" (Gackstetter Nichols 3). Elizabeth Gackstetter Nichols goes on to describe one such cosplayer, who represented an originally male character from the *Walking Dead* franchise:

For her cosplay, Hail wore a battered leather jacket, black leather gloves and carried a baseball bat covered in barbed wire. She also wore traditionally feminine make-up and made no effort to cover or hide her waist-length, feminine hair. She was, however, immediately recognizable to fellow convention-goers as femme Neagan. (10)

While the combination of traditionally male and female appearances could be understood as mere performance of gender play, the iconic properties of the prop used—the bat with barbed wire—make sure that (for those who recognize it) the connection to the character remains and the performance is understood as cosplay. This nicely illustrates once more the liminal nature of cosplay, which it shares, albeit to a somewhat lesser degree, with medieval mystery plays. Both practices, as we have seen, emerge from narrative into something that is not completely separated from narrative but that constitutes at least a depleted kind of narrative in which the iconic, the spectacular, performative rituals, and embodyment have all added to create something truly genuine.

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