

8 CULT BODIES

Between the 'self' and the 'other'

In this chapter I want to explore the role of the fan's body within fan cultural practices of costuming and impersonation. The site of the body has been largely neglected in previous work on fan cultures. I will suggest that the cult fan's costumed and/or impersonating body can be usefully explored both through theories of performativity and consumption. Uniting these areas, I will introduce the concept of 'performative consumption' in what follows. To begin with, however, it is worth observing that at least one theorist has viewed 'performativity' as a theoretical 'solution' to the religious metaphors or discourses which tend to circulate around fan cultures:

In researching the [audience-text] relation as improvisation, the 'Church' analogy for fan communities should be replaced by a focus on performance as enactment of the contradictions of capitalism fetishistically represented in the lived textual performances of the [audience-text] relation.

(Nightingale 1994:1)

Nightingale definitively rejects all metaphors of religiosity, seeking to replace these with (suitably secular) theoretical narratives; performativity *should* replace notions of the fan culture as 'cult' or as 'church' according to her argument. However, I am not convinced that the theoretical concept and narrative that Nightingale relies on—performativity, although Nightingale blurs this with the term 'performance'—can entirely displace the metaphors of religiosity that fans have used to make sense of fan experiences. I say this because fans' use of religious discourses (within self-absent imagined subjectivities) are related to one key distinction of the performative: 'There is no volitional subject behind the mime who decides, as it were, which gender it will be today...gender is not a performance that a prior subject elects to do, but gender is *performative*' (Butler cited in Gallop 1995:15).

While 'performance' presupposes a wilful and volitional subject, the performative is always a citation, always a reiteration: 'the account of agency...[in relation to gender performativity] cannot be conflated with voluntarism or individualism, much less with consumerism, and in no way presupposes a choosing subject' (Butler 1993:15). But this separation of 'performance' and 'performative' is perhaps itself an untenable moment of splitting which works to support a moral dualism between the (delusional) voluntarist and the (right-thinking) theorist of 'Butler-performativity' (itself an academic commodity). How can we choose between choosing and not-choosing? The concept-name¹ of 'Butler-

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performativity' installs a moment of theoretical clarity, vision and choice—on the basis of rigorous philosophical argument, of course, and in line with academic imagined subjectivity—which it otherwise denies to 'ordinary' social agents.

J.L. Austin's distinction between 'performative' (utterances that are 'doing something as opposed to just saying something', Austin 1986:133) and 'constative' (utterances which refer to a state of affairs and can be 'true' or 'false') begins to look rather wobbly on occasions (see Austin 1986, lecture XI). And so too does the separation of 'performative' and 'performance' when these terms are linked to fan cultures. (However, this does not mean that the two terms can simply be used interchangeably; instead it suggests that their separation needs to be reconsidered without dissolving entirely into non-meaning.)

The 'problem' for performative theory is that fans display a type of 'non-volitional volition' (Frankfurt 1988) which disrupts Butler's poststructuralist separation of voluntarist 'agency' and 'power/knowledge'. Fans are 'self-absent' to the extent that they are unable to account, finally, for the emergence of their fandom, but they are also highly self-reflexive and wilfully/volitionally committed to their objects of fandom. Each and every expression of fan identity is hence both a non-volitional citation *and* the (consumerist) 'choice' of a volitional fan-subject. The *performative consumption* which characterises media fandom—i.e. media fandoms presuppose consumption and are expressed through consumption—is hence both an act and an iteration-without-origin. This is only a problem if we expect a clear 'philosophical' logic to tidy away, once and for all, the matter of 'agency'. If, following the dialectic of value, we do not expect to resolve fandom's essential contradictoriness, then this is less of a problem.

My interest in the term 'performative consumption' is that it seems to hold open the matter of agency; it does not dismiss fans as dupes whose belief in their own agency is mistaken (*contra* the (1988) Derridean point developed in Butler 1993:13), but neither does it reduce fandom to an iterated and repeated discourse in which the fan agent vanishes altogether (for a related attempt to theorise fandom in the doubled light of Derridean iterability and sociological co-ordinates, see Gilbert 1999).² Through the notion of 'performative consumption' it is also possible to view the question of agency not as a determinate or definite property which fans do or do not 'possess' (this remains one possible implication of Butler's argument), but rather as a claim that can be made at certain points in time but not at others. Fans do not claim agency in their 'becoming-a-fan' stories, but they do claim agency through their later 'performances' of fan identity. It seems highly unhelpful to read one of these claims as 'true' and the other as 'false'. Arguing that fans are *really* constantly self-absent and non-volitional would equate fans with addicts, while arguing that fans are *really* constantly volitional and active social agents busy making meanings would have to selectively ignore fans' inability to rationalise fully the origins of their fandoms. Instead, I am suggesting here that both types of claim need to be respected within fan studies. Extremely ironically, these doubled fan claims also seem to reverse Butler's view of the 'performative' and 'performance'; fans are 'performative' (i.e. lack voluntarism) when they describe the beginnings of their fandoms. But these beginnings are precisely points of non-iteration which *precede* any iterable fan identity. Fan voluntarism and choice is therefore not disrupted *tout court*,

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only in relation to specific moments of non-iteration. And when fans occupy a more comfortably iterable space of fan cultural identity, they seem able (or willing!) to claim fan agency and thus volitionally 'perform' and express their (now communal) fandom. This situation raises a significant problem for Butlerian and Derridean approaches to 'performativity'. Fandom, perhaps unlike gender, possesses a moment of 'emergence' rather than always already being citational, and this appearance cannot be readily placed within specific theoretical narratives of performativity, despite sharing their emphasis on the loss of individual 'agency'.

Returning to the work of Virginia Nightingale on fan impersonators, we find that Nightingale defines two 'significant performative modes' (1994:1) of fan engagement with texts and icons, namely 'improvisation' and 'impersonation':

impersonation generates another experience [the experience of 'improvisation'], a re-creation of the star not as an image but as a story about capitalism, often as the story of a contradiction in capitalism. As the 'star's' personal narrative is recreated and explored by the impersonator, another performance, another personal narrative is pursued—the impersonator's life as the star.

(Nightingale 1994:11, my italics)

For Nightingale, the impersonator's experience therefore becomes a case of 'improvisation' only when it allows for the opening up of knowledge—either about the capitalist system or about the self—and when it allows the fan 'to occupy a ground from which to speak' (Nightingale 1994:15). 'Improvisation' is not the slavish citation of consumer products: it literally makes a difference, whereas impersonation either remains dependent upon the culture industry, replaying and reinforcing its mechanisms, or extends and 'improvises' only to the extent of finding itself once again structurally enclosed by the industry from which it hoped to escape:

Priscilla Presley opens Graceland to the tourists and the trustees of the Elvis Estate police the impersonations, ensuring that they sound sufficiently like the original to keep selling the original records. Entrepreneurs make impersonation a business proposition, and the impersonators generate their own fan clubs. New commodities—like *Dead Elvis* (Marcus 1991), like recordings of new music by tribute bands or performers—become commonplace. Impersonation points to its related mode of cultural engagement, improvisation.

(Nightingale 1994:15)

It 'points', but it doesn't quite get there. Despite simplistically pinning 'progressive' and 'complicit' audience practices to the clearly valued/devalued terms of improvisation/impersonation, Nightingale explores an essential aspect of what I have termed the dialectic of value; the internal contradictions of the commodity are re-enacted through cult fans-as-impersonators' acts of *performative consumption*. These practices can *simultaneously* intensify the commodity's contradictions between use and exchange-value, *and* allow the extension of commodified exchange-value. However, Nightingale's

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apparent desire to create a moral dualism between 'impersonation' and 'improvisation' replaces the dialectic of value with abstractions which stress the movement from one distinctive regime ('impersonation') to another ('improvisation'). This defuses the dialectic of value by holding contradictions apart rather than recognising their coexistence.

Considering the cult body as written through a process of commemoration and impersonation suggests that this body is not broken down and recomposed 'retail' in the sense suggested by Foucault's disciplinary procedures; the body of the cult fan reverts very much to the 'wholesale' remembrance of predisciplinary models. The 'wholeness' of the body is celebrated via the 'wholeness' of an impersonation which at times may threaten a complete loss of self-identity in the face of the powerful other:

the fear of the replacement of the real world by the world of the image, by simulacra, is repeated as cautionary tale in acts of Elvis and Marilyn impersonation. The impersonation exceeds repetition or commemoration and points to the deeper psychic dangers of a world in which the image has assumed disproportionate power. The psychic power of the impersonator is linked to the courage with which they address such dangers.

(Nightingale 1994:13)

By treading that knife-edge between the complete loss of self and the 'wholesale' writing of the body, the impersonator's life-as-the-star threatens to reproduce those very contradictions inherent in the original star's existence as a component within capitalism's fantasy of pure exchange-value. The repetition of a 'cautionary tale' can therefore, at worst, attain precisely the original tragedy of the cult icon, and the Vermorels recount one such infamous case, that of Kay Kent, a Marilyn Monroe lookalike who 'in a meticulous re-enactment of Monroe's own suicide...took her own life with a cocktail of drink and drugs while lying naked over the pink coverlet of her bed' (Vermorel and Vermorel 1989:68). Media cult history repeats itself here: the first time as tragic iconicity and the second time as tragic impersonation. It is the ultimate commodification of self which farcically underpins such repetition, a commodification which impersonation always plays across, but here collapses into entirely.

'Returning to the body', we can place the cult body as a negation of the following: it is not recomposed through the subtle coercion of part-objects (Foucault 1991), nor is it a legitimating sign system of the 'real' worked upon by mediating tools (de Certeau 1988). However, if the cult body facilitates 'wholesale' remembrance then the physicality and wholeness of this process cannot be considered apart from the processes through which gender difference is iterated, mapped and stabilised or destabilised in a variety of ways. The moment of the body cannot remain outside systems of social signification for anything more than a moment. What becomes significant, finally, is not the fact of the body's brute physicality, but the manner in which this materiality acts simultaneously as a 'relay' for the systems of meaning which hope to exhaust it (Foucault and De Certeau), while also producing a *citational act of consumption* that replays 'as cautionary tale' the essential contradictions of the commodified and gendered 'real' under late capitalism.

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Gender and impersonation

The term 'impersonation', when used in the analysis of stars and cult icons, is typically dependent upon an implied notion of the 'immersed' feminine. This ideological and industrial presupposition has been examined in the work of Mary Ann Doane and Charles Eckert among others (see Doane 1987:1; Eckert 1991:34). And yet the cult fan-text attachment is far from being gender-specific, even if it continues to replay the gendering of textual forms and genres: the 'cult' audience for science fiction (far from monolithically male or ideologically masculine; cf. Bacon-Smith 1992 and Penley 1997) is paralleled by the cult status of texts such as *Gone With the Wind* (Taylor 1989). What these fan-text attachments share across genders is their status as mediators of gender identity within the family, as possible openings for communication and/or impersonation/emulation of gendered identities across and between generations—from father to son, or from mother to daughter:

Many women with growing daughters (but few with sons) say they can hardly wait to introduce them to *GWTW*, and a few who were apprehensive have been rewarded with a new generation of fanatics. For a handful of correspondents *GWTW* provided a kind of neutral territory on which a mother and daughter could safely meet... One cannot generalise as to how mothers and daughters share such an enthusiasm, though its rarity is commented on by one or two correspondents...it appears that several women resisted falling for *GWTW* precisely *because* their mothers recommended it.

(Taylor 1989:32)

This is not to claim that all cult fans will share their cult interest with family members (although there is often a familial rhetoric within the fan group itself as a 'family of choice'), but rather that the family is one persistently privileged social grouping which can act to shape and organise the contingencies of the child's early (and continuing) object relationships, particularly where the cult text is encountered initially in the private sphere (on television, video, radio or as a novel)—see, for instance, Joseph-Witham (1996) on *Star Trek* fans (both men and women) whose intense and lived-out attachments to the text involve costuming and hence 'impersonation'. *Star Trek* costuming traverses family networks which are combined with fan networks (*ibid.*: 12–13), and facilitates the relaxation of standards which might otherwise apply to female roles, e.g. using the impersonation or emulation of a Klingon identity to avoid being seen as a slut:³

Tiger [Manning] further explains the lifestyle of the Klingon female: 'You can wear push-up bras and fishnets and you're not like a slut. You're a Klingon. Klingon women...have power over themselves. Dressing like this isn't dressing for men... It's your own thing.⁴ I couldn't go out on the street dressed like this and feel like I was actually in charge of myself.'

(Joseph-Witham 1996:24)

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However, Joseph-Witham's study does not explicate a similar function for the men who engage in costuming, although the militaristic and hierarchical nature of the Star Fleet/Klingon/Romulan uniforms may facilitate a sense of identity and authority for participants of both genders.

Specifically theorising the 'impersonation' of the cult audience, it is important not to simply leave highly abstract gender codings in place. If the media cult always relates to the social experience of gender as well as to the iteration of gender codes (I am like/unlike my father—I am like/unlike my mother) then its gendering *cannot* be decided in advance. And yet it is insistently assumed in 'common sense' (Gramsci 1996:324) that where the media cult is concerned, issues of gender can be decided in advance.

The flexibility of such hegemonic articulations is evident in the case of Elvis impersonators. One might think that it would be difficult to align 'the King's men' with a feminised stereotype of emulation, but the equation between 'impersonation' and 'femininity' is so ingrained at an *a priori* level that discussions of Elvis impersonators almost inevitably revolve around discussions of the feminine. The work of Marjorie Garber clearly illustrates this trajectory. Garber suggests that mimicry and impersonation are intrinsic to the phenomenon of stardom; it is not only fans who impersonate their idols: the stars themselves also self-consciously borrow from prior celebrities. This chain of an impersonation of an impersonation of an impersonation results in disembodied hyper reality:

To put it another way, Elvis mimicking Little Richard is Elvis *as* female impersonator—or rather as the *impersonator* of a female impersonator ... Elvis was the white 'boy' who could sing 'black', the music merchandiser's dream. And that cross-over move was...a cross-over move in gender terms: a move from hypermale to hyperfemale, to, in fact, *hyperreal* female, female impersonator, transvestite.

(Garber 1992:367)

Elvis as the '*impersonator* of a female impersonator' represents an absolute exorcism of the body. Impersonation is so insistently connected with femininity (with the signs of femininity and with the femininity of signs) that '[i]t is almost as if the word "impersonator", in contemporary popular culture, can be modified *either* by "female" or by "Elvis"' (*ibid.*: 372).

Garber thus essentialises the sign system of gender such that there is nothing beyond its ever-replicating and proliferating multiplicity of empty displays: gender is always already transgendered, simply a trick of the staging. Femininity and representation/impersonation are so firmly locked together that the space of empirical identity and its negotiations becomes utterly irrelevant to Garber's totalising project.⁵

Garber's *a priori* feminisation of impersonation—a desired eradication of the flesh in the name of transgender freedom—also extends to the Elvis impersonator, who following Garber's judgement on Elvis would logically have to be discussed as an impersonation of an impersonation of a female impersonator. One wonders if the value of 'impersonation' as a concept is beginning to fray at the edges here. Nevertheless, Garber again attempts to exorcise the body—this time by figuring impersonation as mechanical reproduction: 'The

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impersonator is something alive that seems almost like a machine... Some were even surgically reconstructed, like the man in Florida who had his nose, cheeks, and lip altered to look like the King' (1992:371). Like the Vermorels' anecdote concerning Kay Kent, the scandal of these Elvis impersonators lies in their pursuit of a 'wholeness' of the re-embodied other.

By immediately citing the 'surgical Elvis', Garber illustrates the process of impersonation through one of its most extreme instances. The 'cyborgification' of the impersonator can only be treated as an implicit value judgement, since if we are all inherently transgendered via the femininity of representation, then it is difficult to ascertain how the 'machinic' body of the impersonator is in any way distinctive. The trope of the 'machinic' remains a way to ward off the threat of the biological body: it is a way of reconceiving the flesh as Idea and as perfected instrumentality. The Elvis impersonator's remaking of the flesh is, by contrast, not a denial of the body, but is exactly part of that process which Baudrillard (1993:23) believes we no longer have time for: 'to search for an identity for ourselves in the archives, in a memory, in a project or a future'. The fan's writing of Elvis upon his or her (see Henderson 1997:125) body *is* that search, not for a 'look' or visuality (an 'I want to look like Elvis') which Baudrillard (1993:23) diagnoses as the condition of contemporary consumer culture, but for a *being* (an 'I want to be (like) Elvis'). Elvis impersonation is a project; it represents recourse to an archive (the precisely catalogued set of jumpsuits and outfits worn on-stage by Elvis; images of Elvis; set-lists and conventionalised details of his stage show), and recourse to a powerful set of memories; those of the fan's lived experience *as a fan*.

William McCranor Henderson's (1997) *I, Elvis: Confessions of a Counterfeit King* presents a record of his own endeavours as an Elvis impersonator; rehearsing, practising, and ultimately performing at an impersonator's contest.⁶ This work highlights the manner in which Elvis impersonators do not only 'replicate' the King—leading impersonators display no particular psychological transference or over-identification with Elvis as a figure—they use the vehicle of Elvis 'to occupy a ground from which to speak' in Nightingale's words (1994:15); or, as Henderson puts it:

Watching him [Japanese Elvis, Mori Yasumasa], I realised he was the best example yet of Rick Marino's dictum [Marino is president of the Elvis Presley Impersonators' International Association, the EPIIA] that the top impersonators use Elvis as a platform for their own personality. He made no attempt to look like Elvis. Mori was always Mori. Elvis was the medium for his work, the language he was speaking—a starting point and constant reference, sometimes a distant reference.

(1997:251–2)

When Henderson first encounters Rick Marino and informs him of his interest in becoming an Elvis impersonator, Marino's immediate response is to stress that the impersonator always has his (or her) own identity. Such a defensive response is necessary not only as a counter to the wider culture's short-sighted insistence on impersonation as absolute replication but also due to the 'psychic danger' of over-identification which the impersonator entertains (Nightingale 1994:9). Marino notes:

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trying to be more exactly like Elvis than Elvis himself is one of the stages. And then it leaches out into your life. You start to walk around thinking you're Elvis. I counsel guys not to go around trying to look like Elvis all the time... I tell 'em: guys, there's a switch—you turn it on, you turn it off. Once you learn that, you're okay.

(Henderson 1997:23–4)

Replication, then, is not the end of the story: it is a moment (or a stage) in the impersonator's dynamic career trajectory. Reproducing a 'wholeness' of the other, the successful impersonator finally returns to his or her own body and their own expressive idiom: ideally, the other is used as an object to assist in the unfolding of self and subjectivity. This object-use can be viewed neither as a pure replication of the cult icon, nor as a matter of 'passive' impersonation on the part of the cult fan. The cult fan's sense of self is not subordinated to the other, being *realised through this process of attachment*. This process is captured in the essay 'Social Mimesis' (Gebauer and Wulf 1995b:13–24; see also Gebauer and Wulf 1995a) which revitalises the concept of mimesis by freeing it from the chains of imitation. Gebauer and Wulf, bring the notion of mimesis into closer affinity with philosophies such as Ricoeur's hermeneutics and Adorno's negative dialectics. In both cases it is the mimetic 'loss of self' which can actually facilitate an expansion of self:

to understand oneself is to understand oneself *in front of the text*... To appropriate is to make what was alien become one's own. What is appropriated is indeed the matter of the text. But the matter of the text becomes my own only if I disappropriate myself, in order to let the matter of the text be. So I exchange the *me, master of itself*, for the *self, disciple of the text*.

(Ricoeur 1981:113)

It is in this sense that Elvis impersonators—and cult fans more generally, given the extratextual impulse to inhabit the world of the text which I have examined in this and the preceding chapter—could be considered as 'disciples of the text' or, indeed, as disciples of the icon.

By considering the cult body within cultural and social processes, it becomes necessary not only to examine the impersonator's 'writing on the body' and the subjective, affective and physical significance which this can have in terms of gender articulations. It is also important to consider the cult body as an object, and thus as a sign for others. This immediately raises the issue once more of fan stereotypes and the external meanings which are commonly attributed to the fans' concrete practices of costuming (in relation to fictional characters) and impersonation (in relation to cult icons). Why, perhaps more than any other fan practice, is fan impersonation and costuming a source of non-fan derision?

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Impersonation and the 'threat' of performative consumption

With their midnight processions of costumed spectators, of look-alikes duplicating the main character in the film; with the collective singing, dancing, miming by which their audience greets the sequences displayed on screen, cult movies [and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* in particular here] start as fiction texts but move from mere spectacle toward the realm of performance. They are turned into ceremony.

(Dayan and Katz 1996:118)

This description—of texts rendered as ceremonial and necessarily embodied performances, of characters remade as 'lookalikes'—partially demonstrates how the 'aura of publicity' inherent in 'the look of some admired...figure' (Braudy 1986:481) has been remade by the media cult through a confluence of Romantic ideologies which in turn are framed by 'postmodern' social conditions: 'midnight processions of costumed spectators' replace more general social ideals of emulation, and a 'large audience' is consciously and romantically rejected in favour of a smaller audience which is minutely self-defined and self-reflexive as a participatory group. The primary historical difference of the media cult is, then, one of intense self-reflexivity regarding the constant management of fluid boundaries between self (cult impersonator) and other (icon). And yet this self-reflexivity—Spigel (1990:184) describes Elvis impersonators as 'one set of especially self-conscious fans'—nevertheless fails to produce conclusive or conscious self-knowledge regarding the origins of the cult impersonator's affective attachment to a specific icon: 'In...childhood memories, Elvis is represented as an overriding influence, a kind of "calling" (whether secular or spiritual) to which the impersonators succumbed "by accident", without conscious deliberation' (Spigel (1990:189)—consider this in the light of my retheorisation of the 'transitional object' in chapter 4). As set out in the introduction to this chapter, the cult fan's impersonation raises the matter of performative consumption whereby fans are both intently and volitionally self-reflexive as well as being 'self-absent' (i.e. unable to account for their fandom which is described non-volitionally, for example, as occurring 'by accident').

The question that I want to explore is why the cult fan's costuming and impersonation appears to be so threatening to hegemonic and non-fan culture. What is it about taking the body as a site for displaying fan identity that seems 'automatically' to condemn the fan to ridicule? So far, I have explored the extent to which fan impersonation and costuming blurs the borders and boundaries of the self. I have suggested that fan impersonation can re-stage the contradictions between use-value and exchange-value which characterise the originating text or icon as a commodity (Nightingale 1994). And I have suggested that the impersonator's 'loss of self' is ultimately an expansion of self; it is only by passing through moments of self-absence that our sense of self can be re-narrated and expanded (Ricoeur 1984). However, these dimensions of performative consumption pose a cultural

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challenge to the notion of the 'invested body':

current structures of production/consumption induce in the subject a dual practice, linked to a split (but profoundly interdependent) representation of his/her own body: the representation of the body as *capital* and as *fetish* (or consumer object). In both cases, it is important that, far from the body being denied or left out of account, there is deliberate *investment in it* (in the two senses, economic and psychical, of the term).

(Baudrillard 1998:129)

The body that is invested in comes to represent a form of capital, and a fetish, only to the extent that it is worked on by a volitional subject trapped in a totalising consumer system/code. In Baudrillard's discussion of the body as 'the finest consumer object' (the title of chapter 8 of *The Consumer Society*), this body's narcissism is always 'managed' (1998:131) and always acts 'in terms of an enforced instrumentality that is indexed to the codes and norms of a society of production and managed consumption' (*ibid.*). The body seemingly cannot evade this circuit; instead it seems to act either as the mediating and completing point of the system (which takes us back to Foucault and de Certeau), or else it displays its failure as a badly managed and a poorly invested in body. However, Baudrillard's argument should not provoke us to describe the cult body simply as a 'mismanagement' or a 'bad investment'; this would accept Baudrillard's characterisation of a totalising consumer 'code'. One problem is that Baudrillard's model is resolutely non-dialectical.⁷ It allows for no possibility that the privatised intensities of the 'body-fetish' may struggle against, disrupt, and become recontained by, the exchangeable 'body-capital'.

Contra Baudrillard's 'invested body', performative consumption indicates that the cult body does not simply become trapped in an all-encompassing discursive or capitalist system—the cult body is neither a product of an entirely volitional subject, nor is it the product of such a subject trapped in a total consumer code.⁸ The threat that performative consumption poses to 'common sense' (both academic and non-academic) is precisely that it cannot be reduced to such narratives, or to narratives of self and other. Viewing Baudrillard's work as an academic transposition of 'common sense',⁹ the cult body of the impersonator is also an affront to shared academic and non-academic 'common sense' because it indicates that there is no one authoritative consumer 'system', *and* that there is no singularly 'volitional' consumer whose opposition to this 'monolithic' system can be championed, or whose consumer 'choice' can be solicited. Furthermore, the impersonator is not a clearly fixed and bounded 'self', but neither are they lost in the 'other'. By opening an irresolvable space for playing, spectacularly and physically, between these two supposedly fixed terms, fan impersonation violates 'common sense'. Cultural work therefore has to be done to represent impersonation as a 'bad' (feared and feminised) if not *abject* loss of self, and hence to ridicule fan impersonators as 'addicts' or as pathological instances of 'weak' or dependent subjectivity. Such narratives emphasise the fan's self-absence or lack of volition, and are therefore to an extent 'correct', but through their (falsifying and non-dialectical) emphasis they seek to regenerate a sense of normative and 'good' consumer will/choice.¹⁰ The self/other permeability that is staged

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and embodied as a 'to-be-looked-at-ness' by male and female impersonators also raises the related matter of communal/individual permeability. That is to say, cult impersonators cannot simply be interpreted as part of a 'regulative discourse' or an 'interpretive community', but neither can they be counter-interpreted as individuals choosing to represent their fandom through their bodies. Consider, for example, these two competing descriptions of the same 1990 'EP' International Impersonators' Association convention:

Impersonating Elvis, I'd soon decide, was deeply embedded in restoring the memory of an authentic experience—it was, that is, all about recovering one's historical identity through the literal em'body'-ment of a spirit from the past. [These fans] are excessively aware of their pretence even as they hope to recover something true about themselves and their world.

(Spigel 1990:179)

According to Spigel, the use to which fans put Elvis is in establishing a set of shared values with which to construct a continuity of tradition and a common sense of the American past.... the knowledges surrounding Elvis seem to me to be very far removed from 'common sense'. Rather than providing fans with a stable ground for meaning, Elvis seems instead to allow for its free play.

(Joyrich 1993:79)

Joyrich characterises her 'differences' from Spigel via her account of Elvis impersonators as displaying 'not just a desire for knowledge [but rather a]... knowledge *for* desire' (1993:80). In Spigel's case, it is the fans' 'exchange-value' of Elvis impersonation which is emphasised via the manner in which Elvis impersonators cite and reiterate a specific set of codes and values. But for Joyrich,¹¹ this 'communal' approach undervalues the fans' use-value of impersonation, in which knowledge about Elvis is produced in and through the body rather than merely being inscribed upon it:

allowed to invest in any detail within an endless circle of knowledge and desire, the 'Elvisophile', far from being chained to an oppressive addiction, is empowered to revel in the pleasure of speculation without subjecting [him/] herself to the frustration provoked by an actual lack.

(Joyrich 1993:86)

Joyrich's approach reinforces my own emphasis on the 'endlessly deferred narratives' which circulate around cult texts and icons,¹² but it is also important to consider that, as we have seen in previous chapters, this specific debate polarises into moral dualisms in which either the fan community or specific fan knowledge are valued. And just as I criticised the polarity of the Jenkins-Bacon-Smith argument in chapter 3, this Spigel-Joyrich splitting of academic positions also requires rereading so that we can avoid siding with 'the individual' fan versus the fan 'community' or vice versa. As I argued in chapter 4, it is important to consider how fan communities can be reworked through the patternings of subjective (emotional) intervention, as well as addressing how 'subjective' fan practices are produced through communal co-ordinates. Such is the nature of

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fandom's dialectic of value: both Spigel and Joyrich are correct in the sense that they focus on aspects of Elvis impersonation, but to the extent that they isolate or prioritise *either* 'knowledge for desire' (a bodily-affective reading of impersonation; Joyrich) *or* the 'desire for knowledge' (a cognitive-interpretive reading; Spigel), these approaches cut a dialectic into two non-contradictory moments of conventional logic, hence falsifying it.

The contemporary media cult appears to be distinctive in terms of its rigorous self-objectification. As Braudy observes: 'there have now grown up several generations of fans who in their turn have become looked at themselves' (Braudy 1986:571–2). The contemporary cult fan, then, is no less subject to those very processes of objectification and spectacular 'to-be-looked-at-ness' which have traditionally been examined as a feature of stardom or iconicity. The costumer or impersonator does not only imitate a specific cult icon or character taken from a cult text: he or she embodies the processes of stardom and textuality, self-reflexively presenting the body-as-commodity. Yet this complex form of fan display and expression, which I have termed performative consumption, doesn't only dramatises and spectacularise the fan's affective relationship to a text/icon, it also dramatises the fans' self-absence, blurring moments of the volitional subject ('master of the text') and the non-volitional 'disciple' of the text. Performative consumption enacts the dialectic at the heart of the fan cult(ure). It is simultaneously a matter of communal and cultural 'exchange-value' and a matter of intensely private or cultic 'use-value'. And this simultaneity cannot be carved up into either/or narratives of fan cult(ure) as either 'challenging' commodification, or as being wholly 'complicit' with consumer culture (*contra* the Spigel-Joyrich debate and Nightingale's 'improvisation'-'impersonation' dualism). Nor can one aspect of fan cult(ure)'s contradictoriness be taken as real or as primary: exchange-value is not structurally real compared to delusional use-value (or vice versa). 'Secondary' use-value cannot be read off from 'primary' exchange-value (and, again, the reversal of this relationship does not hold either). Performative consumption involves not only essential tensions; it involves essential contradictions which academic study closes down and 'resolves' at its peril and to its own detriment. In the concluding chapter, I will address how new media technologies, specifically the world wide web, have reconfigured fan cultures. I will consider online fan cult(ure)s as a further instance of the performance of fan identity.

Summary

- In this chapter I have introduced the term 'performative consumption' as a way of capturing the contradictions between use-value and exchange-value which fan cult (ure) represents and stages.
- I have also argued that performative consumption is a useful term because it refers to the oscillation between intense 'self-reflexivity' and 'self-absent' which is characteristic of fan cult(ure)s. Although 'self-absence' can be discursively dealt with or warded off via discourses of aesthetics and religiosity, I have suggested here that practices such as impersonation and costuming can embody and physically replay the self-reflexive/self-absence contradictions of fandom.

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- By blurring the lines between self and other, fan impersonation challenges cultural norms of the fixed and bounded self. Criticisms of fan impersonation tend to be produced within 'common sense' notions of 'good' voluntarist individualism, therefore dismissing fan-impersonators as lacking a 'strong enough' self-identity.
- I have argued that impersonation also tends to be culturally linked to femininity. The abstract gendering of this linkage needs to be contested in order to avoid the rather odd conclusion that Elvis impersonators are *a priori* feminised by virtue of being impersonators. Problematically, such abstract gender codings seem to produce forms of analysis that are more gender-blind or gender-fixed than the cultural phenomena they seek to analyse.

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