

"LEARNING HOW TO SEE WHAT ISN'T THERE YET": AN INVESTIGATION OF THE
FAN MUSIC VIDEO

By

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To Erinn, who showed me *Buffy* and started this whole mess, and to my Oma, who pushed me, kicking and screaming, into success.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>page</u>
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	4
LIST OF FIGURES	6
ABSTRACT	7
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION	9
2 FRAGMENTATION AND EQUIVALENCE: THE VID AS TECHNOLOGICAL OBJECT	16
Vidding in the Interface of Final Cut Pro	19
Three Generations of Vidding	30
3 NARRATIVE RECOMBINATION AND STRUCTURES OF MEANING: THE VID AS OBJECT OF DESIRE	40
The Vid's Connections to New and Old Media: Composite and Montage	41
Ordering Principles of the Vid	50
Visual and Auditory Structures of Meaning: The Song and the Sample	61
The Vid as a Circuit of Desire	74
LIST OF REFERENCES	81
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH	83

LIST OF FIGURES

<u>Figure</u>	<u>page</u>
2-1 The Timeline window in Final Cut Pro.....	22
3-1 Harry touches his scar in a green-tinged clip.....	49
3-2 Dementor's hand follows Harry's.....	49
3-3 The hand of a dead Barty Crouch, Sr.....	50
3-4 The image of the polar bear is almost immediately paired with Victoria.....	53
3-5 Victoria is similarly positioned to the polar bear in the clip that follows.....	53
3-6 Fraser superimposed over the aurora borealis	54
3-7 Starbuck in the cockpit, a pilot in battle	58
3-8 Starbuck as an iconic pilot relaxing.....	58
3-9 Starbuck becomes the entry point for the vid's consideration of the pilot's role	60
3-10 The shot of pilots celebrating is almost immediately followed by shots of their death.....	60
3-11 Shots of Connor, Angel's son, are intercut with those of his father.....	63
3-12 Angel in a similar pose, action, and with similar framing	63
3-13 Angel right before the climactic axe swing	64
3-14 Rowena focuses her comparison by moving from obvious connections to subtle ones.....	69
3-15 Aaron stands over the dead body of Lilly Kane and holds her murder weapon.....	70
3-16 Rowena pairs Aaron's shot with Logan in a similar situation.....	70
3-17 Rowena emphasizes the subtle connections between father and son	71

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Vids, or fan-made music videos, select meaningful scenes from source texts and order them to a song, thereby engaging and reinterpreting the canon on which they are based. What may be described as American live-action vidding, whose origins are in sci-fi and slash fandom, has a thirty-year history and is vastly unrepresented in fandom studies. It is the paucity of current research on other forms of fannish expression, like the vid, that inspired this project. I examine the vid as both a technological and as an artistic object: first I consider the influence of digital editing tools on the vidder's understanding of what is possible, and second I focus on the complex network of desire, context, and narrative that produce the vid, and the desires that its production fulfills.

After an exploration of a typical digital nonlinear editing program (NLE) used by vidders, Final Cut Pro, and three case studies, I argue that these programs encourage vidders to transform what is given, reassembling bits into a single thread that becomes a whole object on its own. The vid is a recombined object that necessarily has gaps between what the viewer saw in the original and what she must infer in this new arrangement. Certain ordering principles like the song, associations between clips, and metaphorical objects, all produce layers of meaning that allow a viewer to interpret what she is seeing. I next studied what inspires the creation of vids, relying on

the origin of the vid in slash fandom to frame how it functions similarly to the slash fan's tendency to find subtexts, and draw on hidden or dropped threads in the original. Using the framework of Freud's understanding of the dream as wish-fulfillment, I then claim that vids are an expression of fantasy born of both love and frustrated desire, whose temporary satisfaction only leads to the production of more objects. This conclusion sheds light on the nature of fannish production, as well as fandom's economy of desire. The vid is a provocative form because it is imperfectly-sutured, a playful revelation that allows for an infinite number of subsequent and alternate revelations, and the pleasure of the vid is the practice of segmentation, reordering, and reinterpretation, for both the vidder and the fan viewer.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

I discovered online fandom and fanfiction before I discovered fan music videos, called vids. Yet I was immediately struck by the passion and creativity that seemingly any source – from a book or movie to a television series – could inspire in fans, and when I saw my first vid, in the fall of 2002, I knew there was something significant about this form. It was a *Smallville* vid that used scenes from the UK series *Queer as Folk* to reveal the subtextual desire between a young Clark Kent and Lex Luthor. And though the source quality was mediocre, the choice of George Michael's "I Want Your Sex" as a score ridiculous, and the editing amateurish, the vid was compelling, and confirmed the existence of a narrative I had found for myself within the show. The vidder had compiled every longing glance and significant moment between the two and left out the rest of the show, allowing the viewer to focus on one thread, one space for possibility, which was then filled in with what she desired.

As I began to focus on the nature of fannish desire, and the economy of fannish production, I found that I was not especially interested in fanfiction: almost all of the scholarship on fandom focuses on that particular form, and I thought that other types of expression, from the roleplaying game to the vid, required study as well. Vids became a compelling topic for my study because of their composition and structure: they weave together multiple narratives, contexts, and perspectives to communicate a single multimedia message, but remain constrained by the source material provided. The most complex vids demand multiple viewings, as well as familiarity with the source texts from which they are composed, the technology of production, and the fandom, in order for a viewer to fully understand them. This informed the methodology of my project: while I began by watching vids I found particularly interesting, analyzing how they worked, and reading what vidders themselves had to say about their process, I soon

undertook a study of a typical vidding program, Final Cut Pro, which is the subject of my first chapter.

Chapter 3 considers the vid as an imperfectly sutured object, created from clips and scored to a song. It examines how changing technology, specifically the availability of nonlinear digital editing programs for consumers, has inspired transitions in the vid's form. Using the framework of Final Cut Pro, this chapter details the interface with which the vidder works, and how it affects her understanding of what is possible. The availability of professional editing tools for consumer use has made the more interesting and complex vids possible, and transformed vidder expectations along with those of her audience. Shorter clips, more effects, and the wholesale manipulation of the image at every level have become the norm in what I call third-generation vidding, the generation that transitions from experimentation to mastery. Elements of Final Cut Pro like random access, nondestructive editing encourages users to understand her source *as* source material, as digital bits that can be altered at will: thus, vidders transform what is given, reassembling bits into a single thread that becomes a whole object on its own. Three case studies detail significant elements of vids from each generation, comparing the techniques used by the vidders in order to suggest an increasing emphasis on equivalence between images, one that reflects the equivalent tools a nonlinear editing program vidder uses to affect her source material.

Chapter 3 begins by comparing the vid to other traditions of meaning-making, which appear similar in method on the surface. My focus in Chapter 3 is on what is behind the creation of vids, and a challenge that haunted me throughout this project was how to write about something that had not ever been written about in its current form. Should I talk about the vid as a collage? A montage? A new media composite? None of these well-defined terms from the vocabulary of contemporary media studies were satisfying, because they all excluded some

essential facet of the vid: its appropriation of original content for potentially subversive purposes, its reliance on a fannish community of interpretation and reception, or its use of a song to superimpose another context onto the source. Thus, by considering montage, combinatorial narrative, compositing, the structuralist project, and the Oulipian constrained text, the vid's particular nature is revealed as both all, and none completely. It is the vid's context that makes it unique, as it relies on a complex web of influences, including the particular fandom, the original source, the techniques of other vids, the chosen song, and of course, the vidder's own motives. Any particular vid contains within it the circulating economy of its creation and reception, and as such represents one node in an ever-changing web of fannish desire and practice.

Understanding the vid as a recombined object, that necessarily has gaps between what the viewer saw in the original and what she must infer in this new arrangement, led me to emphasize certain ordering principles, like the song, associations between clips, and metaphorical objects, all of which produce layers of meaning. Given the additional meaning provided by the fandom itself, it was essential to consider the desires inspiring the vid. Here I relied on the origin of the vid in slash fandom¹ to frame how the vid functions, with the slash fan's tendency to find subtexts, and draw on hidden or dropped threads in the original. I also compared the fannish process of making the vid to Freud's understanding of the dream as wish-fulfillment, which led me to claim that vids are an expression of fantasy born of both love and frustrated desire, whose temporary satisfaction only leads to the production of more objects. The vidder thus desires to reveal in her vid what the original meant to say, really says, or never could say, a message communicated with approximation and reassemblage of what is available. This conclusion sheds

¹ Slash is the name for a particular genre of fan fiction that depicts sexual and/or romantic relationships between male characters that are not paired in canon, and who are most often not depicted as queer. The term can also refer to similar narratives featuring female characters, though many fans classify that as a separate genre called 'femslash' or 'femmeslash.'

light on the nature of fannish production, as well as fandom's economy of desire. As I point out in Chapter 3, the vid is unique *because* it is imperfectly-sutured, a playful revelation that allows for an infinite number of subsequent and alternate revelations, and the pleasure of the vid is the practice of segmentation, reordering, and reinterpretation, for both the vidder and the fan viewer.

Thus, this study traces what might appear two different projects in its dual chapters: the first examines the vid as a technical object, created through particular practices and interfaces that change over time; while the second considers the vid as an aesthetic object, focusing specifically on the network of influences that produce it and the desires that its production fulfils. Yet both aspects of the vid, technical and artistic, are necessary to understand this tradition, since the form relies as much on individual wishes as it does upon the medium by which they are conveyed. This emerging art differs from fanfiction, the fannish practice most often studied by ethnographers and academic fans, not just in being audiovisual, but also in its reliance on what is given. Unlike fanfiction writers, who may depart from canon at any time and create whatever worlds they desire, vidders are fundamentally constrained by the source material itself. In order to make a vid detailing a non-canonical relationship, or insist upon a particular interpretation of original events apparently unsupported by the source, a vidder must piece together whatever visual evidence she can find, and order it in a persuasive manner. That gap left behind by what was never filmed cannot be filled with a pop song's score or special effects, but remains an inviolable connection to the original, and a reminder that the vidder's desire can only be temporarily satisfied.

Given that what may be described as American live-action vidding, whose origins are in sci-fi and slash fandom, has a thirty-year history and is vastly unrepresented in fandom studies, the reach of such a project must necessarily escape its grasp. This study is only an initial

examination, limited in scope and the vids represented, but attempts to simultaneously trace the implications of vidding for new media studies, as a technological and intensely personal engagement with the fannish possibilities for expression. The practice of amateur videomaking is becoming widespread in America as well as abroad; vidding is now being discussed at academic conferences; fannish practices are receiving greater mainstream attention; and academic work on machinima², anime vidding, and other traditions that have arisen largely independent of the live-action vid is growing, all of which demonstrate a need for greater study of this art form.

The potential freedom to engage media according to the needs of the user, as well as to repurpose such media at will, implies an understanding of various medial forms as fluid, changeable, and fundamentally open to alteration. Like other fannish and subcultural practices that resist notions of single authorship and therewith authority over texts, spaces, and objects, from collage and graffiti to fanfiction, vidders move from interpretation to appropriation. While the process of amateur video exchange, whether among fans or via YouTube, may encourage a communal environment of reception and engagement, if not production, it does not necessarily circumvent the traditional transmission of commercial entertainment from the corporation to the individual, wherein the individual has little to no effect upon the creators of her pleasure. Despite works that claim a revolutionary potential for social change in fannish practices, I contend that vidders, along with other fans, desire a relationship with the source of their pleasure that is intimate, if not equal in influence. Thus, despite instances of apparent success – from anecdotes of vidders working with the approval of or in collaboration with creators, to fanfiction writers

² Machinima refers broadly to the practice of rendering CGI (computer-generated imagery) using real-time 3-D game engines, and more specifically to a film genre that consists of movies and music videos made with game tools and resources.

achieving mainstream success as writers and creators of similar if not the same original shows – I find in fandom little desire to reject or transform corporate structures and means of production.

Other signs of change, however, do exist, and reflect a growing shift in the perception of how art, artistic production, and consumption are understood. As Chapter 3 demonstrates, vidders using nonlinear digital editing programs are encouraged, in their use of the interface, to understand their work in the terms and with the tools of professionals. This professional approach reveals one way that vidding alters traditional understandings of reception: when making a vid, the original source becomes a database engaged through the NLE interface, and the visual surface of the clip (and the interface for vidders), rather than the physical original, is the point of engagement for creators as well as the audience. Beyond understanding the source as digital rather than physical, as alterable rather than fixed, vidders seek out hidden threads of meaning and connections between narrative elements, and then demonstrate an increasing depth behind and between the surfaces of the given original³.

The technological shift from analog to digital texts fundamentally alters the medial object because it encourages new systems of producing alternate versions and supplemental documents, from director's cuts to podcasts, which then expand the range of viable narratives and audiences. Thus a work is potentially never finished, and the object's coherence is made permeable, as originality and authorship become destabilized concepts. Further, digital technology – nonlinear editing programs as just one example – encourages a perception of equivalence across traditionally separate practices of art. Modes of producing film, photographs, novels, music and webpages merge through interfaces that allow all documents to be acted upon in similar ways,

³ This ability, as remarked upon by the fan kassrachel, gave this study its title: "There's something strangely comforting about recognizing that vidders -- even brilliant vidders -- have to wrestle with learning how to see what isn't there yet."

suggesting that creation is becoming a practice of manipulation and recombination. The most provocative works that rely on these technologies are derivative, in that they remake preexisting documents: mashups; adaptations; fanfiction; vids; and a variety of other texts extend and transform narratives through a complicated interaction that turns back upon itself to then affect the original in ways that cannot be predicted beforehand.

This study traces the interaction between practice and pleasure at work when reforming fragmentary images into complete objects that transmit their own narratives, only to question what happens to signs and signifiers when they are repurposed into different media and detached from their original referents to create a new context for storytelling. This heuristic can be applied to other art forms, and resembles what might be considered a "mashup aesthetic," one that takes given elements and recombines them to suit purposes not originally intended. Though the objects thus created vary in a number of ways, including source media, final form, and subcultural influences and affiliations, the methodology behind the created objects remains remarkably similar, which points to the need for a cross-media analysis of changing art-making practices and audiences. Vidding represents one particular iteration of the interconnected and interdependent nature of many new media, and its circulating economy of influences, from original source and context to fannish interpretive and appropriative processes, reveals the direction that emerging technologies and their users are taking, toward a self-reliant expression – and satisfaction – of desire.

CHAPTER 2 FRAGMENTATION AND EQUIVALENCE: THE VID AS TECHNOLOGICAL OBJECT

In 1975, a fan who goes by the name of Kandy Fong made what would later become known as the first vid: at a *Star Trek* convention, she displayed stills of the television show on a slide projector and accompanied them with music on a cassette player. The possibilities of what would become a vibrant art form only emerged when technology caught up with fan aspirations in the 1980s and 1990s, with the advent of the VCR (Coppa qtd. in Hellekson and Busse, 58). Using two VCRs, a patch cord, and often a stopwatch for precision timing, first-generation vidders selected meaningful scenes from source texts and ordered them to a song, thereby engaging and reinterpreting the canon on which they were based. Fundamentally, the only common trait between vids, whose genre can be comedy, character analysis, romance, alternate reality, multi-fandom, etc., is that they are appropriated from media owned by someone else, are set to music, and engage the narrative of the original source in order to comment on it in some fashion.

In 1992, Henry Jenkins in his book *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture* addressed vidding or 'songvids,' as they were then known. At the time, editing was a process of transferring footage from one machine to the other. In order to find and utilize the clips for a vid, intensive planning and patience were required: VCR vidders sorted through multiple tapes, scrolled through useless footage, and finally copied important moments from one tape to another, often remaking their projects multiple times to ensure the smoothest transitions (Jenkins p.5). One reason for the lack of scholarship on vidding's thirty year history is that distribution and access are a serious concern: the early experiments with slide projectors are no longer available, and thus claims about their aesthetics, use of source material, or the interaction between image and musical accompaniment are difficult to make. VCR vids initially had only

limited distribution that relied on personal copies made by request; source degradation was also a problem. Only recently have some early vids been digitally remastered and made available online. In the late 1990s, however, vids began to be circulated in numerous ways due to fans hosting their works on the Internet, as well as creating them with the aid of nonlinear digital editing programs.

In 1999, Apple released the nonlinear digital editing application Final Cut Pro to challenge the dominance of Avid in the field of film editing, and to market professional quality editing tools to consumers. One professional editor, in a review of the differences between Final Cut Pro and Avid as of the latter's latest release, confirms that aside from a few minor details like advanced color correction, "both Avid and Final Cut are professional-level apps. More importantly, Final Cut Pro has no real inherent limitations when compared to Avid" (Inhofer p.4). As Walter Murch explains in *In the Blink of An Eye: A Perspective on Film Editing*, nonlinear editing programs were developed to broaden the options for professional editing equipment, to further merge film and television production and increase profits and creative options available to filmmakers (86-7). As programs like Adobe Premiere and Final Cut Pro appeared on the consumer market, those increased options were made available to nonprofessionals, who now had access to software designed for a style of editing far more complex than what was possible before on two VCRs.

Vidding on a VCR has parallels to sampling⁴, as well as a fundamental model of editing as editing *out*; the method was one of fast-forwarding until the desired clip was found and then duplicating it into a new context of other clips. In contrast, editing on digital nonlinear editing

⁴ As will be elaborated in Chapter 2, here sampling refers primarily to the musical practice of re-using a sound, instrument, or melody and mixing it into another audio track, but also evokes the word's use in signal processing, which often involves converting a sound wave (like the continuous loop of a film, physically or in the playing) into a discrete sequence of samples that may, as the word is used in case studies, come to represent what is most significant about the whole.

programs involves breaking down footage into useful pieces through various modes of selection, and then altering, manipulating, and recombining them. This chapter uses Final Cut Pro to examine effects of nonlinear editing on vidding; other programs like Avid, Pro Tools, and Adobe Premiere have similar functions and interfaces, and watching a vid offers fewer or no clues as to which nonlinear editing program was used to make it. The selection of Final Cut Pro is, also, a practical one: being a Mac user, it follows that I would examine the program designed for users of the software platform I also use.

While fans have been rewriting and editing the objects they consume for decades, particular conditions like Final Cut Pro's interface, its conception of what video is, and the way it teaches the user to interact with it like a professional editor, all transform vidding as a practice and the vid as a medial object. Vidding is fundamentally altered when nonlinear editing programs become available to consumer artists, whose understandings and practices of editing are then shaped by interaction with this software. Engagement with and understanding of the original source, as well as the new object, is radically affected by vidding in a nonlinear digital editing program, and the possibilities such programs offer – as well as the constraints – can be directly traced onto programmatic, visual, and structural shifts in vidding as an art form. Beginning with a brief explanation of nonlinear editing, I will analyze the interface of Final Cut Pro and its use of the complex language and practices of professional editing. This practical analysis will culminate in three case studies of first, second, and third-generation vids, which will chart changes in the art form as vidders have moved beyond VCR vidding and adapted to the visual, artistic, and structural aspects of nonlinear editing programs. Finally, this chapter will be informed by considering Final Cut Pro as one move in a history of editing as a way to engage media and their narratives that relies on not just resistant but contrarian impulses.

Vidding in the Interface of Final Cut Pro

Two key elements of nonlinear editing programs are their ability to give the user random access to any shot without having to scroll through prior footage, and their nondestructive nature⁵. While early film editing machines allowed users to piece together film stock out of order, only a limited number of changes to individual frames were possible. Later video editing platforms were nondestructive, but required editors to view all footage prior to the frame to be edited before changes could be made. Because nonlinear editing programs record changes on the computer but do not alter the digitized original, edits can be made, erased, or altered at any point in the process. One aspect of nonlinear editing that makes it considerably more efficient than prior formats is that the assembly of images on the computer is virtual: "the images themselves have not been disturbed, only the computer instructions for what to do with the images... This simply means that, in mechanical editing, the *images* and the *information about the arrangement* of the images are one and the same thing," while in nonlinear editing, the computer uses information about the images in order to assemble them as the user watches (Murch 81-2). Nonlinear editing separates the recorded image from its surrounding context—its order in the sequence, its correspondence to surrounding clips, its place in the logic of the original—but in a way that is illusive.

Fundamentally, Thomas Ohanian suggests that nonlinear editing "refers to the concept that the physical nature of the medium and the technical process of manipulating that medium does not enforce or dictate a method by which the material must be physically ordered" (19). The user defines and organizes clips according to her need, in segments of any duration, according to prior

⁵ Nondestructive editing essentially means that the original content is not altered in the course of editing; only the edits themselves change. When the user accesses the edited video or audio, it is reconstructed from the original source and the edit decision list without degrading the source or making edits permanent.

notes, given structures like DVD chapters, or timecode, which is the identifying signal of hours/minutes/seconds/frames recorded onto each frame of video.

Further, Final Cut Pro can work with numerous types of digital media and convert them from one format to another, which encourages the user to perceive various physical forms as equivalent digital bits that can be manipulated in similar ways through a single interface. Each of the four windows—Browser, Canvas, Viewer, and Timeline—allows for multiple perspectives and editing options. A single clip, for example, appears in the Browser, can be seen and edited in the Viewer, placed in its playable order on the Timeline, and then watched after editing in the Canvas. Alternatively, a clip can be edited and then dragged to the Canvas, where there are multiple options for adding it to the sequence open in the Timeline, such as 'Overwrite,' 'Fit to Fill' the empty space in the sequence, or 'Insert.' Further, clips can be acted upon in various ways: the user can add effects using the Menu, keystrokes, Toolbar, in the Timeline, Canvas, or Viewer windows, or even by accessing the effects tab in the Browser. As I demonstrate later in this chapter, the user's understanding of editing or alteration as an equivalent process, which can occur in various ways and by various means, significantly alters the viewer's understanding of her source material.

The interface uses various metaphors that show the influence of spreadsheet and word processing program design, from tabbed windows in the Browser that separate clips and effects to labeled actions like Undo and Cut and Paste. The Browser allows the user to view its contents, which are icons that only refer to the actual media files, and then organize and label them in various sequences of imported clips. A single sequence can contain all of the clips in a single project, or multiple versions of a particular scene; sequences can be nested, as well, so that edits can be done to multiple clips within a scene but not all of them. The visual presentation of clips

as documents that can be organized in folders, or moved into different windows via drag-and-drop will be familiar to computer users; however, novice editors with no knowledge of professional programs like Avid could be confused by elements of the interface that rely on the historical processes of film editing. The playback head in the Timeline corresponds to a physical device on earlier machines, as do the shuttle and jogging interfaces in the Viewer and Canvas that slow down or speed up playback to find exact frames.

Users of Final Cut Pro may engage these representations without understanding their names or how they function, which makes many aspects of the interface less than intuitive. While the Viewer and Canvas are merely another incarnation of the ability to move material from one screen to another, like reel-to-reel editing or even two-VCR vidding, nonlinear editing is particularly "reliant on the clip, the splice, the transition, and the timeline"—in other words, the ability to segment footage into manipulable pieces establishes a fundamental disconnect from the original physicality of film (Ohanian 77). This physical disconnect, which transforms the material object to intangible data that can be altered with ease, mirrors ways in which vidding as a practice requires rejecting the sanctity and impermeability of the original text in favor of alteration and reinterpretation.

The window of Final Cut Pro with the most elements likely to influence the viddier is the Timeline, as its interface allows the user to perceive and act upon clips in far more varied and complex ways than the two-VCR setup. As shown in Fig.1, the Timeline represents clips in both their physical length and their duration in time, combining the film (spatial) and video (temporal) perceptual approaches to editing (Ohanian 53-4). The Timeline is laid out like a symphonic score, with video in a horizontal line of clips and the audio tracks below it, allowing

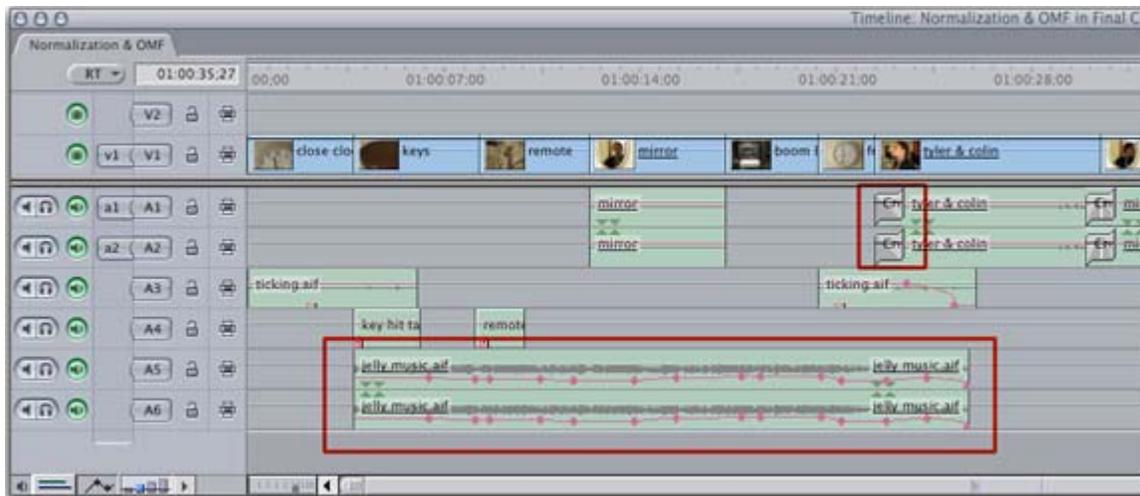


Figure 2-1. The Timeline window in Final Cut Pro. Image source: "Final Cut Pro 6: A First Look." Image ©2007 Steve Martin.

for both horizontal and vertical scaling as well as asynchronous and nonsequential picture and sound editing. An unlimited number of audio tracks may be displayed alongside up to ninety-nine video tracks. The user can view the audio as a waveform to aid in editing, initially meant for professionals to lay tracks of background noise and score, but now available for syncing motion and cuts in the video to a similarly-edited song.

Vidders have taken advantage of the ability to arrange visual footage nonlinearly by synchronizing it with the time progression of a song. The song structures the vid in that images are chosen to match its elements, and the movement of the song orders the progression of said images. The specifics of matching image to sound at every level, from beat to instrument and lyrical content, allow the song to guide the viewer by signaling changes, interpreting the placement of clips, and associating the vid's visual content to a sung narrative. The song structures the selected images, and vidders using NLEs can synchronize clips, transitions and effects to correspond with musical elements beyond the lyric and beat. The specific ways that the song influences the vid's content, layout, and message will be explored later in this chapter, and the song's importance as both constraint and as emotional conduit is developed in Chapter 2.

The Timeline also encourages nonlinear editing by allowing users to splice in new clips before existing ones, rearrange clip order, and work with visual effects that run in real time. While early film editors could not preview effects other than cuts, but instead "provide[d] directions for the optical laboratory ... by marking the film with a Chinagraph marker," Final Cut Pro only requires that users wait for single clips or entire sequences to be rendered before changes can be previewed (Ohanian 14). The metaphor of the Chinagraph marker remains an option in the Toolbar for making complicated edits like keyframes: by selecting the Pen tool, users can draw lines to zoom in on a section of a frame, mark the duration of a change in opacity, or alter the motion of a clip. The keyframe options in Final Cut Pro offer vidders in particular an entirely new level of control over their source media, for with the selection of Position/Scale/Rotation, the user controls external motion, essentially adding a camera to reshoot a clip and therewith reinterpret its structure and meaning. The options offered by Final Cut Pro's Timeline and effects can only encourage vids' reliance on juxtaposition and cuts, since changes are not only easily made, but the vidder can also see how edits made to one shot affect the shots surrounding it, emphasizing the contextual relation between clips. Program windows that show multiple representations of the same object further emphasize the rhetoric of manipulable pieces. The Timeline shows clips temporally, the Canvas visually with a static image or whole clip, thereby affecting the user's understanding of the object by suggesting that it is multiple things at once and can be altered in any form.

The increased flexibility of nonlinear editing nevertheless imposes constraints on the vidder, along with expanding her options. For example, a problem with the Undo button that may not be immediately understandable to users is that only so many edits can be undone, and that the list of un-doable events is determined by the timeline of the editing session. Should a vidder

want to change a transition in her second clip, she would need to do so as soon as possible, since it may be impossible two days and innumerable edits later. Despite Final Cut Pro's rhetoric of simultaneous editing, users would be best served by working one edit at a time, and finishing work on particular clips or sequences before moving on to the next. And, as beneficial as the ability to create multiple versions of a single sequence may be, the sheer number of possible edits may confuse and overwhelm the vidder, who often works with multiple seasons of a show, even more than the professional editor working with once scene: "If you had fifty-nine shots for a scene, which is not at all unusual, you would potentially have as many possible versions of that scene as there are subatomic particles in the entire universe" (Murch 79-80). A user may specify her preferences and design Final Cut Pro's operations in various ways to optimize her workflow – changing shortcut keys, saving favorite effects, storing source media on different drives, etc. – but that workflow then becomes so customized that only a single user can operate the program. Murch warns that desktop digital editing programs may transform editing into a single-person activity, reducing collaboration, apprenticeship, and the potential variety of post-production technologies (111-21). Yet that same isolation ensures that consumers can edit with professional tools at all, and there is no evidence that collaboration or communal exchange in professional or amateur editing has decreased since the advent of programs like Final Cut Pro.

The first issue a vidder encounters when using Final Cut Pro is how to find the clips that she wants. Murch compares working with film stock on a Moviola to clay, in that editors gather together individual emulsified frames and shape them into sequences, and using the KEM to marble, as editors chip away at large segments of film in order to uncover the scenes buried within (45). Digital editing on a computer, however, is quite different: "You ask for something specific and that thing—that thing alone—is delivered to you as quickly as possible. You are

only shown what you ask for" (Murch 45). If a vidder does not know exactly which four-second segment she needs, she will have to re-import scenes multiple times, since Final Cut Pro recognizes its clips as singular segments that will only be edited and used once. This encourages vidders to alter and expand their procedures for gathering footage, in order to utilize the options Final Cut Pro offers to professional editors. The user may log the specific scenes she wants and capture only those, break down large chunks into smaller sections of footage once they have been captured, or tell the computer to select clips based on the timecode numbers on beginning and ending frames. Vidders who become familiar with timecode numbers may understand their clips as digital bits of specific duration, but users unfamiliar with nonlinear editing may work directly with the scenes in front of them, beginning with a linearly-ordered original and considering their clips as physical, connected frames of film that must be manipulated exactly. Additionally, vidders using Final Cut Pro's random access capability may experience the drawback of having to know exactly which scenes are needed beforehand. As Murch points out, the problem with random access is that "your choices can then only be as good as your requests, and sometimes that is not enough. There is a higher level that comes through *recognition*" (46). While that recognition may be difficult for editors screening vast amounts of footage from dailies, the vidder's position as a fan of her show implies a pre-existing recognition of key moments and shots from the show due to repeated watching. The benefits of random access editing are not simply claimed in order to sell programs like Final Cut Pro, but are an integral part of the interface design, encouraging users to develop particularly detailed prior knowledge of the source in order to find and edit it quickly.

The knowledge of a fan is not sufficient, not least because what is often most compelling about a scene is precisely what cannot be included—dialogue. Thus, the nonlinear vidder has to

engage the source the way a professional would: by logging frames by timecode, pre-forming clips, and attending to the number of frames in a scene, rather than just its length, rhythm, or content. The user who does not take advantage of the timecode either needs to work linearly in creating the object, or consistently rearrange clips to make space for ones that will now come before them. This appears to enforce a linear construction onto the user, even with multiple tracks and source material that has been broken into pieces and can be rearranged in any order, but vidders have developed a way to arrange visual footage nonlinearly: in accordance with the time progression of a song.

Though the vidder's understanding of the source and chosen topic are essential to the process of selection and organization, the song chosen to accompany the images structures vids, and thus clip selection relies not on any random plan for arrangement, but correspondence with musical moments. For example, a particular song's bridge between the second and third verse may be sixteen bars long, and end with a drum roll at timestamp 1.23. Guided by the song, the vidder can place an image lasting from 1.23 to 1.28 that corresponds with the drums, and know that her next clip will need to match the beginning of the next verse. In this way, a vidder may become aware of how to arrange nonsequential images of varying lengths according to pre-given time limits, and many organize their editing notes around these time signatures, rather than those attached to frames of film. Final Cut Pro allows users to select and order their clips according to multiple frameworks, and even encourages the synchronization of image with sound by linking the score of the sound track with that of the timeline. This synchronization ties the song's content even more closely with the vid's images, allowing vidders to use the lyrics and music to reveal associative meaning through their connection with clips.

The digitization of film into small and manipulable bits – clips, scenes, shots, and frames – means that what the user can do to a piece, she can do to the whole, or a group of pieces collected into a sequence. Historically, film theorists like Pudovkin have described editing in terms of structures, each of which contains smaller parts: "Shots are built into scenes. Scenes are formed into sequences. Sequences form acts" (Pudovkin qtd. in Button 191). When vidding in Final Cut Pro, the user breaks her source material into pieces, retitles them, and then proceeds to reorder, alter, and otherwise manipulate her pieces into a new whole that has an order and meaning reliant on the object itself, rather than simply its success at referring to the original. Bryce Button, similarly, encourages editors to consider the balance of the document once it's nearly completed, and if that doesn't work, to "work your way back down to the individual shot and back out again" (Button 44). This suggests that professional editing relies on metaphors of pieces broken down and reassembled in the service of a larger story, not just in terms of physical fragments but also ones of meaning. Conversely, the message the vid discovers through reassemblage is that of a single thread, a kernel of the original, which is then elevated to stand in for and reinterpret the whole, a topic that I elaborate upon in Chapter 3.

Along with this telescopic movement from the single frame to the whole project and back again, nonlinear editors must consider three other vertices of perception: horizontal, by which "shots are chosen and transitioned together to create the basic flow of the story"; vertical, as "shots are layered together to form a collage of images"; and intraframe editing, since "the actual pixels that make up the frame (or fields) can be manipulated" (Ohanian 135). The vertical perspective is familiar to professional sound editors, who have had to consider not only what sound is next, but which occur simultaneously, but as Murch points out, professional film editors have in the past only considered the horizontal dimension, and must now start thinking vertically

as well, which is to say: "What can I edit *within the frame*?" (130). Such editing, as mentioned before, does not merely apply to special effects—backgrounds can be lightened, colors changed, images inverted or slowed down, and images can be composited as well. Third-generation vidders take advantage of these options when speeding up a clip to sync it with music, altering the color of clips to mask bad source quality or different lighting styles, and compositing images to assert connective relations in a single frame between different times, places, and characters.

Compositing is "a process that takes multiple layers of video, usually along with effects and a variety of digital alterations, and combines them into one seamless layer in the finished project to make the unbelievable believable" (*Final Cut Pro Tutorial* 67). The availability of such tools is an encouragement to use them. The power to alter all aspects of the source material has influenced film editing in terms of speed and number of effects, and it seems likely that such programs have guided a desire to produce more professional-looking objects in vidders, especially given that vids have traditionally been based on television footage and played on those same screens, and "television has to make things collide within that tiny frame in order to catch your attention because of the much narrower angle that the image subtends compared to theatrical film—hence the quick cuts, jump cuts, swish pans, staggered action, etc." (Murch 123). Third-generation vids overall have shorter segments, more effects, complicated transitions, and enhanced visuals, demonstrating that at every level, the source is alterable. Vidders now have higher expectations from their audience as well as innumerable options to consider, which were simply not possible when the only options were whether to copy the scene or not, and at what point in the song to insert the clip. The increasing use of transitions in vids, along with effects that suggest various relations between connected clips, suggests a greater freedom to recontextualize the source—subsequently, it is significant to consider how vids reinterpret their

pieces so that they only make sense in their reordered context, and in fact may make a *better* sense to the fan than the original does.

Though the process of organizing a coherent story from another type of media is one familiar to professional editors, given that a script and directorial choices guide the text that will eventually become a film's final print, nonlinear vidding is less like correctly ordering the shots that tell a story, which can be compared to the collection of important clips in a VCR vid, and more like distilling the source in order to produce an object that comments on – and goes beyond – the parameters of the original. Once the vidder transforms the given show into a collection of fragmentary moments that can be culled to find a particular color, motion, or connection, it becomes source material, rather than a primary text whose logic and ordering principles must guide the vid. Though the source does fundamentally constrain the vid's creation on various levels, from the given story and characters to what scenes are filmed and can hence be used, the practice of nonlinear editing encourages the vidder to transform what is given. Certain orderings of clips convey different meanings and associations; unusual juxtapositions provide emotional resonance; cuts become ways to connect images as well as ways to separate them; and both transitions and effects represent opportunities to comment on the relationship between clips and the progression of the vid as a whole. The desire to comment on the source material raises important questions about the origin of the vidder's impulse to convey her message, which will be discussed in Chapter 3.

Both vidders and professional editors continually emphasize the importance of adequate thought and preparation *before* beginning to edit, so that the project is guided by the creator's coherent vision of its structure, pace, motivation, and so on. Just as a film is not a collection of scenes, a vid is not simply a sequence of clips on a timeline, and in this way, both second and

third-generation vids resemble film in both concept and practice. When vidding in a nonlinear editing program, the story, song choice, pacing, and numerous smaller issues arise from decisions made in response to the original, in order to create a powerful story out of the one that already exists. Rather than watching footage for dialogue or plot, the vidder finds significant moments that express a relationship, an atmosphere, or the emotional state of a character, and once influenced by the chosen song, she selects and orders clips that fit its meaning⁶.

Three Generations of Vidding

The following case studies examine three vids to demonstrate how nonlinear editing programs, when their possibilities are fully utilized, have altered the way that vids are made, along with what kind of stories can be told. Though viewing a first-generation vid without some amount of comparison to later, more complex vids is difficult, the goal here is not to imply a progress narrative of artistic 'improvement' so much as to chart a trajectory of increasing fragmentation on all levels, as nonlinear editing programs offer more means of source manipulation. The first is by Mary S. Van Deusen, who has recently begun digitally remastering her VCR vids and making them available on her website. This *Blake's 7*⁷ vid, made between 1996 and 1999 on two Betamax 1000s, is a study of the character Avon throughout the series, and is set to Peter, Paul, and Mary's "All My Trials," for which it is titled. At three minutes and seventeen seconds, *All My Trials* is within the usual length of vids (between three and four

⁶ It should be noted that fandom as a whole, including the specific practice of vidding, emerges under particular conditions which allow for repeated viewings as well as source alteration. Modern fandom relies on particular technical and medial moments for its production: certain technologies, especially the VCR, allow for the recording and replaying of source material; photocopiers allow for fanzines to circulate and thereby enlarge the population of fans; the establishment of conventions for sci-fi fans influenced the development of fan conventions, where vids were first screened; and the importance of the internet to fandom is far too large a topic to engage here. Without the moment of facilitated repetition, fans would not be able to develop an understanding of a particular show's canon, circulate it to the uninitiated, and detect hidden or dropped strands of narrative that would make fanfiction and vidding possible.

⁷ *Blake's 7*. Created by Terry Nation. Writer and director vary. BBC, 1978-81.

minutes). The clips are quite long—the first runs twenty-three seconds—and some appear to encompass most of the original scenes on which they are based.

Most of the shots in *All My Trials* are of faces in close-up or unmoving actors, making the vid quite static, visually, although it relies on cuts made within the show for added motion and effect, usually of reaction shots. All cuts are simple, given the obvious technological parameters of VCR vidding, and their placement does not mark relationships between scenes on the visual level. Musically, the vid places cuts according to lyrics, usually at one cut per bar or half verse, and since the lyrics begin either right before or after the first beat in 4/4 time, the choice to match clips with words explaining them means that the cuts often appear out of sync with the song itself. Other than selection and placement, which rely on marking and ordering moments that have great importance to the series as well as the vid, the clips have not been altered in any way, but their ordering nevertheless conveys a sense of helpless and inevitable movement toward a tragic ending to fans of the original show.

The structure of *All My Trials* relies almost entirely on the context of the series; extended shots of conversation, for example, can only convey what the viewer *already knows* that the characters said in that scene, episode, and season. The scenes that make up the vid are moments recognized as significant by fans, like the first meeting between Blake and Avon, and Avon's reaction to killing Blake, but since their ordering appears to be guided by the song's lyrics and the chronology of the series, the clips appear to have only a slight relation to each other. *All My Trials* begins with the final scene of *Blake's 7*, and returns to that scene, completing it, at the end of the vid, and this circular framing implies a looking-backward similar to the fan's upon viewing the series and considering the narrative's trajectory upon its ending. The interim scenes illustrate how Avon, whom the song can be understood as being both about and by, came to be in the

position of the last scene, by showing his reactions to specific events and his interactions with other characters—primarily Blake.

Though the vid is a character study, rather than a romance or slash text, the *Blake's 7* fandom's preoccupation with the relationship between Blake and Avon is evident in the choice of clips usually included in vids that proclaim that they are in love. One drawback of the song choice is that "All My Trials" only has fifteen lines, and seven of them are the same: "All my trials lord, soon to be over." This repetition is reflected in the clip selection, as each iteration is paired with different and slowly worsening experiences, but the vid does not demonstrate any nuance in what those trials are, or how Avon and only Avon feels about them. A viewer unfamiliar with the source⁸ would finish *All My Trials* with the understanding that *Blake's 7* is a story of loss, struggle, and eventual death, and that Avon suffers a great deal, which only reveals the insularity of many early vids. In comparison to third-generation vids, Van Deusen's vid would appear more of a commentary than a reinterpretation, but within the context of its time, *All My Trials* is responding to the desires and interests of *Blake's 7* fans. Thus, even if Van Deusen's vid communicates very little beyond the story the series tells to anyone who is not already familiar with it, and relies on the original context in order to be effective, that does not diminish the power the vid has for fans who are invested in Avon's tragic story.

⁸ Though a full analysis of even one fannish interpretive community is beyond the limitations of this study, some observations about the particular nature of a vid's reception can be made. Before it was feasible to make vids available online, they were viewed primarily at conventions in large groups, during a time set aside for a "vid show." Attendees could often request tapes of these vids for private viewing. Today, vidders are aware that individuals will most often view their creations on a computer screen. This shift in audience, location, and screening context necessarily affects not just the reception, but the creation of vids: viewed in isolation and perhaps multiple times, vids can be more complex, thereby requiring more sustained attention. Further examination of the vid's conditions of reception is needed, including the influence of a growing audience that is familiar with vidding, one that may appreciate the form itself rather than vids made for a particular fandom, and the tradition whereby vidders collaborate, edit each other's works, and pass on new techniques.

Wonder of Birds is a second-generation vid that reflects certain elements of nonlinear editing, such as shorter clip length, interlaced scenes, and motion synced to the song's instrumentation, but is primarily distinguishable from third-generation vids in that it does not significantly alter the original footage. However, its theme of a slash relationship does reinterpret the source narrative in ways both tied to the form's origins and in ways evident in more recent vids. As is somewhat apparent in *Wonder of Birds*, but even more so in the final case study, the effects of the NLE are visible in the composition of the vid: clips are paired with lyrics in associative as well as linear ways, the structure is more object- and visually-oriented, and this vid tells a story somewhat connected to but not wholly reliant on the one told in the original series. *Wonder of Birds* was made in February 2003 by Laura Shapiro and Morgan Dawn, and is based on the television series *Due South*⁹. Shapiro is publicly known to use Final Cut Pro for her vidding, making it relatively easy to analyze this vid as a product of that program.

The pacing of the three minute, five second song, "Wonder of Birds" by The Innocence Mission, is faster than *All My Trials*' folk rhythm though both are in 4/4 time, and the cuts reflect that speed: the average clip length is three seconds, and each direct cut is timed to precisely match the beat, though they occur on more than just the first. Within a clip, movement is similarly synced to the music, especially character actions and reaction shots, which are often paired on the second and fourth beats. The clips vary in their reflection of the lyrics, for some appear chosen for literal accuracy – on the line, "we keep our heads above the water," the characters are shown emerging from a lake – and some for metaphor, as in the repeated line, "we will fly away," which is matched to various movements like the characters running and ascending a cliff. In contrast to *All My Trials*, facial shots are balanced with action, there are no

⁹ *Due South*. Writer and director vary. CBS. DVD. Platinum Disk, 2005.

clips of characters speaking, and objects suggesting flight, primarily a thrown dream-catcher, are used at key moments.

While *Wonder of Birds* also uses the same scene to begin and end the vid, that scene has been pared down to a single moving object, the dream catcher, with its literal reference to the its appearance in the main characters' first interaction and its metaphorical suggestion of wish fulfillment. The interim clips, however, are not only ordered to match the chronology of the series, but also match the verses and music while building on an emotional theme. Each verse contains progressively more action shots, and transitions from the parallels in these two characters' individual situations to their shared experiences. Scene recognition, and with it application of the original series' context, is made more difficult by the extremely short duration of the clips in *Wonder of Birds*, and thus the burden of the vid's meaning is on the continual shots of characters moving, gesturing, and interacting with each other physically, which evoke a state of being through emotive action. This vid demonstrates that professional technology may lead to more complex and professional-looking vidding, with an increase in the number of clips, objects used to convey meaning when cuts are so frequent as to provide little connection between clips, and therewith a need to make vids intelligible to those without prior knowledge of the source.

Wonder of Birds does contain scenes and moments to which fans already have emotional ties, in large part because the vid is one that presents a narrative wherein the two male protagonists are in a relationship, and telling that story effectively without using scenes understood to have romantic subtext would be difficult, if not impossible. The influence of slash fandom – and 'slashy' ways of seeing – upon vidding as a form is significant, and will be dealt with in Chapter 3. However, Button's advice that in editing, "Each sequence will have its own dominant rhythm ... The individual scene's pace and rhythm will be further determined by the

needs of a key shot within the sequence," is made more complicated when applied to vids (42). For in distilling large segments of footage into a three-minute object, most vids are almost entirely composed of key shots determined by fans of the original or by the vidder, in her attempts to capture the most powerful clips for her story. In *Wonder of Birds*, clips are chosen and ordered according to multiple logics and frameworks, including the source narrative, what fans find significant, visually interesting and emotionally resonant moments, and what fits the song's tempo, meaning, and duration. This vid connects clips that are not chronologically or contextually related, at least on the surface, but makes its connections by juxtaposing representative moments that "distill[ed] the essence of ... the 'decisive moment'" in which something of meaning occurs (Murch 41). While second-generation vids mainly use characters' facial expressions and movements to guide editing, third-generation vids expand that category and apply practices of manipulation and alteration to the entire structure of meaning, creating vids reliant on the manipulation of equivalent objects that may be faces or dream catchers.

The final vid for examination is *New Frontier*, made by Here's Luck in January 2006, using source from the film *Serenity*¹⁰, and set to "New Frontier" by the band "Benefits of Being Paranoid." The song is in 4/4 time but has three distinct different tempos to match the verses, chorus, and bridge, and the vid's clips speed up or slow down to match the song, while cuts are matched to various elements of the song, including the lyrics, guitar, drums, and time signature. The longest vid of the three I discuss here, at three minutes and twenty-seven seconds, *New Frontier* has a few extended clips of three to five seconds, especially during the song's intro and bridge, but a vast majority are one or two seconds long, and the occasional layering of images compresses their duration. While the vid's cuts are usually direct until the fade to black at the

¹⁰ *Serenity*. Dir. Joss Whedon. DVD. Universal Studios Home Entertainment, 2005.

song's end, clips from different times and scenes in the story are consistently intercut to illustrate connections both metaphorical and literal. The vid opens with shots of things in motion, including a planet, a wind generator, and a ship, which establish a large and inclusive scope. Only two of the first seven shots are of characters, the first in extreme close-up and the second from behind, suggesting that objects, machines, and people are equally important. Overall, *New Frontier* has a structure that relies on physical elements, by focusing on objects in motion to imply the situation of the vid's main characters, which are similarly captured in action or situated within a specific place.

The structure of *New Frontier* is relatively linear and relies on the timeline of events within the film, but nonlinear images are layered and spliced into scenes with such consistency that the vid appears to be as concerned with the nature of existing in the world of Serenity as in its story. Fewer key moments recognizable to fans are used, except to tenuously anchor the vid to the original narrative, and are far outweighed by clips of objects on television screens, ships in space, doorways, power generators, and guns. *New Frontier* contains far more instances of source alteration than the previous vids, in order to aid in matching clips to the music and the characters of River and Mal. During the bridge, at least fifteen separate shots are layered sequentially over River's face to convey secrets images in her mind, and the computer image of Mal's criminal record is shown at least four times within the vid, each time zooming in on the message that he was a volunteer in the past war. Along with cutting out extraneous frames in a scene to show the important action in a shorter time, shots of a spaceship and a fleet zoom closer to the viewer in pulses that match percussion sequences, and relatively static clips of characters' faces are often sped up or slowed down slightly so that each gesture matches a beat. This

condensation of extended clips into key images is a form of sampling, and a technique relatively new to vids; I consider its meaning at more length in Chapter 3.

Clips are placed into sequences due to similar motion, often in connection to the actions of the characters River or Mal: for example, planets, the camera, Mal's gun clip and River rotate clockwise in sequence; River drops her robe before an advertisement is broken down into descending layers of computer code; Mal walks through a doorway whose shape resembles that of a subsequent computer screen and generator; and a ship spirals through the atmosphere as River slays enemies in a circular backbend. *New Frontier* shows a correspondence between the logic of individual action and that of artificial and technological processes, and while it attempts to show connections between characters and the meaning of the film, as the other vids examined have, it relies on objects in motion to make metaphorical connections not evident in the original. Thus, this vid is more connected to the source footage in its extrapolation of theme and message than in its structure and context; viewers unfamiliar with the film or the television series that preceded *Serenity* are likely to understand the vid as commentary on violence, the nature of humanity, and the dangerous pleasures of relying on objects.

Unlike *All My Trials*, which relies on context and character's faces to establish narrative context and thus meaning, or *Wonder of Birds*, whose structure is organized by consistent physical action, *New Frontier* conveys its meaning through the movement and juxtaposition of objects. This shift suggests a reconception of vidding as no longer based entirely on people thinking, feeling, and saying things, but instead on fragmentary objects which structure the text and convey new meanings. The reliance on characters and their figural or gestural movement in third-generation vidding is balanced by the inclusion of scenic, camera, and object movement; this tendency to assign equal use and meaning to different types of movement, as well as objects,

suggests an expansion of style and genre. While context-based vids like *All My Trials* are being produced today, along with vids like *Wonder of Birds* that focus on the situation of the character's world or state of being, a third category is appearing: the metaphorical and fragmentary vid, more evocative than literal, whose message is more inclusive while being less tangible or articulable. Once objects are understood as being equivalent to effects, facial shots, and key moments in both importance and potential meaning, the technical and conceptual effects of nonlinear editing programs on vidding can begin to be understood. Further, expanding the categories of 'object' and 'meaning' confirm that the practice of vidding is an essentially contrarian one, in which the vidder finds evidence of a subtextual or variant meaning and uses her vid to prove (or confirm) its validity. The beloved source text must be understood as and broken down into pieces, or threads, so that it may be recombined to satisfy the fannish desire awakened by the original.

Fundamentally, vidding *is* editing, in both practice and concept: extraneous details, 'bad' frames or scenes, and any source material that does not fit with the developing and evolving vid can be removed, leaving behind a pieced-together and distilled medial object. When vidding in a nonlinear digital editor such as Final Cut Pro, to return to the metaphor of pieces, each clip becomes its own singular digital bit, equivalent in meaning and alterability. Technological innovation does not guarantee a kind of deterministic progress, but in the case of nonlinear editing programs, newly available technology has effected a transformation in what objects can be envisioned and how they can be made. Third-generation vidding, in which narratives are broken down into fragments and reassembled, appears to rely less on its sources for connective tissue, and fractures the integrity of the original image as the new object reinterprets the given story. Increasingly, vids are demonstrating an aesthetic of shorthand, in which objects infer

meaning, pieces refer to narratives now disordered in time and space, and linear, chronological media are recombined into segments of data whose intelligibility depends as much on placement and recomposition as on original context.

CHAPTER 3 NARRATIVE RECOMBINATION AND STRUCTURES OF MEANING: THE VID AS OBJECT OF DESIRE

Having considered the vid as a new media object, the process of its making, and effects of changing technologies on its creation, I now turn to its operations as an art object, primarily the nature of its structure and narrative. Before beginning such an analysis, however, it must be noted that my goal is not prescriptive: this will neither be an ontology of the vid, nor a summary of its potential forms and characteristics. Given their ephemeral character, the informality of their distribution methods, and their dependence on specific technologies and conditions of playback, vids are often difficult for the contemporary scholar to access. Further, genres such as constructed reality or alternate universe vids require extensive knowledge of and reference to source material, and thus are beyond the scope of this study. The five vids I will investigate in this paper may not be representative of vidding's history, what most vids look like, what qualities are evident in a 'good' or 'artistic' vid, or even where the art is (or should be) going. They are, however, representative of elements that I find important, even essential, to recent innovations of the form, and their exemplarity is founded both on the questions this paper asks, and on the interests of its author.¹¹

The vid is an artistic object – the product of an art form and a self-contained thing – simultaneously deconstructed, reinterpreted, and recombined. To understand its aesthetic

¹¹ To those that would question the lack of ethnography in this paper, I will note that I am concerned with formal, aesthetic, and medial issues, rather than with questions of who fans are. For example, while I do study some slash vids, and make some claims about the influence of slash and slash readings of texts upon vidding, this analysis avoids asking, "But why do they make vids?" except in the most general and theoretical of ways. My conclusions about what desires the vid and the practice of vidding reveal are not a diagnosis of individuals or of fandom, and as such attempt to be free from the value judgments that viewing the community as an homogenous whole often prompts. Additionally, this study is meant to intercede in a discussion most often concerned with fanfiction, often to the detriment of other types of fan creation. No one since Jenkins, for example, has published significantly on vids. Such attention has been paid to the spectacle of slash fiction and its creators that it often appears to foreclose the possibility of any meaningful conclusions about fannish production itself; my focus on vidding is an attempt to expand the field of examination so that other art forms can be studied without constant recourse to work that only considers fanfiction.

principles, then, it follows to first consider vidding's practices of de- and recomposition. The vid can be understood in terms of a structuralist project, an Oulipian constrained text, a montage, a (re)combinatorial narrative and a new media composite, but all of these definitions, once applied, are in important respects insufficient to explain the complexity of vidding, or of the vid itself. Each of these terms both under-describes and over-defines the scope of what vids are. What is most provocative about the vid is that it is not, in fact, a primarily narrative text, on the level of structure or on the level of meaning.

The Vid's Connections to New and Old Media: Composite and Montage

Lev Manovich notes a movement in new media to an aesthetic of compositing, which "can be understood as a counterpart to montage aesthetics. Montage aims to create visual, stylistic, semantic, and emotional dissonance between different elements. In contrast, compositing aims to blend them into a seamless whole, a single gestalt" (Manovich 144). A fundamental element of the composite, he asserts, is its seamlessness:

Once all the elements are ready, they are composited together into a single object; that is, they are fitted together and adjusted in such a way that their separate identities become invisible. The fact that they come from diverse sources and were created by different people at different times is hidden. The result is a single seamless image, sound, space, or scene (136).

The vid, however, diverges from the composite model on multiple levels. First, though a vid may appear *optically* seamless as it smoothly transitions from shot to shot, and it is certainly meant to be a complete and interconnected whole, rather than a simple collection of images or scenes, structural fragmentation will be perceptible even to a viewer who has no context for understanding its composition. Characters have clearly changed clothes, hairstyles, and have even aged between successive shots, suggesting that these moments represent different times and places and that their relationship is not chronological. Second, a viewer who is aware of the original source will recognize that its diegetic continuity has been displaced and reformed. For

example, a scene of a budding relationship will be followed by one that takes place years later with different partners, and often entire plots and characters disappear from this retelling of the show. Significantly, objects and settings that barely registered to the viewer are suddenly given metaphorical importance, and the vocal narrative accompanying – and explaining – these images has disappeared.

It must be granted that Manovich's understanding of the composite is based on a kind of mimetic form, the realm of CGI and special effects, which attempt to provide the audience with a credible realism in a universe from moment to moment. If we apply his understanding of digital alteration and seamlessness to the realm of narrative, however, the vid's disruption of logical progression flies in the face of Manovich's claim that compositing is based on an aesthetic "characterized by smoothness and continuity. Elements are now blended together, and boundaries erased rather than emphasized" (142). While vids do not usually emphasize the boundaries between scenes, episodes, seasons, or even source material, they begin with the dismemberment of the original narrative by stripping out half of the medium and rescored it to a song. This involves recutting images to match the song's rhythm, lyrical content, progression, instrumentation, and duration. The viewer of a vid cannot expect to see a whole narrative, given the very definition of the form as composed of bits and pieces, rescored and filtered through a particular interpretation that must be understood as fundamentally unrealistic, unless all fans are to be considered delusionally incapable of distinguishing between original and appropriation.

Moreover, to return to the theme of what has been excised, the vid's relationship to the original source is in many ways defined by the vidder's selection. The vid is about what a viewer loves in a show – though as I will later show, this love is not uncomplicated by frustration and dissatisfaction – and consequently, what is cut out is not merely extraneous, unnecessary, or

unusable, but what the viewer dislikes. Thus the practical and aesthetic foundation of a vid *is* its seams, which are, fundamentally, incompletely sutured. Were the show in its original format to contain only things the vidder loves, making a vid would be an unnecessary project—and, along the same lines, were the show to develop the characters, narratives, relationships, etc. in line with the vidder's desires, as will be examined later on, there would be no need for vidding's process of selection, recombination, and reinterpretation.

To return to the physical world created by the vid, when Manovich considers compositing in terms of "the cinema of special effects," he assumes that the intent is the addition of newly-created effects and the appearance of reality, "usually through the simulation of a traditional film set; that is, it looks like something that took place in real physical space and was filmed by a real film camera" (137). While this is an accurate description of compositing, it appears in several respects irrelevant to vids, which smash together time, space, and place without the intent of presenting a 'real' world that adheres to a logic of sequence, causality, or even perception. Shots themselves are often altered, with color, motion, superimposed images, slowing-down or speeding up of action, etc., added until they no longer resemble whatever reality was being originally created by the producers of the show. And, as previously described, whatever effects vidders add to their source, they also strip out the sound that is integral to the establishment of reality, from dialogue to sound effects. Vidders, then, are quite clearly not attempting to create a seamless composite, not least because such an object would not retain any traces of its origin. The 'real' world of vids is primarily that of the source, with a particular vid offering a revelation about its nature, but only temporarily threatening to destabilize its visual and narrative structure.

The origin of a vid is not merely a starting place or an inspiration for creating a virtual world that appears original – vids are necessarily influenced by structural elements of their

source, from color and lighting to narrative structure and message, for one thing. Instead, it is the fictional world that they respond to when creating their own object, which is always made possible by the existence of that source, with all its potential and flaws. In their continual negotiation with what they have been given, vidders must consider each aspect of their already-constructed text in order to further de- and re-construct it, thereby elaborating its artifice with an even more artificial reinterpretation.

Despite their computer-generated nature and the optical seamlessness of selected images and their recombination, vids retain more of the aesthetics of montage than may be expected of a new media art form. When a vidder places nonsequential shots next to each other, or layers multiple images into a single frame, she is utilizing the "two basic techniques" of montage by combining separate realities into a single time or space (Manovich 148). Yet that fact alone is not enough to reduce the aesthetics of vidding to those of montage.

If we consider that the incongruities of the vid's fragments at the formal level also apply at the semiotic level, then the placing of disparate shots together for the purpose of claiming a connection between them appears to be an example of Eisenstein's original conception of montage, which "*is not an idea composed of successive shots stuck together but an idea that DERIVES from the collision between two shots that are independent of one another*" (26). This definition allows us to consider that the vidder does not only place images or scenes next to each other because they fit the song's lyrics, or because they connect on a visual level, but also because such association, here, implies a subsequent connection. If montage on its most basic level is "Collision. Conflict between two neighboring fragments" that "gives rise to an idea," and the chosen arrangement or "*series*" of fragments is not correct but only one possible option, then we have an initial model for understanding how the vidder's recombination of shots gives rise to

a new understanding or interpretation of the source. (Eisenstein 19, italics original) This also allows for the possibility of multiple connections and reinterpretations of the same source material in different vids, and locates the weight of the vid's meaning in the act of placing together, rather than simply in the recalling of original events.

Yet what exactly does Eisenstein mean by 'independent,' or 'neighboring'? His theory of montage applies to original films, and relies on a belief in the ideological power of connecting images that were not necessarily *meant* to go together as consequential parts of the same narrative, and hence had no original relationship. In *Eden*, a 2006 vid by Corn_Child set to the 2003 film *Peter Pan*¹², for example, each chosen shot not only belongs to the original film, but also to the narrative thread of the vid, which is also key to the text—that of Peter and Wendy's developing relationship. While this theory does support the vidding practice of putting disparate shots together, it does not allow for the method often behind it, which is to demonstrate evidence of connections made by the vidder that are not visible in the original: vids insist on connections between images that are not in conflict; they are in fact the resolution of a conflict that has been generated because they do not correspond in the source material. The vidder discovers a relationship between such scenes either prior to the vid or during its making, and connects them in order to make the pre-derived meaning evident.

What appears to be an example of montage instead becomes a kind of post-montage via an additional stage of mediation, suturing bits of a single thread – one more or less evident in the original narrative – according to beliefs about that thread. Though the vidder and the viewer may be consistently aware that the vid's connections are ineptly sutured for the purpose of creating an effect, drawn together to cover gaps in space, time, and narrative, those same gaps are evident

¹² *Peter Pan*. Dir. P.J. Hogan. Universal Pictures, 2003.

not in the final product itself, but in the creation and reception processes of encountering, struggling with, and compensating for them. The dissonance between original and adaptation does not disappear, but is only temporarily hidden through a joining and reordering of images and, most importantly, through the imposition of a song's framework onto these shots.

For the vid to be understood as a discrete object in the terms of its own logic, it must possess ordering principles sufficient to replace the absent context of its source—though that context is never truly missing, as will become clear. As noted by Manovich, Eisenstein developed a number of ordering principles for film, which were primarily concerned with time, and with the advent of sound, he "extended these principles to handle what, in computer language, can be called 'synchronization' of visual and audio tracks" (156). Scholars of early animation have emphasized the importance of synchronization of music, sound effects, and visual elements in establishing a diegetic logic that often compensated for a lack of plot or narrative, a crucial principle for a vid, and some of Eisenstein's methods of montage reflect a similar approach. Set to songs of varying time signatures, percussive tracks, and lyrical content, all of which structure the selection, duration, and placement of shots, methods like "metric montage, which uses absolute lengths of shots to establish a 'beat,' and rhythmic montage, which is based on pattern[s] of movement within the shots" are consistently visible in vids (Manovich 156-7). Timing and synchronization, however, are not the only significant ordering principles in vids, as is evident in *The Boy Was A Puppet*, a 2005 vid by Fabella scored to the Rob Thomas song "All That I Am".

While this vid uses shot length and diegetic movement to great effect, it also makes metaphorical, contextual, lyrical, and musical connections that go beyond Eisenstein's ideological montage and its proposal of a counter-narrative. Rather than revealing a social truth

through sequenced images, vids rely on techniques that are in effect constraints to produce a personal revelation that the vidder determines is obscured by the canonical source. *The Boy Was A Puppet*, which uses as its source the four *Harry Potter*¹³ films released as of 2005, examines the titular character and his position in the wizarding world through an elaborate associative chain. In this vid as in others, constraints make, rather than inhibit, meaning: given a limited amount of source footage, three different directors, and aging child actors, all of which would constrain a more linear and context-based vid, the vidder anchors hers in objects that work both metaphorically and literally to suggest a dangerous environment and a populace in peril, whose only hope is a young man destined to battle evil.

Rather than following the narrative progression of the four films, *The Boy Was A Puppet* circles around objects that are significant to the films, and that symbolize Harry Potter's condition. Though the vid focuses specifically on the fourth movie as its most consistent "present," it points backward to establish portents and associations, as well as toward an irrevocable future, especially given the knowledge that readers have of what happens to Harry in the fifth and sixth books. The layers of context that create a vid are especially visible here, given that the viewer must draw on her knowledge of all four then-current films, six books, the differences in their interpretations of common events, *and* on fannish conjecture about the story's end. *The Boy Was A Puppet* traces a particular take on Harry's mission that relies on these layers in order to present a likely meaning, one that can only be confirmed retroactively, at the end of the series. The use of evocative objects also adds a level of complexity to what could be perceived as heavy-handed lyrics, such as "I breathe so you breathe/let me stand so you'll

¹³ Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone. Dir. Chris Columbus. 1492 Pictures and Warner Bros., 2001. Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets. Dir. Chris Columbus. 1492 Pictures and Warner Bros., 2002. Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban. Dir. Alfonso Cuarón. Warner Bros., 2004. Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire. Dir. Mike Newell. Warner Bros., 2005.

stand/with all that I am" (Thomas "All That I Am"). While Fabella pairs those lyrics of the chorus with literal images of Harry fighting Lord Voldemort and then looking at pictures of his dead parents, or in the second chorus with clips of Harry struggling, followed by group shots of the wizarding world celebrating, she consistently relies on objects that work as transitions and connections. For example, Figures 1, 2, and 3 are from nearly-sequential clips that, through their sequential placement, argue for an ominous connection between these pairs of hands.

The vid begins with clips of a clock tower, Harry rubbing the scar that he received from Lord Voldemort as a child, and then returns to the inside of the clock tower, moving the vid inward in space and evoking a theme of time as destiny. Many clips have been tinted green to match the color of the killing curse that is central both to Harry's fame and destiny, representing his survival of it as a baby as well as an inevitable confrontation with Lord Voldemort that only one can survive, which fans know, since that information is revealed in the fifth book. The green tint flares in and out as another means of transition and connection, linking the scar to spells coming from Harry's wand.

After making a connection between the effects of spells and their performance, the vid returns to their effects in a quick succession of clips evoking danger and secrets: the vid cuts from a giant snake to a dragon, from a mysterious stone to a Dementor, from a statue to Lord Voldemort's rebirth, from blood on a dagger to Harry's pained face as the blood is taken. It is difficult to narrate *The Boy Was A Puppet* with any coherency because it is associative, and relies so heavily on the viewer's knowledge of the objects used. A Dementor, for example, is a monster that feeds on happy thoughts and steals human souls through a kiss; the existence of such creatures is important to the plot of the third book and to the vid's recurring theme of

danger, fear, and death, all of which expand outward from every event in Harry's life. Thus, *The Boy Was A Puppet's* use of objects works most effectively because its viewers can follow the associative chain, interpreting the images through the resonances of their connections. Alone, or without context, the chain of clips that moves from a sword to a dark mark, through crows; a



Figure 3-1. Harry touches his scar in a green-tinged clip. Image from *The Boy Was a Puppet*, by Fabella, 2005.



Figure 3-2. Dementor's hand follows Harry's. Image from *The Boy Was a Puppet*, by Fabella, 2005.



Figure 3-3. The hand of a dead Barty Crouch, Sr., completes the ominous parallels of hands and the work of Voldemort. Image from *The Boy Was a Puppet*, by Fabella, 2005.

memory; a crystal ball; the hands of humans, Lord Voldemort, and Dementors; Harry falling, flying, and swimming; finally to a burning newspaper, which ends the vid, is evocative, but does not synthesize into a larger statement on Harry's situation. The various constraints of *The Boy Was A Puppet*, then, from familiarity with original context to the suturing together of disparate clips, are crucial to its method of associative meaning-making.

Ordering Principles of the Vid

The connectedness of constraint and recombination are nowhere more evident than in the literary experiments of the group known as the Oulipo, the *Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle*.¹⁴ As noted by Warren F. Motte in his edited collection of Oulipean critical and poetic texts, the Oulipo focuses its research and work in two directions, first to rediscover old experiments in form, and second to elaborate new forms (1). Their work is informed by both analysis of early constrained narratives like the villanelle and the sonnet, as well as experimental synthesis of various structures, exploring new forms and structures defined as "potential literature" (Motte 2).

¹⁴ For a detailed history of the Oulipo's membership, origins, and guiding principles, see Motte 1986.

Members of the Oulipo contend that texts are always shaped by constraints, including those of language, poetic form, syntax, dialogue, and setting. Vidders must negotiate similar restrictive conditions, and their creation requires understanding the structure of a show before altering and elaborating on it.

Some examples of constraining and ordering principles are due to traditions in vidding, like the context of a vid's screening, which was originally in a communal convention setting but now occurs mainly on individual computer or television screens. Another is the program on which a vid is produced, which provides the technological possibilities for creation. A further layer of constraint is provided by the choice of television show or film upon which the vid is based, which has its own length, pacing, lighting, cinematography, and other elements that affect more than the usability of footage, such as characterization. For example, vidding a television show like *The West Wing*¹⁵ is nearly impossible – and this author only knows of one vid based on the show – because nearly every clip contains characters speaking; it's difficult to make a good vid with limited source footage, because much of the original is already unusable to a vidder who must consider the fan resistance to shots of what is often called 'talky face'.

As the form has developed, certain technical and formal parameters for vids have become rules (though not without their exceptions): titles including at least the vidder and vid's names are used as a framing device and claim of authorship; nearly all vids are restrained in content to images from the show being vidded,¹⁶ which requires negotiating with the limitations of that source; and technical, visual, and musical constraints offer a host of constraints that alone can be

¹⁵ *The West Wing*. Created by Aaron Sorkin. Writer and director vary. NBC. 1999-2006.

¹⁶ One genre that does not fit this rule is the multi-fandom vid, which often makes comparisons between different shows and characters for various purposes, including humor. Another is the crossover vid, which posits a relationship between characters from different shows, suturing together footage from both to suggest continuity. There has long been a taboo against including outside source in a single-fandom vid, and very few exist, though one is included in this study.

seen to define the form, following the Oulipian idea that an art form is defined in large part by the rules of what and how it must or must not be.¹⁷ A 2005 vid by Sisabet, *Icebound Stream*, breaks the constraint of only using clips from the original source, using its outside material to elaborate on and expand the thematic possibilities available in approximately eighty minutes of footage. The source is from two episodes of the television series *Due South*, "Victoria's Secret" parts one and two¹⁸, which recount a tale of tragic love. In short: the main character is Benton Fraser, a Mountie currently working with the Chicago police department, and the titular Victoria is a past love whom he jailed for a crime, reunites with, and is then betrayed by. *Icebound Stream* is scored to a song of the same title by Laura Viers, and contains footage from various documentaries of northern Canada and the North Pole; these images including polar bears, flying birds, avalanches, icebergs, and the Northern Lights, develop a theme of wildness that explains the desires behind Fraser's relationship with Victoria. Given such limited footage, it follows that the vid uses objects, repetition, and special effects like image overlays to develop connections, and that the outside source material serves as an additional thread to show the inner life of the main character.

Icebound Stream advances recursively, beginning with Fraser in the hospital and ending with the event that led to him being shot and needing surgery, and this movement of doubling-back and repeated motion occurs multiple times in the vid. The first two shots are of Fraser strapped to a gurney, connected with a fade to black, and the first clip of Victoria is repeated twice in the same structure. Further, the key object in the vid, a snow globe, appears numerous

¹⁷ "Perc's *La Disparation* is a novel about a disappearance, the disappearance of the *e*; it is thus both the story of what it recounts and the story of the constraint that creates that which is recounted" (Motte 12).

¹⁸ "Victoria's Secret Part One" and "Victoria's Secret Part Two". *Due South*. Writ. Phil Badard and Paul Haggis. Dir. Paul Haggis. CBS. 11 May 1995. DVD. Platinum Disk, 2005.

times, even after it is smashed. After the images of Fraser, the vid uses outside source to establish a location of snow, ocean, and wild isolation, which recur nearly every three clips to connect the small urban tragedy to a larger space that is both Fraser's origin and – the vid suggests – essential to who he is. *Icebound Stream* uses movement along with objects to connect clips, moving from revolving doors to turning bodies, and camera pans to birds flying. The most



Figure 3-4. The image of the polar bear is almost immediately paired with Victoria. Image from *Icebound Stream*, by Sisabet, 2005.



Figure 3-5. Victoria is similarly positioned to the polar bear in the clip that follows, making their connection stronger. Image from *Icebound Stream*, by Sisabet, 2005.

direct pairing of *due South* to the outside source is when a shot of a polar bear with blood on its face is followed with a clip of Victoria's face, as can be seen in Figures 4 and 5. This connection continues with a nearly-literal linking between two polar bears fighting, and Fraser and Victoria moving from struggling to kissing, always in violent ways.

Yet Sisabet also uses her outside source as a contrast to the TV narrative: the free movement of animals in the wild is juxtaposed to Fraser and Victoria in front of caged polar bears; the isolation of the North Pole is linked with Fraser and Victoria intimately connected in bed; and the breaking ice of glacial movement occurs just before the smashing of a snow globe. One particularly evocative image links Fraser in a single shot with the mystery and wonder of the aurora borealis, circumscribed by the shape of the snow globe [Fig.6].

Though the vid is fragmented, moves simultaneously in circular and linear ways, and uses the potentially humorous conceit of polar bears to symbolize the couple's relationship, *Icebound Stream* has a clear and intelligible progression, made possible through its highly circumscribed focus. No other characters appear in the vid, and the occasional framing of the snow globe over original source clips emphasizes the vidder's encapsulation of the series into two episodes, a

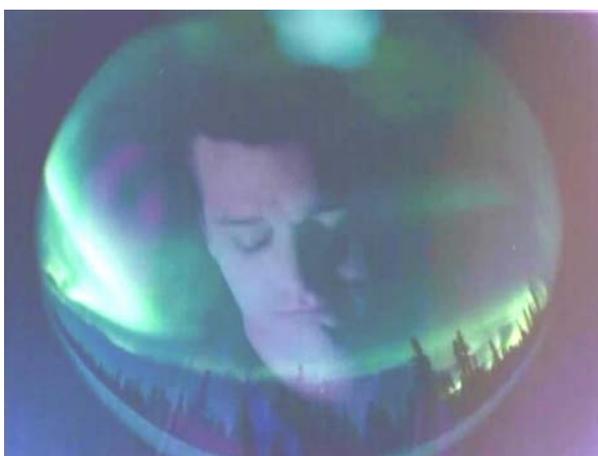


Figure 3-6. Fraser superimposed over the aurora borealis, evoking his Canadian home, within the shape of the snow globe. Image from *Icebound Stream*, by Sisabet, 2005.

single storyline, and a few key moments between Fraser and Victoria. In many ways, *Icebound Stream* can serve as the exception to the rule of rejecting outside source: without it, the vid would likely fail to make connections that would lead to new interpretations of the source, but the shots of animals and nature also make sense within the context of the show, given the importance of his origin to Fraser's character. The vid succeeds in interweaving primary and outside source to demonstrate the primal and wild desire, violent and conflicted as it is, that connects Fraser and Victoria, thereby making the constraint of using two episodes serve to justify breaking another, though it is that break itself that gives the vid its power.

Beyond the necessity of constraint, the Oulipean text can also be understood as one that requires a reader to decode and discover its layers. Conceived as "a system of ludic exchange between the author and reader," the reader of such a constrained narrative must be familiar with the form being used, or at least the intent behind using such a form, which implies that prior knowledge and allegiances are required to fully appreciate an Oulipean work (Motte 20). This expectation of an audience who understands the purpose of a text applies to vids as well, though in a way perhaps not anticipated by the Oulipo. If prior understanding of the original source is a constraint for the vid, it functions more as a given, an assumption made by a creator in her adaptation of a beloved original, in order to share her work with a receptive community of those who feel similarly.

This ordering principle is in one way no different than any art object inspired by a particular point of view, but in another way it is radically situated in a particular historical, communal, and exchange-based dynamic wherein the vidder, like her audience, participates in her fandom's circuit of knowledges and beliefs. Her ability to offer an insight into or make a claim about a particular source relies on being in such a position, which distinguishes vidding

from the Oulipian project: "The Oulipo of course does not seek to impose any study; it merely seeks to formulate problems and eventually to offer solutions that allow any and everybody to construct, letter by letter, word by word, a text. To create a structure – Oulipian act *par excellence* – is thus to propose an as yet undiscovered mode of organization for linguistic objects" (Marcel Bénabou trans. by Motte 46). The vidder, on the other hand, is familiar with the constraints of her form, and those imposed by her sources; moreover, though she may discover various new methods for conveying her version of the original, she already knows what meaning will result from her vid, for that meaning is what she understood in the first place and created the vid to convey.

Roland Barthes' description of the "structuralist activity" provides an initial gloss on how vidding allows vidders to find new meanings in the text, for its goal

is to reconstruct an 'object' in such a way as to manifest thereby the rules of functioning (the 'functions') of this object. Structure is therefore actually a *simulacrum* of the object, but a directed, *interested* simulacrum, since the imitated object makes something appear which remained invisible or, if one prefers, unintelligible in the natural object. (214-15, emphasis original)

The structuralist – or the vidder – breaks down an object or text in order to discover the rules of its composition, and reconstructs it in order to make its meaning, in terms of its internal logic, the nature of its working, "generally intelligible." The discovery of an object's meaning is the "something new" that "occurs" in the process of very literally working on it, like a chemical reaction that produces a byproduct that explains the reaction itself.

In this way the vidder makes rules, connections, and structures of an original text intelligible through a process of dissection and articulation: "To dissect the first object, the one which is given to the simulacrum-activity, is to find in it certain mobile fragments whose differential situation engenders a certain meaning; the fragment has no meaning in itself, but it is nonetheless such that the slightest variation wrought in its configuration produces a change in the

whole" (Barthes 216). Here Barthes emphasizes a logic of association, in which certain fragments when connected create meanings, and explains that the structuralist first limits her pool of potential fragments or units, and then gathers together the ones which suggest a meaning due to their affinity, or dissimilarity to other objects in the group of fragments (217). The connections to the practice of vidding, which on the simplest level is a practice of selection, are quite clear. However, Barthes's structuralist activity does not appear to leave room for the vidder who remakes her text according to rules, functions, and structures of her own art form – including the conventions of the vid, the rules of its reception, the beliefs of its audience, and the shared knowledge of those in the source fandom – rather than merely according to the internal logic of the original.

Mainstream, a 2007 vid by Charmax, scored to Thea Gilmore's song of the same title, moves beyond character study to consider what means to live in the world of the television show *Battlestar Galactica*¹⁹. The series tells the story of a ragged group of apocalypse survivors who alternately fight with and hide from their pursuers, the human-created Cylons, and Charmax's vid uses the pilot Starbuck as an entry point for a multifaceted examination of the series from the human perspective. The vid mirrors the structuralist activity in its breaking down and recombination of Starbuck's individual story into the role she plays as a pilot, and how her struggles are representative of the entire show. *Mainstream* sets up the situation of the fleet in the first verse, establishing those in power – the newly elected president of the human survivors and their general are identified during the line "the critics and the diplomats are living in a tin shack" – and Starbuck's role as a soldier, whose fighting in spacecraft and on the ground is only "turning on the light switch" (Gilmore, "Mainstream"). In the second and third verses, the vid isolates

¹⁹ *Battlestar Galactica*. Writer and director vary. Sci-Fi Channel. 2003-present.

Starbuck's individual experience as battle commander, connecting actions she takes to ones she orchestrates from afar with image masks and overlaid clips.

Charmax often uses the song's lyrical specificity to generate analogies rather than literal comparisons, but relies on the music to structure the vid's movement, most compellingly in the bridge. In that section of *Mainstream*, the focus shifts from Starbuck the individual to Starbuck the iconic pilot, and repeated clips of Starbuck jogging around the ship suggest a circling around the stereotype of a cigar-smoking, rebellious 'throttle-jockey' [Figs.8 and 9]. The chorus, with its repetition of "are you gonna swim the mainstream", is paired relentlessly with clips of flying,



Figure 3-7. Starbuck in the cockpit, a pilot in battle. Image from *Mainstream*, by Charmax, 2007.



Figure 3-8. Starbuck as an iconic pilot relaxing. Image from *Mainstream*, by Charmax, 2007.

space battles, and exploding ships, and the vid's use of motion as transition and focal point evokes the frenzy of battle, objects constantly acting in the world of the series ("Mainstream").

The most suggestive section of *Mainstream*, as an example of structuralist work, is its final section, which moves outward from the character of Starbuck and her role as a pilot to the situation of the pilots in *Battlestar Galactica*. The vid remains linked to original chronology until this verse, when it explodes into a near-slideshow of brief clips that confuse and overwhelm the viewer as the clips survey the extent of the series. Rather than charting a narrative from the series, Charmax uses the final verse to establish the small moments of daily life as a pilot – numerous salutes, the opening and closing of Starbuck's locker, her reflections over time, putting on and taking off the uniform – and then transitions to the trauma of it. For the first time, *Mainstream* uses clips of a group, highlighting pilots in training, drunk, celebrating, dying, and laid out for a military funeral [Figs. 10 and 11]. The song itself shifts to a chorus of voices chanting "if we grow up we're all going to be famous" to match these clips, and moves out from the individual to the position and the group that occupies it, with a recurring clip of Starbuck walking slowly as punctuation ("Mainstream"). As the vid moves out into space and space battles during the final instrumental section, the transition from character to situation is complete: *Mainstream* effectively hollows out the character of Starbuck, rather than meditating on it from a different position, in order to make her representative of the pilot's condition, as well as the condition of the series. Having expanded the parameters of the character vid, it seems fitting that *Mainstream* ends not with more portents of battle or a key moment in her story, but with a close-up on Starbuck's eyes looking at the camera, not just watching but looking *back* at the viewer from the situation, and world, that has now been revealed.

It follows, then, that the broken-down and recombined object is understood by Barthes as being transformed in some way: it appears in the world as the object it originally was but now understood, having "manifest[ed] a new category of the object," that of the newly functional, reproduced text with an additional, newly revealed meaning (218). This additional meaning was in some sense already there, since rearrangement and reselection do not magically bring forth new meanings, but it becomes intelligible in a way it was not before, and even meanings not apparent at first glance in a show are suddenly thrown into sharp relief when a vidder cuts out the extraneous source material and highlights certain moments of importance through selecting and reordering her chosen clips. As Henry Jenkins points out, the aesthetics of vidding rely on "the



Figure 3-9. Starbuck, in foreground, becomes the entry point for the vid's consideration of the pilot's role in the series. Image from *Mainstream*, by Charmax, 2007.



Figure 3-10. The shot of pilots celebrating is almost immediately followed by shots of their death. Image from *Mainstream*, by Charmax, 2007.

selection, inflection, juxtaposition, and recirculation of ready-made images and discourses ... emphasizing borrowing and recombination as much or more than original creation or artistic innovation," and aesthetic choices directly affect the possible meanings that can result from breaking down and reassembling shots (223-4). While Jenkins' claim about the lack of artistic innovation in vids is outdated, - his research was based on VCR vids that allowed for limited experimentation, image manipulation, or use of effects – his basic assertion about vid aesthetics holds up. What he does not fully consider, however, possibly because the VCR interface only allowed for limited synchronization, is what happens to the reconfigured object after it is stripped of an essential element, the original sound track, and subsequently reordered through the new context of a song.

Visual and Auditory Structures of Meaning: The Song and the Sample

To return to a constraint of the source material as yet unexamined, vids are scored to songs. The importance of this cannot be overstated. Songs are selected for their appropriateness in terms of the show and in terms of topic. For example, a song for a *Lord of the Rings*²⁰ vid should evoke the fantasy genre and perhaps be folk or folk-influenced, and a song chosen to tell the story of Tim's love for Dawn in *The Office*²¹ would need to match his point-of-view, the emotional tone of that story arc, and the narrative content of the show. Having removed the initial layer of verbal and auditory narrative, vids find a new ordering principle in the song, which explains, guides, interprets, and frames the collection of shots. As the process of vidding images is fundamentally recombinatorial, relying on discontinuity at the chronological, serial, and medial levels, music orders the vid by supplementing the source clips and their arrangement

²⁰ The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring, The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers, and The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King. Dir. Peter Jackson. New Line Cinema, 2001, 2002, and 2003.

²¹ *The Office*. Writ. Ricky Gervais and Steven Merchant. Dir. Ricky Gervais and Steven Merchant. BBC. DVD. BBC Video, 2003.

with a way of linking them thematically. The constraint of setting shots to a song also functions as a crucial organizing principle, which is nowhere more evident than in Sisabet's 2005 vid *Two Words*, scored to the Kanye West song of the same name.

Two Words attempts to compress five seasons of the television series *Angel*²² into a single vid, an ambitious and complex project made possible by the vidder's song choice. One of, if not the first vid to a rap song, *Two Words* moves chronologically through the original narrative in a highly structured fashion; the song "Two Words" is divided into sections, from verse and chorus to different rappers' parts, and it guides the organization, layout, point-of-view, and thereby the meaning of the vid. The intro by Mos Def, including lines like "there's only two places you end up / either dead or in jail / nowhere to go", establishes the world of *Angel*, as well as the dire situation of the urban city without its titular hero (West, "Two Words"). The first verse, also by Mos Def, has a four-part structure with a lyric, then the repeated "Everybody move", and Sisabet uses this verse to show each of the first four seasons, with a traumatic end-of-season change occurring on each repetition. The POV here is universal, and subsequently focuses in on Angel and his son [Figs. 11 and 12] to showcase their parallel journeys and experiences in the first chorus, which sets up the next verse by Kanye West, whose rap is tied to Angel's point of view in order to reveal his story. Each chorus thus serves as a transition: after West's rap, the chorus introduces season five and its various tragedies; the following verse by rapper Freeway explores that season in detail using a multi-person POV; and the final chorus layers significant clips and events of the series' end in order to reach the last shot of the series.

Given the project of *Two Words*, it follows that the vid's clips are extremely short, and most often moments that fans remember and find significant. Numerous transitions, overlays,

²² *Angel*. Created by Joss Whedon. Writer and director vary. WB. DVD. 20th Century Fox, 2003.

and parallel transitions are used to link together causes and effects, characters, and situations, all of which serve to make *Two Words* a visually arresting cascade of visuals. Yet Sisabet makes sense of *Angel* and the love she has for the show through using every element of the song, which



Figure 3-11. Shots of Connor, Angel's son, are intercut with those of his father to emphasize their similarity. Image from *Two Words*, by Sisabet, 2005.



Figure 3-12. Angel in a similar pose, action, and with similar framing, compressing story arcs into single images. Image from *Two Words*, by Sisabet, 2005.

guides the viewer through characters and storylines in a manner that appears almost natural. The vidder's ability to compress a series into a song, a story into a moment, is most evident in Sisabet's choice for opening and closing shots: the song begins and ends with the same note, and she matches one clip to that note. The clip is the last shot of Angel, wherein the character swings an axe, and implies that every event of the series, not simply the vid, happens in the duration of that swing [Fig.13]. *Two Words* works as a retrospective for the fan, a condensed memorial to a cancelled television show, and as an example of how necessary an appropriate song is to a successful vid.

Within most of mainstream narrative cinema, sound and image tracks are generally sutured in order to maintain the illusion of narrative and mimetic realism and coherent, synchronized action. The sounds and spoken words matched to a fight scene are intended to be understood as occurring simultaneously and at that moment, for example. Such a fight scene is a product of

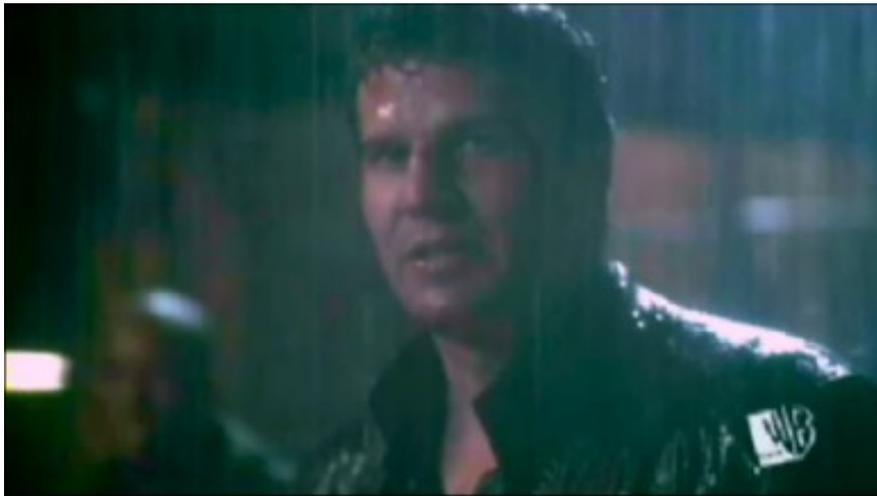


Figure 3-13. Angel right before the climactic axe swing, a movement that ends the series and frames the vid. Image from *Two Words*, by Sisabet, 2005.

editing, including sound recording and dubbing, and the textual continuity that vidders use as a starting point is of course the result of extensive ordering and reworking that creates an illusion of continuity. That the soundtrack is meant to evoke the mood of a scene only reinforces this continuity, but though the vid's song also establishes a mood, that song is imposed on the scene, not composed for it. Vids tether images from one context to a song from another, and yet this recombination is intended to be believable and without any disassociative rupture. Given that the majority of popular songs chosen for vids are both linear and recursive, with numerous verses that chart a narrative and a single chorus that repeats at regular intervals, interrupting progressive movement by circling back to an unchanging meditation, the song could easily overwhelm and over-constrain the forward progression of the vid's images. However, the convention of song choice does impose a consistent narrative structure onto fractured images, one that is chosen

precisely for its ability to reveal what the vidder suggests with the chosen and combined images in a method not so unlike the composition and selection of music for a film or television soundtrack.

The song informs, guides, and defines the visual content according to words and instruments, and the pairing of sound and image inextricably links them, allowing each to add a layer of meaning and context to the other. In this way, the images acquire new meanings by their association with the song and its lyrics, just as the song “gains new associations from its contact with the borrowed images ... Both song and images retain traces of their previous context(s) that are shaped by the fan artist and that shape the viewer’s experience” (Jenkins 225-6).

Consequently, after seeing a vid, the song may recall those images and vice-versa, such that their association in the viewer's mind forever influences both sources. However, despite the vidder's understanding of her visual source material as fragmented and infinitely alterable, the song continues to represent a whole and continuous object, which may explain both why vidders do not tend to alter their songs, other than editing them for length, as well as why the song works so well as a constraint. No matter how ambitious the vidder's goals, she never approaches the song with the same reconstructive impulses as she does her images, but instead uses the song as an emotional through-line *to and by which* images are chosen and placed.

As a superimposed formal structure, the song functions perfectly: it constrains how and when images can be used with its lyrics, instruments, length, time signature, and its simultaneously progressive and recursive narrative. Recall that in Chapter 2 I noted that the progression of a vid is usually from source material to song, and only then to a vid. Once the vidder' discovers a song that perfectly expresses the emotional position of a character, or the complexity of a relationship, for example, that affective connection made by the song inspires

the vid. It follows, then, that the song is somehow inextricable from the message the vidder is attempting to convey, and must affirm both the visual and the interpretive tracks followed by the viewer. If the song syncs the images together, providing an index or guide to the vid's narrative, the vid may not be rejecting the composite aesthetic as much as may first appear, since that rejection on the visual level is countered by the visual's integration with a newly-applied soundtrack. If the song doesn't work, the vid itself does not work, which suggests a need for consistency and continuity at the level of affect – whereby the song conveys the emotional meaning behind, or represented by, the images – that requires the song to be an unaltered, even unconsidered form.

Two of the most common techniques that vidders use to match image to sound are also the most important for conveying meaning: synchronization and sampling. In film editing, the beat of a shot can be considered "the primary moment at the heart of any shot The moment when crisis and the resultant decision to act occurs" (Button 192). Yet in vidding, the beat is not simply a visual and auditory moment that anchors each unit of a narrative, though those 'primary moments' are often those the vidder chooses to use, but is instead more literal and more complex. The beat of the song provides a guide for timing shots, cuts, and transitions, all of which can be categorized under edits. Vidders expand what is meant by the beat by using both the time signature of the song, cutting on the first and fourth beat of a 4/4 structure, for example, and all other elements used could be described, very generally, as those providing opportunities for transition, accentuation, and emphasis. Drum rolls, introductions of instruments, guitar solos, shifts between verse and chorus, even individual parts of a lyric are all points where – or perhaps when – vidders synchronize their edits. Just as a lyric like "make a wish" might need to be bracketed by an edit before and after it, the four seconds of silence afterward might be filled with

multiple images in quick succession and a jump cut leading into the chorus. Selecting, arranging, and manipulating clips are all guided by synchronization, which connect separate pieces both by cuts and by considerations of what takes place in the clips: the color of a clip, its lighting, perspective, characters or objects represented, duration, camera angles, and even context determine how it will be used.

While vidders fragment the original continuity of images presented in their source, they emphasize continuity between images by establishing a logic of connection between what the viewer hears and sees. Perhaps the most complex aspect of this synchronization is the matching of diegetic movement in the composite visual text to elements of the song. A character may kiss another just as the music reaches a crescendo, a fight may be slowed down or sped up so that each strike matches a cymbal crash, or a tear may fall just as the vocal line mentions crying; all of these examples demonstrate how the vid compensates for a lack of original sound with movement, proximity, gesture, facial expression, etc., and manages to convey the original context along with new connections made by the order of and relationship between clips.

I have chosen the term sampling because of how the effect hearkens back to its use in the fields of music and digital media production. In genres like hip-hop and dance music, sampling refers to the practice of reusing part of a sound recording, whether spoken, sung, or played, and mixing it into another audio track. This practice of cutting and pasting recontextualizes what is sampled by placing it into a relationship with the new materials into which it is layered, but retains specifics, like the method of recording, ambient sounds, and reverb, of the original. Vids mimic the musical method of sampling through breaking down important shots to their most quotable and significant fragments, often breaking down a key scene into a few short clips that are shown in order but not sequentially, and/or repeating a single shot multiple times throughout

the vid. In another, related use of the term, digital sampling involves either the conversion or compression of media files from higher to lower resolution, often with a loss of quality. While both methods decrease the size of the file, they also alter it at the bit level. That change may be indiscernible to the human eye or ear, but results in a loss of data necessary to fully mimic the original.

An effect relatively recent to vids clearly resembles digital conversion: for example, if a vidder wants to use a ten second scene of two characters running into each other's arms, she does not need the entire clip, only enough distinct moments of it to both convey the action taking place and remind viewers of their initial experience of watching the scene. The vidder will then cut the ten seconds down to three two second clips, of the characters seeing each other, running, and then embracing, and suture them together. The effect appears to be a momentary stuttering or speeding up of an event, and the vidder can match this sampling to musical cues so that a six second piano line organizes the disjointed clips. As Jenkins points out, "images in fan videos are shorthand for much larger segments ... encapsulating a complex narrative within a smaller number of highly iconographic shots," and thus these effects synchronize action as well as the narrative context to the song, serving to compress scenes to their necessary elements and convert their original logic to the vid's, by sampling and reordering moments significant to the fan (234). This conversion and compression are not final, however, which is crucial to the vid's reception: the audience recalls the original source while watching a vid, shifting between contexts, and therewith practices a distinctive dual temporality of viewing and interpretation.

Part of the Queue, a 2006 vid by Rowena that scores the TV series *Veronica Mars*²³ to an Oasis song of the same title, is a particularly relevant example of how vids use sampling,

²³ *Veronica Mars*. Created by Rob Thomas. Writer and director vary. UPN/The CW. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2005.

synchronization, and key moments in order to reinterpret the source material. The vid is primarily a character study that examines Logan Echolls, tormented and rebellious rich boy whose life falls apart during the show's first season, in the context of his father. Beginning with the opening shots, which capture the pair as they prepare to attend the funeral of Logan's mother, the vid links the two characters by emphasizing their parallel actions through juxtaposition. The vid initially focuses on Logan, though he and Aaron are paired in obvious ways from the beginning [Fig. 14], tracing a linear if not chronological path through the events of the series, and the song's various instrumental progressions are matched to constantly sampled, shortened, and interlaced clips.



Figure 3-14. Rowena focuses her comparison by moving from obvious connections, as when Logan [L] and Aaron are in the same frame, to subtle ones. Image from *Part of the Queue*, by Rowena, 2006.

For example, an early clip of Logan parking his car is chopped into many pieces sutured jerkily together, and overlaid with shots of his interactions in the car with other characters at different times, providing the viewer with a location and focus on his experience. The cuts are syncopated and emphasize the song's percussive rhythm, as Rowena transitions quickly between the song's various time signatures, slowing down on the verses and speeding up on the instrumental spaces between lyrics. *Part of the Queue's* use of sampling could appear excessive

if it didn't serve as a method of making meaning: not only does it often make motion in a single clip jerky and precisely timed to the instruments, as in a clip of Logan walking to a chair and sitting down in the first three beats of a 4/4 signature, but it underscores the song's message of alienation and tragedy, and the vid's suggestion that some bonds are inescapable.



Figure 3-15. Aaron, in a green-tinged flashback, stands over the dead body of Lilly Kane and holds her murder weapon. Image from *Part of the Queue*, by Rowena, 2006.



Figure 3-16. Rowena pairs Aaron's shot with Logan in a similar situation, next to a dead body and holding a potential murder weapon, thereby highlighting the connections between them. Image from *Part of the Queue*, by Rowena, 2006.

As the vid progresses, clips of Logan are increasingly paired with clips of his father Aaron performing similar actions: a shot of the Aaron kicking a his daughter's abusive boyfriend in the ribs is followed by Logan kicking a romantic rival in the face, and a brief instrumental sequence weaves together two separate instances of violence so as to suggest a correspondence between Aaron's abuse of his son and Logan's violent outbursts [Figs. 15 and 16]. Rowena layers these parallels in the bridge as counterpoint to an emphasis in the verses on Logan's desperate actions

to escape his father's influence, transforming a parallel dynamic into one that is more circular [Fig 17]. *Part of the Queue* is dizzying, full of one- or two-second clips that capture frantic motion and contradictory contexts, as if to make Logan's perception literal in the viewing of the vid. One effective edit synchronizes an extended crane shot of Logan kissing a girl to a feedback whine, the former moving away as the latter grows louder, expanding and moving outward simultaneously on the visual and auditory planes. The choruses themselves are overwhelmed with clips of circular movement rotating both clock- and counterclockwise as Logan appears to become his father and then diverges from Aaron, and the vid ends with a sequence of ominous mirrored clips of the pair. Rowena utilizes sampling and synchronization as techniques necessary



Figure 3-17. Rowena emphasizes the subtle connections between father and son by superimposing one onto another. Image from *Part of the Queue*, by Rowena, 2006.

to convey the message of her vid, rather than as special effects, suggesting a collision of father and son that necessarily transforms into a circular metaphor of generations performing inescapable patterns of behavior. Further, in pairing moments relevant to fans of Logan and *Veronica Mars* with actions by Aaron, the vid suggests connections and interpretations not visible in the original narrative.

Though some vids emphasize repetition and circular structures, most follow narrative-filmic conventions of progression, such as a movement from left to right, beginning to end, question to answer. A vid examining the relationship between Buffy and Angel may not simply reproduce the events as they happened, but it does begin with an interrogation of that relationship, and end with its results. Whether a vid recombines the source material in a relatively chronological manner or not, its arrangement of scenes follows a movement of progress, and results in a discourse that functions similarly to the story of the source, which appears to contradict the song's recursive nature and its wholly fragmented images. In a sense, the vid works on three separate but simultaneous structures of time; all three contribute to a chronology unique to the vid, and one that cannot escape the structure of the original narrative. While some forms of avant garde film and video work self-reflexively, engaging their content as a commentary from outside, fragmenting and reordering clips to raise theoretical or social questions about the nature of art, for example, vidding is usually not so abstracting of or removed from its sources. Instead, the vid remains tethered to its consumed narrative, immersed in a context in order to reinterpret its meaning from an internal space, constructed from a reliance on the show as a source of pleasure.

Rather than displacing the original text, the vid distills its source so that it represents some essence of the show. Despite what can be perceived to the uninitiated as illogical structure, however, vids obey a condition of causality that relies on the meaning fans have found in the moments they choose as their fragments. If, given the example of *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*²⁴, the vidder uses a clip of Angel losing his soul, it is connected temporally to the shot of Buffy killing him; if the vid is one about their relationship, moreover, those two scenes will almost

²⁴ *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Created by Joss Whedon. Writer and director vary. The WB/UPN. DVD. 20th Century Fox, 2002.

certainly be used, due to their importance to the relationship and in the fandom. Significant moments appear again and again in vids from the same fandom, though they are often edited down, manipulated, or evoked using events before or after, objects that represent the moment, or even a reaction shot separated from what caused it.

Causality in a vid is most often expressed through a rule of appearance or reference, whereby an evocative clip stands in for both a literal progression of time and narrative in the original, as well as for the associations fans have developed about their show. Most vids dealing with Buffy's character throughout the eponymous series include some consideration of the first season, usually her sense of betrayal and tragedy in the final episodes upon learning of a prophecy foretelling her death. Certain shots from that scene of discovery are used repeatedly in these vids, but their selection is not merely a function of how vids condense length into moments: to make a reference to that time, place, and narrative, a vid only needs to show two seconds of Buffy throwing books at her mentor in anger, or flinging her cross to the ground as she rejects her fated role as a Slayer.

As Jenkins points out, "One reason that so many of these shots reappear is that they evoke a particular interpretation of the original material" (Jenkins, "How To Watch A Fan-Vid"). While here he is explaining certain conventions of slash as well as vidding to people outside fandom, upon the semi-public circulation of a Kirk/Spock slash vid, Jenkins clearly emphasizes the importance of the viewing context: "Keep in mind that in many cases, these videos are watched by people who are also reading fan fiction and thus have come to understand the relationship between Kirk and Spock within the terms of the fan subgenre known as Slash" ("How To Watch A Fan-Vid"). To understand a vid on all its levels, then, a viewer must know how a vid functions, be familiar with the original show, and most importantly, either have access to or

participate in the fannish conversation about the show, which will expose the ways that the vid responds to its source. The reliance on these key moments, as well as the context they evoke from within the show and within the fandom, suggests that not only do they bear meaning necessary to the vid's logic, but that the source text never disappears from the vid. Instead, the vid negotiates the original narrative in an attempt to resolve a conflict in meaning.

The Vid as a Circuit of Desire

If the vid remains ever tethered to its original source by layered networks of context, association, and fan interpretation, its ability to create new meanings is directly related to the dynamic of the show's reception, and what that reveals about the practice of fannish creation. While fans have always been invested in their shows, and fannish criticism consistently involves explaining, interpreting, and evaluating their show at every level, the particular practice of slashing the original text has influenced vidding since its beginning. The first vids were slash vids,²⁵ and thus involved finding evidence for the claim that two characters were meant to be – if not already – together. As Jenkins points out in his analysis of a Kirk/Spock vid,

The construction of slash depends on reading certain looks and gestures exchanged amongst the characters as showing some hidden emotional truths and so song videos are often presented as visual evidence in support of a slash hypothesis about the series. Fans can point to the screen and say that you can see it in their eyes, these men really care about each other ("How To Watch A Fan-Vid").

The intent here is not to claim that slash vids are the most significant genre of the form. Instead, the goal in allying vidding as a whole with its slash origins is to demonstrate how vids utilize a slash aesthetic, which is also a fundamentally fannish one.

Finding evidence for a character's motivations and feelings in key moments, revealing hidden connections in the source narrative, as well as piecing together and repurposing a text to

²⁵ While the early years of vidding are quite murky, and need further study, fans and scholars generally agree that the first vids were Kirk/Spock slash vids.

make an argument about what that original actually intends to communicate to those who grasp its conjectured subtleties—these are all examples of slashing a text. A vid that reinterprets or reimagines a show, whether with the goal of asserting an ostensibly hidden male/male relationship or of revealing an also hidden facet of a character, is one that runs against the grain as it makes new meanings. Just as the show itself is a source of pleasure for the viewer, for vidders and their viewers, "the pleasure comes in putting words in the character's mouths and making the series represent subtexts it normally represses," thereby creating a new object that moves beyond the original in its attempts to make the show say more than it does (Jenkins 227-8). Vidding transforms a coherent, linear narrative into media objects whose meanings depend not just upon placement and original context, but also on the uncovering of subtextual threads found by fans and elaborated upon. These unintended meanings and invisible connections are revealed in the vid, which fixes what is perceived as wrong or missing in the original, and cuts out what is unnecessary to the fan's pleasure. As in other fan productions, the underlying desire is the fulfillment of a wish.

Since the vid is in this basic way a slashed text, a negotiation with a dismembered original narrative at the level of structure, it follows that most interesting elements of the vid, as a fragmented and reassembled object, are not the narrative ones. While Jenkins contends that fans comment on the original text, my interpretation imagines the fan's engagement with her source material as more active and more combative. Vids do not merely demonstrate a playing with desires both present and latent in the text, but renegotiate that text to fulfill desires that the vidder has anchored in the text according to an idiom of interpretation that is possibly hers alone. As famed film editor Walter Murch observes, "editing—even on a 'normal' film—is not so much a *putting together* as it is a *discovery of a path*," and the vidder discovers in her work a progression

from fragments to a whole, from dissatisfaction to satiation (3-4, emphasis original). The desire satisfied by the vid relies on the limitations of the original show and the promise to resolve them, in effect by reading the fan's desire back to her, which is a performative revelation. Whether the vid makes a claim about Fraser's true nature and the reason for his passion, as in *Icebound Stream* or one about the essence of *Angel*, as in *Two Words*, each vid speaks what the show itself cannot say, and even further, what the show truly means to say. It is fitting that no vid can ever fully prove the persuasive and performative claim that it makes – the desire for vids that endlessly retell the relationship of Buffy and Spike alone demonstrate how insufficient a single account or version of a story can be – as each vid traces the specific desire of its creator, and then contributes it to an ever-growing exchange of fannish consumption and re-production.

I feel I must stress again that this study does not attempt to chart specific desires of the real people who make and watch vids, but what vids as combinatorial objects drawing on prior fragments of experience represent, which, like the dream as understood by Freud, "*is the fulfilment [sic] of a wish*" (154, emphasis original). While not all vids insist on interpretations not supported by their sources, they excise what is unnecessary in order to foreground connections and revelations that move beyond what the original claims. In considering the dream content, Freud writes, "the material of the dream-thoughts ... is submitted to a process of compression, while at the same time displacements of intensity between its elements necessarily bring about a psychological transvaluation of the material", whether by the replacement of one element with another, the condensation of two discrete elements into one, or the visual and physical representation of an abstracted thought by another object (374). It is important to note that the transitions – or transformations – that Freud considers are threefold: first the desire stages itself

in the dream; second the subject retells the dream to the analyst; and finally the analyst interprets the dream in order to show the subject the desire that has hidden itself.

The vid's structure and ordering principles also follow some aspects of dream-logic: just as vidders combine seemingly disparate images in order to demonstrate their underlying connection, Freud suggests that "If in the course of a single day we have two or more experiences suitable for provoking a dream, the dream will make a combined reference to them as a single whole; *it is under a necessity to combine them into a unity*" (211). As the objects and conditions experienced in daily life possess a combinatorial logic that determines which, how, and in what relation they will appear in a dream, standing in for desire even as they obscure it, vidders use and reuse selected key moments for their metaphorical significance and contextual weight, and the use of one potent image often necessitates using another, whether the two are directly linked nor not. The invocation of love through a clip of a first kiss, for example, requires the addition of a clip demonstrating the tragic consequences of that love when one partner betrays the other, revealing a deterministic impulse behind both selection and placement. Freud uses the metaphor of a poetic pattern to illustrate how the dream work is constrained, in that the second line must not only rhyme with the first, but make an appropriate meaning that masks the necessity of choosing an appropriate ending word or rhythmic structure. In many ways, a vid's song choice works in this way, obliging the vidder to construct a transition in images from verse to chorus that appears not only natural but necessary for the vid's meaning, as well as of a piece with the concerns of cuts, effects, shot length, instrumentation, etc.

I do not suggest here that either the vid or the vidder requires a scholar/analyst to interpret the human desire expressed in the vid, but rather that the vid functions as its own interpretation of a desire expressed through the original source, structured according to the wish of the vidder

and for the satisfaction of that wish. The benefit of the expression of a wish, the interpretation of a desire and therewith temporary satisfaction, for the artist or for the community is difficult to discern, but viewing the practice of vidding through the lens of wish-fulfillment does shed some light on the circulation of desire in fan practices. For if vids were only collections of moments, highlights videos that reminded the viewer of her favorite scenes, there would be no need to remove the sound half of the medium and rescore it to a song. Additionally, if vids were only a statement of what the show is or does, a compressed expression of love, they would not be necessary at all—the show itself would be sufficient for fans. The vid functions, rather, as a repudiation as well an affirmation, a saying-no to the disappointment of what the show does not do, cannot do, what it does wrong, while it is a saying-yes to the new presence of a meaning that was absent until the fan discovered it.

Though it possesses a logic, an original context, a meaning, a progression, and even a kind of narrative, the essence of the vid is distinct from its narrative traits and operations. Instead, it signifies a narrative in its structure, refers back to a narrative in its inescapable relationship to the source, and it performs a reading of a narrative through the lens of a wish. Fundamentally, what is distinctive about the vid is what is *not* narrative about it. The vid's fragmented and recombined medial nature, in all its incompleteness, illustrates a dynamic of fannish desire far more complicated than a simple wish to retell a beloved story in a slightly different way. The combination of fannish love and frustration runs throughout the vid: a celebration of a repressed interpretation, found in the creator's desire, is entangled in a struggle with that repressed meaning that results in a reappropriation always dependent on the original. The vid affirms its expression of desire by repeating back to the viewer the vidder's desire, the wish fulfilled through the return of the repressed in a fragmented creation. Like the dream, the vid represents latent material

recovered through retelling, working backwards through the show's manifest narrative, but the meaning recovered in the vid is always an imperfectly sutured interpretation of desire.

The vid cannot overcome the familiar problem of retelling one's dream: even as one transforms the dream-images into words, the desire behind those images is further obscured or translated by the mundane objects and individuals cited to express it; the repressed remains coded in what is at hand, that original source, even as it's interpreted. But further: the interpretation itself would be flawed and thus unsatisfying if the desire were for an unproblematic and direct access to a seamless pleasure that required no activity from the fan. An essential element to the vid's working as an object *and* activity of wish-fulfillment is that it is a worked-upon, imperfectly-sutured thing; the pleasure is in the practice of segmentation, reordering, and reinterpretation; and this must be true for both the vidder and the fan viewer. As an expression of mastery of the material, a reworking of the source so that it conforms to the contours of the vidder's desire rather than simply the content – the revelation of a hidden meaning rather than merely believing in a truth – the vid suggests a structure of desire that relies more on play than certainty, on expanding possibilities rather than limiting them to a single point.

Like the musical tradition of theme and variation, in which composers and/or players select a known element and extend it through reinterpretation and recontextualization, often moving from one variation to another in a series, a vidder's desire revises and re-envision the source text and its constraints through the representation of fantasy. If "The motive forces of phantasies are unsatisfied wishes, and every single phantasy is the fulfilment of a wish, a correction of unsatisfying reality", the vid certainly qualifies, but it also does not claim to wholly fulfill that wish (Freud, "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming"). Instead, it is the work of vidding, the

practice of viewing and understanding, which temporarily satiates even as it reawakens the desire for endless further exchanges in a circuit of desire.

Despite its attempts at coherent structure and meaning, what is most distinctive about the vid is that which differentiates it from narrative forms like fan fiction—not the reordering of images or the addition of a song, but the specific evidence of gaps left behind. Though the vidder uses segmentation, recombination, and reinterpretation to discover the narrative enacted – and therewith satisfied – by her desire, the lack remains, because what is absent from the source cannot be included in its re-visioning. Whatever may be attempted, whatever compelling meanings can be found through connections, metaphors, transitions, or any manipulation of the image, the vid remains pieces reaching toward a necessarily ephemeral whole.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Lyndsay Brown was born in Roosevelt, Utah, and left as quickly as possible. Lyndsay received her B.A. in English from Whitman College in 2003, and has studied at the University of Florida for the past two years. She has been a Ph.D. candidate in English at the University of Florida since the fall of 2007. Her first publication, on queerness and heteronormativity in the comic *Y the Last Man*, showcases what some have called her generalist approach to scholarship, canvassing queer theory, children's literature, new media, fandom studies, psychoanalytic theory, and subcultural appropriative art for productive ideas. Lyndsay suspects that instead, she might just be easily distracted by shiny things. Along with expanding her conception of the "mashup aesthetic" into a dissertation project, Lyndsay is currently working to become a force for awesome in the world.