In *Cosplay: The Fictional Mode of Existence*, Frenchy Lunning examines the different aspects of this subculture dedicated to costuming and performance of fictional pop culture characters. Cosplay, although it originated as a term in 1983 in the Japanese magazine *My Anime*, has a much deeper history prior to its labeling as such, for which Lunning provides a detailed account of the several incidences of a disputed “first” cosplay, from William Fell’s Mr. Skygack of Mars in 1908 (p. 36) to Forrest Ackerman’s and Myrtle Douglas’s 1939 Worldcon costumes inspired by the movie *Things to Come* (p. 38). In this archival part of her work, Lunning reminds her readers that “cosplay” is not quite the same as “costuming,” which has much older roots. According to Lunning, while costuming has the goal of portraying a character for a performance, cosplay is about the fan’s experience of embodying and identifying with a character, one with which the fan entertains a special relationship. This relationship between cosplayer and character is in fact the central focus of Lunning’s book.

While the introduction and first chapter allow the reader to familiarize themselves with cosplay as both a practice and a community through Lunning’s extensive field and archival work, the rest of the book goes much deeper into the kind of social and psychological dynamics that go into the act and culture of cosplaying. In chapter 2, Lunning first defines cosplay as a sign of identity, one by which the cosplayer is both ostracized by mainstream culture as “a fan, a geek, or a nerd” (p. 63), and at the same time recognized by fellow *otaku* (“a fan of anime, manga, and the related constellation of fan work,” p. 72) as a part of the same culture. Thinking of identity, she uses Etienne Souriau’s work on modes of existence (“in how many different ways can one say that a being exists?,” p. 65) to ponder the multiple roles that the cosplayer comes to play between directing, costuming, acting, and consuming their own performance. As she uses Bruno Latour’s work to refine her analysis on cosplay as both a tool for self-exploration and deconstruction, Lunning paints a compelling picture of cosplaying (and masking) as
multiplying one’s modes of existence, only to achieve a higher mode of identity—one by which the cosplayer becomes “more than themselves” in order to “counteract the shame and sense of belittlement” (p. 93) that come with the rejection of a marginal identity, an experience which Lunning identifies as abjection, following Julia Kristeva’s nomenclature.

Chapter 3 delves deeper into the mechanics of abjection within the context of cosplay by examining the relationship between costume and actor. First, Lunning differentiates cosplay from costuming more generally by articulating cosplay’s specific set of narratives, as well as its portrayal of well-defined characters, already cemented in narratives. Lunning explains that cosplay allows self-discovery through portrayal of fictional characters, allowing the self to develop through an aspiration to embody a character’s traits. In portraying different characters, she argues, the cosplayer hopes to find an aspect of a true self that resolves the ambiguity of abjection. For the reader, chapter 3 is a deep dive into the sociology of cosplay as a marginalized practice, one that is deeply tied to a sense of belonging to a community—from the recognition of a shared kyara such as the Lolita to that of a shared experience of isolation due to harsher social conditions leading to the search for collectivity. Lunning also tackles the proximity between the practice of cosplay and one’s relationship to sexuality—one that has developed on the margin and thus in close proximity to queer and feminist movements, leading to a general acceptance of crossdressing or the fetishization of the characters portrayed.

As Lunning progresses through her last chapters, it becomes clear that the book does not stop at a mere ethnological description of the world of cosplay but intends to take a deep dive into the mechanics of identity and its construction. Her discussion of the persona allows the reader to think of the logics of mediation between the costumed self and the audience with each party perceiving the other through the specific filter of the persona. Lunning mobilizes Souriau’s notion of instauration in order to think of the role cosplay plays in the development of one’s identity. This notion becomes central to her argument, as she argues that it is the mask itself that allows for the cosplaying individual to deconstruct their identity traits, and therefore, to reveal the multiplicity of their identities. To maintain the illusion brought by the mask, the audience must show a degree of suspension of disbelief—what gaming studies would call a “lusory attitude,” that is, a willingness to lend oneself to the exercise, to play along with the proposed rules of the act. Lunning hints at a strong sense of a shared culture whose codes are readily available online in the form of popular culture. It is by this cultural literacy that the community can stand as an open, welcoming space for the abject individual. Community, then, acts as a “body without organs,” a concept borrowed from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, which Lunning mobilizes in the sense of the community sharing a transversal, collective body that ties together its otherwise heterogeneous elements (p. 147). In a collective context, “instauration” thus takes a different meaning, in which it is not solely a personal endeavor but one that is always already made within a network of beings—this is the meaning used by Latour, who sees instauration as an act of “maintaining oneself in existence” (p. 158).

One of the most valuable aspects of Lunning’s work is her ability to bring together complex theories of identity and ethnographic accounts of her field research together seamlessly, and in a way that allows the reader to approach her text at different levels of complexity. In a particularly compelling passage, Lunning develops the concept of instauration by mentioning the literal lust and love shown by cosplayers toward fictional characters. This attachment is unrequited by essence and seen as abject precisely because those emotions are projected onto fictional beings—beings we often dismiss precisely because they are fictional
and thus “incapable of truth” (p. 167). It is the sen-

sual connection between cosplayer and fictional
space, allowing them to embrace a fictional mode
of existence, that allows instauration to take place.
The cosplayer experiences “a sense of bodilessness
while simultaneously and paradoxically allowing
a sense of expanded embodiment” (p. 170): exist-
ing in fiction, the cosplayer becomes both a fic-
tional being themselves and transcends their ma-
teriality by allowing fiction to bleed onto it—ef-
fectively becoming a chimera of reality and fic-
tion, merged within one body, lent to the fiction.
Embodiment, however, is also expanded within
the “real” as desire itself is shared among the com-

munity: the body without organs feels as one, des-
pite being embodied individually.

The last pages of the book bring to the reader
new notions with which to think of identity and
being. Lunning introduces Souriau’s idea of
“surexistence,” an existence that contains all
modes of existence. This is precisely the kind of
image that Lunning has been showing us through
the description of the cosplay community: experi-
menting together, as one body without organs,
composed of many bodies lent to fictional charac-
ters, bodies which exist liminally between reality
and fiction, outside of the mainstream, yet togeth-
er in the abject. The book overall offers new ways
to think of identity in the context of both a com-

munity that shares common codes while being
otherwise extremely heterogeneous, but also of
how one may approach identity by circumventing
it: welcoming fictional modes of existence, rather
than being an attempt to escape from one’s self, is
in fact an effort to grow into a fuller self.

Lunning offers an insightful discussion of cos-
play with many images that allow the reader to
immerse themselves in the universe that Lunning
describes. Given the important visual component
of cosplay culture, these images are valuable both
for the reader who is ignorant of cosplay culture
and for those who are familiar with it—anchoring
the work, and therefore the reader, deeper into

the cultural literacy that ties together the cosplay-
ing community. More than an ethnographic work
on cosplay, Lunning’s work brings value to the
field of media studies at large by questioning the
dynamics of identity regarding fiction, within the
context of a fandom community. As Lunning un-
derlines, existing in the twenty-first century im-
plies new modes of existence in relation to the vir-
tual whose borders, once thought clear, are in-
creasingly becoming blurred. It is therefore essen-
tial to question how this new technological turn
will continue to change those who grow in its or-
bit.
If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-japan


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