

The Politics of Performance: Gender Identity in Cosplay

Written by Katarina Birkedal

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KATARINA BIRKEDAL, MAY 22 2016

What does the wearing of cosplay have to do with the political, and by extension the field of International Relations (IR)? In what way is the embodiment of characters from popular culture narratives a political act, and how is the study of it useful to scholars of IR? With this blog post I endeavour to briefly answer these questions, outlining in the process how I have conducted my research, and my own experiences. I posit that the act of cosplay is an expression of the desire for agency, functioning therein as an exploration of various aspects of identity – perhaps most importantly gender identity. Moreover, I put forward that the understanding of the politics of cosplay could aid the understanding of the politics of clothing more generally, such as e.g. military uniforms, national and regional dress, extreme right wing fashion, etc.

Cosplay, derived from ‘costume play’, is the (re)creating wearing of costumes based on characters from popular culture, such as films, TV, books, and games. Those who engage in cosplay are well placed to discuss the impact of popular culture narratives, as they participate as spectators and performers. That is, that beyond viewing – or, indeed, reading or playing – the narratives, they (re)produce them. Cosplayers pay extremely close attention to the aesthetics of the narratives, and thereafter attempt to recreate that in their costumes and performances. As such, they place themselves within the narratives, furthering the simulacra of their chosen universe. In other words, they become in a way the characters much as the actors do, and within the bounds of cosplay spaces, e.g. Comic Cons, they are referred to as such. They are as real as the original simulations they simulate.

What this means is that cosplayers’ engagement with their chosen character is reflected in the affect. That is, what is acceptable, and felt to be acceptable, shifts depending on the character. Hence, cosplaying a character known for mischief and anarchy imparts a feeling of power and fun, whereas cosplaying a character known to be noble and heroic imparts a feeling of power and responsibility; both impact the behaviour and speech of the cosplayer. Many characters are chosen because they have depicted agency, which I argue is part of the attraction of cosplay. In other words, by embodying the aesthetics and performance of a character with agency, the cosplayer feels similarly empowered.

My approach for researching the above and below phenomena was to become a cosplayer myself. Every decision I made thereafter has deepened my understanding of the experience. These decisions included the initial choice to cosplay Marvel Cinematic Universe’s (MCU) Loki, to sew and craft the costume myself, as well as of course the actual experience of wearing the costume and embodying the character. Most intriguingly, the process has had physical and psychological effects, from injuries and skills gained, to the exploration of aspects of my own identity I previously felt unable to express, or was even unaware I had. As a result, I feel I am as much Loki as anyone can be.

The old Norse culture from which Loki is drawn conceived of gender as performance. Hence, a woman warrior could be masculine, and a man interested in storytelling and seiðr could be feminine. Whilst there was a hierarchy within this that placed greater value on masculinity, as well as a strong tendency to associate biological sex with gender, performances that went against this supposition were not deemed unnatural. Indeed, Loki – the God of Mischief – can be seen as the very embodiment of this, shifting at leisure from masculine to feminine, and from man to woman. For MCU’s Loki, gender fluidity is reflected in the costume, and in subtleties of staging. For me, it allowed me to play several gender versions of Loki, and to experience on and for myself what these felt like.

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This is obviously contingent upon a sense of affiliation with the character, but what is interesting is that this is confirmed by the 'audience' – i.e. other attendees and cosplayers. By this I mean that initial interactions between the cosplayer and others is shaped by the performed character, rather than the cosplayer themselves. Cosplayers are referred to by the name of their character, and assumed to behave or respond similarly to that character. Perhaps most importantly, the physical sex of the cosplayer becomes irrelevant. As a woman mostly cosplaying a male iteration of a gender fluid character, I have experienced only validation of my performed masculinity from the 'audience'. Whether or not I can truly pass as male is irrelevant, as the performed gender becomes, in that space, real. Indeed, in the Butlerian sense of gender, wherein the truth of gender lies in the performative, cosplay highlights the notion that the performed gender is the 'real' one. In other words, the biological, genetic sex is irrelevant, as it is the chosen, performed gender that is recognised in the social.

Hence cosplay also becomes a safe space for the exploration of gender identity, and a place to resist the identity prescribed by society. Interestingly, the behaviours and emotions traditionally associated with the genders are not necessarily altered – women cosplaying male characters might feel or act more assertively, for example – which leads me to posit cosplay as resistance within reproduction. It is, therefore, a sort of dialogue within narratives, led by the appropriation of desired characteristics through embodiment. The very idea of cosplay is, in a sense, radical, insofar as it entails not only the reproduction of narratives, but also the exploration of gender identity and performance. Thus, despite reproducing some associations, cosplay becomes inherently political.

Exploring cosplay as political, and especially investigating the affect of wearing cosplay, might shed light on political dress. That is, it might be helpful in choosing what questions to ask. My research method on cosplay, as described briefly above, hinges on investment in the character and process, and might not therefore be easily replicated for all purposes. By that I mean that the wearing of costume alone will not produce these affects; rather, it is the investment in the character through costume and performance that produces the affective experience and catharsis. Similarly to philosopher Jacques Rancière's distinction between appearance and experience, superficial appearance is just that – superficial – without the addition of the performance. However, the types of interactions I had with other cosplayers, and the questions I asked them, should be relevant. Moreover, in and of itself, the study of cosplay is important, as it informs the study of gender performance, and popular culture narratives.

About the author:

Katarina H.S. Birkedal, AFHEA is a PhD candidate at the School of International Relations, University of St Andrews, Scotland. Her research focus is on gender as performance, agency, and depictions of violence. She began cosplaying as part of her PhD project, and has found in it a space of great personal exploration. Katarina is from Norway, and grew up with stories about Loki, Tor, and Odin from Norse mythology.