Staging Icons, Performing Storyworlds – From Mystery Play to Cosplay

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Abstract. One of the oldest complex forms of intermediality is the static live-performance adaptation of the iconographic qualities of well-known stories. Early examples of this phenomenon are the depictions of biblical scenes in the form of grand (and largely static) tableaux in medieval Mystery Plays, very popular until the emergence of the professional entertainment stage. The nineteenth century had its fascination with the *tableaux vivants* – not coincidentally during the time that photography was introduced – and the late twentieth century saw the beginning of the newest variety with cosplay, which has by now become a global cultural phenomenon. Cosplay, the activity of fans dressing up and posing in a visually recognizable way as characters from popular media franchises such as manga, anime, or TV series, developed from role-playing activities into its current, highly ritualized static form through its symbiosis with amateur photography. This paper wants to first analyse the underlying art form in its historical varieties from an intermedial perspective, and in connection with that, it will explore the deeper philosophical significance of this practice, looking particularly at the role of embodiment.

Keywords: performance, iconography, mystery plays, cosplay, embodiment.

What do the medieval Mystery Plays, the *tableaux vivants*, and the newly emerged global phenomenon of cosplay have in common with regards to intermediality? Or rather, in how far do they all share a comparable intermedial practice? One way to answer that question would be to say that they are all forms of the predominantly static live-performance adaptation of the iconographic qualities of well-known narrative existents. Or, in other words, all three of these practices take elements of a storyworld well-known to its audience – we will focus here mainly on characters – and then use a life performance to visualize these elements or characters by having them embodied through actors. This is a similarity in formal terms, but we will see that this is grounded in comparable philosophical

attitudes towards, or conceptions of storyworlds, so that the specific media use – and the change in media – becomes in itself a message.

The earliest example of this practice that will be considered here can be found in the theatrical modes used by medieval mystery plays. Mystery plays are biblical dramas that were staged all throughout Europe from the 13th to the later 16th century. They were the only form of dramatic entertainment at the time, and they were usually produced each year by a town and its different guilds on the occasion of special religious holidays, most importantly the feast day of Corpus Christi. The purpose of the mystery plays was to instruct the laity about the essential features of the Christian faith, but they were also very elaborate, highly spectacular, and logistically complicated affairs. They surely provided as much entertainment and aesthetic pleasure to their audience as they did divine instruction. There are very few contemporary pictures of pageant wagons. The closest analogies can be found in 16th-century Flemish paintings. In these images you can see nicely the care and effort that went into the creation of the wagons as well as the costumes that appeared on them.

The most common form was that of a cycle of a number of mini-dramas or pageants. The complete cycle of e.g. the Corpus Christi plays would be nothing less than a history of the universe from its creation all the way to Judgment Day, but the individual pageants would represent well-known episodes like the temptation of Eve, the building of the Ark, the annunciation, or, of course, the crucifixion. The most common staging practice used so-called pageant wagons that were each created and paid for by a different guild, on which the mini-dramas that constituted the cycle would be staged. These mobile stages would then be pulled through the city along a pre-determined route, with a number of fixed stops, or "stations." At each of these stations, the respective episode was then performed once, before the whole trek moved on. For the spectator, the effect was very much that the whole spectacle took on a processional quality. If the spectator remained stationary, the episodes would pass by him like a procession, which after all was one of the sources for these staging practices. And if the spectator moved around, the experience would be similar to watching a story unfold through a number of stained-glass windows in a church or the pages of a Book of Hours.[1] This quality is of prime importance here, not the text or even

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1   "One view sees the pageants as a picture sequence, the same in kind and intent as those of Books of Hours or stained-glass windows which feature the events of Incarnation or Passion frame by frame: a parallel emphasised by the framing effect of the pageant wagon. The overall effect is thus cumulative rather than integrated. There is much to be said for this view" (Twycross 1994, 45).

the rudimentarily enacted events, the acting or action, but rather the relative predominance of a tableau-like presentation, of relatively static life performances that were to a large extend understandable merely by looking at them. As Twycross writes, "spectacle can speak more strongly than words" (1994, 37).[2]

The target medium is in all three examples a life performance. In most cases, such a move from image (or, as we will see, iconic property) to stage representation is also a sequentialization, compartmentalizing the narrative events that are presented simultaneously into a temporal sequence. This is our usual intermedial perspective on these kinds of adaptations, stressing the difference between spatial and temporal media. But the stage – or, more abstractly, bodily performance – is both temporal and spatial. In fact, it adds very important aspects of spatiality: it adds three-dimensionality compared to images, and it adds physical presence to the aspect of time. A statue is also physically present, but this presence is (ideally) timeless, whereas a *living statue* – we all know these obnoxious performers from the pedestrian areas of the world – by emphasizing its ephemerality (it could start to move and "lose the pose" any second) makes the bodily presence much more immediate. It is this effect I am interested in, which is why I focus on performances that restrict sequentiality and movement over time. That is, I am not interested in acting – in the sense of actors making events happen – as in the aspect of representing through embodying. Representation and embodiment will therefore be the main focus.

After having endured almost unrivalled for centuries, the mystery plays vanish as theatrical practice in the course of the 16th century, the most important reasons for their demise being the introduction of the Reformation with its hostility to the creation of icons, and, especially in England, the emergence of a mimetic stage with the theatre companies of William Shakespeare and his contemporaries. The historically second use of this practice, the *tableau vivant*, will not be analyzed in any detail here, but it should at least be mentioned as a historical bridge to show that the general phenomenon did by no means end with the emergence of the modern stage.

A tableau vivant, or "living picture," is most commonly a life performance of a famous image from art history, or the creation of an image with allegorical or historical meaning. It is even more a-temporal than the *tableau*-like experience of the mystery plays, in that usually all kinds of movement or speech are excluded from the performance. It thus attempts to merge the media of the stage with those

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2   For detailed descriptions of the stage settings, stage effects, and costumes of medieval mystery plays, cf. Anderson 1963, 115–170.

of painting or photography. The 19th century was the heyday of this form, when even members of the royal family participated. And its appeal only rose with the emergence of photography. It was only through photography that the process of re-mediation came full circle, from image to performance and back to image. Around the turn of the 20th century, photography as well as the movies quickly shifted interest towards a capturing of movement and therefore marginalized the practice of the static *tableau vivant.* And yet, as I want to argue, the practice has returned to prominence with the end of the twentieth century and is on its way to becoming a world-wide cultural phenomenon in the twenty-first, and it does so through the activity usually described as "cosplay."

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

Cosplay is a truly intercultural phenomenon in which especially American and Japanese cultures interrelate in a complex and intricate way. Both cultures have developed their own source iconography. American fans dressing up as characters from the *Star Trek* series in the 1980s were the original inspiration for manga and anime cosplay in Japan, which has developed by now into a whole subculture (cf. Winge 2006, 66f.). On its way there, cosplay has also developed its own performative rituals.

Believers and Otaku: From Adoration to Moe

In order to better understand the possible connections between these examples, which seem to lie, culturally and historically speaking, as far apart as is possible, it will be helpful to address some core issues of intermediality, particularly in the sense of a media change through adaptation. What is the common ground, we might ask, the point of convergence of such intermediality from the point of

view of a literary or cultural scholar? What is that 'thing' that can be transported from one medium to another, that can be added to by a third, or be expressed simultaneously in all three? In my understanding, the most important answer to that question would be: the mental construct that we call a narrative storyworld and its existents. These of course do not have to be fictional, but the general claim would be here that we make sense of our world, of what we come to know about our world, by narrativizing it (e.g. Boyd 2009, 131), and therefore by mentally projecting storyworlds in which events take place and things exist. That is, we constantly construct storyworlds, and we relate all medial representations of existents (be it people, objects, or events) to the storyworlds that we construct. Thinking about storyworlds, and especially attitudes towards storyworlds, can therefore help us tremendously in understanding trans- or intermedial practices, just as these practices can enlighten us on different concepts of storyworlds and how people relate them to the actual world.

I will try to illustrate that rather abstract point by looking at the practices of "staging icons." Thus we can see that not only are there intriguing similarities in its different intermedial forms, but there are also connections in the underlying concepts. In its shortest form, my argument would run somewhat like this:

– the *source* from which the performative remediations take their material are narrative storyworlds

    – in the case of the mystery plays: the traditional stories of mythology as codified in biblical narrative[3]

    – or, in the case of cosplay, the consciously created narrative worlds of large story franchises like superheroes and manga

– the *motivation* for the remediation lies in the desire not only to make visible the source material in medial representations (as would be the case with illustration for example), but to embody it, to give it bodily presence in the actual world

– the *reason* for this motivation lies in a paradoxical attitude towards the storyworld, an attitude that understands the storyworld as not only having a symbolic or referential relation to the actual world, but as having its own ontological level of existence that is equal or even higher than that of the actual world.[4]

In the case of the medieval mystery plays, we call this attitude religious belief or adoration, the belief that stories about the transcendental, about angels,

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3   All mythologies and religions have used narrative and stories to communicate their ideas, their explanations of the origin and purpose of life. Thus, they have always created narrative worlds: stories of titans, gods, and the sons of gods.

4   It also means regarding the elements contained in a storyworld as if they were not reducible to the storyworld's concrete representation.

miracles, and the incarnation of God in human flesh refer to realities. In the case of cosplay, an important term that we might use is *moe.*

Moe is a Japanese slang word. It is highly controversial, both concerning its origin and its meaning, but it has also become central to discussions of Japan's pop culture.[5] The term and its use in Japan is bound up with debates about subcultures and concrete representational forms,[6] but my approach to the term is more abstract, since I am interested in it as a general relation between a recipient and a fictional existent. In this sense, *moe* is, negatively speaking, a confusion of categories: it means attaching kinds of or intensities of feeling to a fictional object that should be reserved for actual objects.[7] The most well-known example would be that of a person falling in love with a fictional character. The person that experiences *moe* therefore regards a fictional object as if it were real – not cognitively (he still knows the character is fictional, he is not yet Don Quijote), but emotionally. The main reason why this "should" be regarded as a mistake is a rational one: because there is no reason to desire something that does not exist.

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

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5   At the Japan Pavilion of the 9th Venice Biennale of Architecture in 2004, Morikawa Kaichirou placed the word "*moe*" alongside *wabi* and *sabi,* Japan's distinguished aesthetics (cf. Galbraith 2009). In a sense, moe is almost the opposite of the *wabi sabi* aesthetics: Where one designates the acceptance and celebration of imperfection in reality, *moe* means the unwillingness to accept that a perceived perfection is unattainable (because fictional).

6   E.g. with what characters are *moe* and what sub-categories exist.

7   "Takuro Morinaga believes *moe* is a much stronger sentiment, and is about being in love with an animation character (36). This is not just a strong penchant in the sense of being a fan, but love for and the need to be with the character as if it were human" (Sharp 2011, 66f).

I would therefore argue that the waning of religious belief does not eliminate the emotional relation that has brought forth the desire for embodiment of storyworlds. On the contrary, I would like to argue for the primacy of that relation and the resulting urge. Moe attitudes are also often addressed in quasi-religious terms, Galbraith for example talks about "the culture of idolizing fantasy characters."[8]

Representing Storyworlds

Now that we have looked at the motivation, let's take a closer look at the representational issues involved, the question of the material and its re-mediations. Our concern, as we have seen, is with the representation of characters from a narrative storyworld. These storyworlds can have their origin in a number of media, such as oral communication, written text, drawings or paintings, stained-glass windows, but also the stage or the screen itself. My main argument in terms of representation is concerned with the use of iconic properties: both mystery plays and cosplay establish concrete references to characters from narrative worlds that pre-exist the performance. The main purpose of the representational aspect of their performance is therefore recognizability: you have to "get" the performance for it to really work: *that* must be Jesus, and *that* must be Megaman. The interesting question for our purposes here is: when do the existents that make up the respective source material (need to) take on iconic properties?

As long as every single story creates its own storyworld, elements don't have to be memorable in the sense of being recognizable. Hemingway can call the protagonists of his short story *Hills like White Elephants* simply "the American and the girl" – thus making them virtually indistinguishable from millions of others – because they exist only in and for this one story, and more importantly, this one text. But as soon as characters *reoccur* in *several* stories, or when the same story is being told in different ways, maybe even through several different media (often without a concrete single source text), the reoccurring elements need distinctive attributes to make them recognizable. The easiest possibility to create recognizability is the use of proper names. Don't call your characters "the American and the girl," but rather Humbert Humbert, or Ulysses. Then you could simply say: let me tell you another story about Ulysses and his adventures, and everyone will know that it is *another*

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8   The use of "idol" in this context is not mere coincidence, since another important part of otaku culture are the music "idols," fabricated personas of very young female singers and dancers that are also the basis for fan obsessions.

story about the *same* Ulysses. And yet, readers will most likely still crave for more convincing proofs of the identity of the "new" with the "old" Ulysses. They might, for example, eagerly wait for the point where he proves his superior cunning, and therefore proves that he really is "the" Ulysses.

Moving back to our main examples, we can say that Christianity in theory is of course heavily text-based, but that only with the Reformation, with its strong emphasis on scripture (greatly helped by promoting vernacular translations), its emphasis on actual acquaintance with the source text, does this basis become available. In the medieval catholic context, the concrete text-base would not be readily available to the mass of people. And yet the same people would be very well acquainted with the respective storyworlds. They knew the stories and the characters without being able to refer to a single, concrete source. This is where the visual arts come in, creating a vast number of adaptations of the biblical stories in all available media that do not rely on language.[9] And in order to do that, they developed an elaborate iconography, that is, a number of visual signs such as specific colors, forms such as the halo, or objects that are all to be understood as directly referencing specific characters, events, or concepts.

This iconography is also of prime importance to the staging practice of the mystery plays. Certainly, they were never intended to be used as reading matter (cf. Davidson 1991, 66f. and Tydeman 1994, 1). As I tried to show, they were experienced much more like living images than as a modern stage performance. Within the dramatic framework of the medieval plays, there was only very little time to establish the numerous characters appearing, from St Joseph to Herod. Also, the lack of fixed seating made it doubtful that everyone would understand all the words. But then, of course, all the spectators already knew the different stories very well – the only precondition was that they recognized *which* story they were being presented with. The performances therefore had to draw on the vast pool of visual symbols that had developed throughout the history of Christian art in order to ease identification beyond the written word. Elaborate masks, iconic costumes, haloes, and the carrying of attributes are all important parts of the performances (cf. Carpenter and Twycross 2002, 191–232).

When we look to the storyworlds created for superhero comics or manga and anime franchises, we can immediately spot some interesting similarities. First of all, they are also modeled on the structure of mythological narratives: they

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9   In fact, both mystery plays and cosplay crucially restrict the use of spoken language and thereby further emphasize physical presence. Cosplayers almost always perform silently, and in the mystery plays, the silence of the suffering Christ is both a central performative and doctrinal aspect (cf. Aronson-Lehavi 2011, 87 and 120f).

project complex worlds filled with a large cast of characters that interact, but who also fill their individual and independent narrative arcs. They are concerned with origin stories as well as often eschatological stories (stories about the end of the world). They are told through multiple texts and often several media, by multiple authors that refer to a shared understanding of the storyworld. Indeed, the original understanding of "canon" is regularly applied to discussions of whether a concrete instantiation (like a movie adaptation or a new comic series) is in accordance with the original storyworld. On the other hand (and this is also a similarity with mythical narrative), they are often re-told with slight or substantial alterations ("let's tell the story of Superman's origin again!") to the point where the source text is lost (or at least loses its authority). The "canon" of the Superman story is not defined by its first telling, in the comic book *Action Comics No. 1* from 1938 (where Superman is not even able to fly).

Compared to the invented mythology of superhero narratives, or the almost infinite pantheon of manga and anime characters, Christian mythology seems almost reduced in its dramatis personae. The website *Anime Planet* is a database of anime and manga characters, and lists almost 50.000 different named characters.[10] And given this incredible number of recurring characters, who need to be highly recognizable in order to create fans or followers, it is hardly surprising that iconic properties play as big a role as they do. Talking in terms of media technology, it was only the printing technique of halftone color, popularized in the early decades of the 20th century, that enabled cheap reproduction of colours, and with it the establishment of the infinite storyworlds of superheroes. Even more so than symbols or specific forms, it is the iconic color schemes that make these characters so instantly recognizable. In manga, these color schemes routinely also include outrageous colors for the character's hair and their eyes, which true cosplayers are eager to imitate as well.

Beyond physical trappings such as color-coded costumes, masks' or props, mystery plays and cosplay use another aspect that is especially useful for their chosen medium, the life performance. The limited space of the medieval mobile stages did not allow for much realistic acting, but of course actors did not stand still. One thing they used to great iconic effect were gestures. These gestures, many of which were well established in Christian iconography, had to be distinct, visible, and recognizable, that is, characteristic (cf. Davidson 2001, 66–127 and Aronson-Lehavi 2011, 106–115). The same is true for most cosplay performances, where acting space and viewing time is limited. Like important religious figures, most manga and superhero characters also have their own specific and

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10   Cf. *http://www.anime-planet.com/* Last accessed 21. 02. 2014.

characteristic pose, and any cosplay performances usually includes these. This further emphasizes, especially in the Japanese context, the static nature of cosplay performance (cf. Winge 2006, 73).[11]

Performing Storyworlds

The most fascinating aspect of the practices of "staging icons" is of course that they are not only representational, but also performative: though, as we have seen, representational properties like colors, forms, or gestures are adapted from earlier occurrences in other media, all of these are re-mediated through the physical presence of the performer. In fact, the first thing that one can observe is that in all of these practices, there is a constant doubling of presence and representation: both the performers and the spectators are constantly and simultaneously aware of the bodily presence of the performer *and* of what he is representing.[12] In the context of both the mystery plays and cosplay, one element that stresses this doubleness is the fact that the same narrative character is embodied by several performers *at the same time*.[13] Within the complete mystery play cycle, multiple actors would perform in the same role. In York, for example, there were at least twenty-two

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11   The identity of the person of the performer and the visual, iconic trappings of the performance also highlights the craftsmanship involved (cf. Aronson-Lehavi 2011, 90), and this aspect has been and still is a very important aspect of the practice. Already in the medieval plays, the motivation of showing religious devotion became mixed with a strong element of civic pride and artistic showmanship (cf. Twycross 1994, 42). The guilds spent a lot of effort and money on their performances, and there was frequently a direct (and sometimes rather macabre) relation between their specific play and their trade. And today, no self-respecting cosplayer would dream of appearing at a convention in a ready-made costume, maybe ordered online. Thus, the act of creation is really and visibly inscribed in the performance.

12   The secularization of the embodiment of Christian mythology (from the clergy of liturgical drama to the citizen participation in the mystery plays) can be seen as a re-discovery of the stage's ability to enable a hybrid form that combines identificatory performance and the bodily representation of a fictional/ imaginary other that has its source in different narrative media. This hybridity is then – with the end of the mystery plays – continuously lessened in the main development of the stage as a medium for storytelling: here, the focus shifted away from participation to reception and installed an ever-widening gap between actors and spectators. The main stages of this development are the professionalization of theatre in the early modern period, the development of the indoor-theatre with its proscenium arch and curtains, and finally the move to the movie screen, which repeated the act of physical and temporal separation between performance and reception from the earlier move from oral to written storytelling. But, I would like to argue, this hybridity is conserved to a much larger extent in the practice that I am focusing on, especially in the *tableaux vivants* and in contemporary cosplay.

13   Aronson-Lehavi talks in this respect of "religious and iconic personae" as well as "iconic 'molds' that can be filled and refilled by different performers," 2001, 4f., cf. also 95–106.

actors employed for the role of Jesus Christ, who of course appears in a large number of individual pageants. Thus, all of these actors would be understood to embody and to signify Christ, but nobody would have *identified* them with him. They were all merely serving as images – icons – of the character. But, crucially they were also more than that, because they were also representing his main attribute, his main doctrinal function: by giving bodily presence to Jesus Christ, they also signified the incarnation, the word made flesh, in what we might call an intermedial performance of transubstantiation (cf. Stevens 1995, 38–39). We should remember here that the most important feast day for the staging of mystery plays was Corpus Christi, which has the main doctrinal purpose of celebrating the Real Presence of the body and blood of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist.

In the Christian context, the physical presence of the body of Christ is a central doctrinal element. Interestingly, this element was one of the ideas that were fought by Protestant theology – here, the presence of the text substitutes the presence of Christ, as can be seen in the re-interpretation of the doctrine of transubstantiation (cf. Beckwith 2001, 59ff.).[14] And suddenly, staging icons comes dangerously close to worshipping idols. Thus, in order not to commit a sacrilege, the body of Christ on the stage is substituted with the body of mere mortal man, and the story of a humanist, and realist renaissance theatre can begin.[15]

As we can see, in mystery play performance we have a simultaneity of the represented and the real body of the performer. And something of that medial and conceptual-philosophical doubling is also present in the practice of cosplay. The first obvious similarity is the multiplication of performers of the same character within one setting. At all cosplay conventions, you will notice the multiple presence of some of the more popular characters, like Spider Man or Sailor Moon.

When it comes to explaining cosplay as an individual activity, most common assumption for the relation between the cosplay performer and the represented

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14 In terms of media history, it is not least the introduction of printing that enabled the protestant emphasis on the concrete textual basis of Christianity (by making identical copies available), valuing the proper name over recognizable visual iconography.

15 But with it also the gradual "flattening" of the performance through limiting the audience's spatial position. To an extent, the performance on the Shakespearean stage was created for a fluid spectator position. Already the proscenium theatre depended on its staged illusion on a specific angle for the spectator's gaze. The *tableau vivant* creates its effect and performance around a single, specific point of view: there is, in theory, one point of view from which the performance perfectly imitates the (two-dimensional) presentation of the painting. Of course, part of the appeal here is the interplay between the point of perfect visual similarity and the fact that the three-dimensional bodily presence of the performance allows the viewer to change this point of view, to look "inside" or "around" the image.

character is identification. The arguments usually run like this: someone who dresses up as a fictional character wants to *be* that character (and not be him- or herself). I don't want to argue against the existence of such a motivation, but only that the phenomenon goes beyond that, that the cosplayers are not only trying to enter into the storyworld (by way of identification) but also to bring forth, to embody the storyworld in the actual world. These performances do not, as Erika Fischer-Lichte has argued for any performance, escape reality, but constitute it (cf. 2005, 27). To defend this claim, I want to look at the staging rituals of cosplay.[16] One interesting fact is that cosplay developed from activities that were closer to role-playing into its current, highly ritualized and predominantly static form only through its symbiosis with amateur photography. A cosplay performance is of course something that can and should be watched by spectators, but it really comes into its own through the ritual act of taking a picture. In cosplay, the spectator – in the form of the cosplay photographer – is not merely passive; his participatory and performative role becomes obvious. There is, especially in Japan, a very formalized ritual:

– the photographer approaches the cosplayer and asks for the permission to take a picture

– the cosplayer agrees and starts to strike a number of characteristic poses or gestures

– the photographer takes one or several image

– *both* participants thank each other (and I don't think this is just Japanese politeness, it is an acknowledgement that both have performed their function)

– in a more intimate context than the large conventions, the photographer will often later give prints or copies of the images to the cosplayer.

The photographer's presence points to the performer's awareness that what he or she engages in is a staged representation, made for someone to watch, and not a move into a different world or identity. We can see this also in the fact that the cosplayers themselves very often take pictures of each other. This is a very different emphasis from some of the more extreme forms of role-playing, such as live-action role-playing, or Renaissance fairs, where every element that is "out of

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16   Another argument would be the prominence of sculpture in manga/anime culture. Collectible and carefully crafted three-dimensional figurines of manga characters are one of the main sub-sections of Japanese pop-culture, with a mind-boggling number of such figurines being sold in large specialized department stores, showing the importance that three-dimensional presence (even besides life performance) has in such *moe* attitudes towards fictional characters. A fan who displays such figurines at his home also rather brings forth the characters' storyworld than entering it.

character" – such as a modern camera – would be regarded as an illusion-breaking intrusion. At the same time, the camera de-temporalizes the performances, by capturing and preserving the moment of perfect verisimilitude, very much comparable to turn-of-the-century *tableaux vivants*, and it finally returns it to a medium that is similar to the source's original.

As we have seen, the doubling of representation and embodiment in the Christian context serves a real theological purpose; the medial change effected by the performance reflects the reality of a religious belief, the move from word to flesh, from image to incarnation. But, as I have argued at the beginning, the psychological drive that underlies this belief is certainly older than Christianity and also works in completely different contexts, post- or non-Christian. Because in all of these cases, the characters and their bodies that form the source of the adaptation, are bodies that transcend mere physicality, are transcendental or magical bodies, hybrid hyperbodies that are a result of a mixed descent from Gods and humans, or of a God taking on human form, or a human acquiring superpowers through radioactivity or genetic mutation, or by merging with a mechanical body.

The French artist Antonin Artaud is most famous for his concept of the theatre of cruelty, a concept that is also closely connected to the kind of total theatre that is involved when actors really embody the suffering of Christ in a mystery play. In 1947, for a radio play entitled *Pour en finir avec le jugement de Dieu* (*To Have Done With the Judgment of God*), Artaud developed the further concept of the "body without organs:" "Man is sick because he is badly constructed. We must make up our minds to strip him bare in order to scrape off that animalcule that itches him mortally, god, and with god his organs. For you can tie me up if you wish, but there is nothing more useless than an organ. When you will have made him a body without organs, then you will have delivered him from all his automatic reactions and restored him to his true freedom" (1982, 79).

The *moe* character, one might argue, is just such a "body without organs" (cf. also Galbraith), precisely because its original body exists purely in the realm of the storyworld, a storyworld that on the one hand does not include God, and that can therefore liberate the character's body from all limitations. Most of the bodies chosen for cosplay are in fact hyper-bodies, super-powered or magic-driven bodies, or bodies that showcase the perfection of the Japanese ideal of *kawai* cuteness. Such powers as well as character traits are often visually written into these bodies – and it is a central paradox of these performances that they attempt to incarnate the hyperbody without ever being able (or even willing) to go beyond the limitations of the physical, of the performer's own body, which is after all

their chosen medium.[17] This is where they meet up with the mystery plays: as representations, they are adaptations of signs without a reducible source, and as performance, through their intermedial shift from visual sign to bodily presence, they paradoxically lament, contradict, and acknowledge the recognition that only in storyworlds can the body be really free.

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17   Manga, anime, and superhero comics render the hyperreality of their character's bodies through visual dynamics, a spatial energy that is yet contained in the outline. They are flat surfaces seemingly striving for three-dimensionality, for physical presence. Especially manga and anime have, in their development of a distinct visual style, emphasized the "flatness" of the image over the three-dimensional illusion of the central perspective. The reasons for this lie only partly in technical constrictions. But the "flat" style of depiction is often in strong contrast to the spatial conception of these characters, since these tend to emphasize three-dimensionality through the "bulginess" of their bodies, which is further enhanced by the frequent – and frequently oversized – appendages to them through hair, costumes, and accessories such as, most prominently, gigantic swords. Lara Croft is certainly not the only imaginary character whose bodily form defies the laws of gravity and anatomy, but it is these very challenges to and of three-dimensionality that cosplayers engage in with the most enthusiasm.