



On the Art of Affective Repetition: Fan Video & *The Untamed*

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Using *The Untamed* and its transcultural fanworks as a case study, this video essay shows how logics of modular affectivity are at the heart of remix and fan culture, as official and fan authors alike repeat and recontextualize beloved image-moments, which in turn gather new emotional resonances as they spread across fan spaces.





Creator's Statement

Transcultural Syntheses and Frictions

My video essay explores affective repetition in the Chinese TV series *The Untamed* and its surrounding fan videos. *The Untamed* is a fantasy adventure series adapted from a *danmei* (boys love) Chinese web novel. The series tells the story of two cultivators, Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji, who fall in love despite being separated by death, with Wei Wuxian falling to his death only to be resurrected 14 years later, resulting in their emotional reunion. *The Untamed* was released in 2019 to huge popular success in China and internationally, and inspired much fan authorship including short and long form fan videos emanating from a wide range of national and cultural contexts (Wang and Alberto; Qiao and Hu). Fans post and comment on these videos in a variety of video sharing spaces, including YouTube, Bilibili, TikTok, Instagram, and Xiaohungshu.

The networks of fan video creativity at play in this case study (and other transcultural fandoms) are in ongoing processes of interpretation, synthesis, and friction. Fans from different national and cultural contexts rework the original audiovisual Chinese source of *The Untamed*, interpreting it via their own cultural frameworks and genre cues and combining it with audiovisual referents from varying cultural contexts. These new transcultural syntheses create their own affective reverberations. Such cultural remixing can also spark friction, present in the videos themselves and in their reception. Indeed, such fan videos at times become sites of transcultural negotiations over issues of race and racism, especially as fan works for *The Untamed* and other Chinese dramas continue to spread and gain visibility in anglophone fan/social media spaces that used to be dominated primarily by Western media (Pande; Yoon and Garcia).

In my video essay, I quote Lori Morimoto's question "What happens when fans from one culture and media from another mix ... when fan and social subjectivities

collide?” (2018; online summary). I follow this question with another: If the same image triggers different chains of associations for different viewers, what if those chains get tangled together? The fan videos I consider in my video essay embody exactly such tangled chains of repeating signifiers, rewoven to create new meanings for transcultural fan communities.

The Pleasures and Practices of Repetition

Using *The Untamed* and its fanworks as a case study, my video essay explores the logics of modular affectivity—that is, the loving repetition of particular image-moments or image-audio moments within fan practice. Using remix, I bring together the many times official and fan authors alike repeat and recontextualize beloved image-moments: the iconic (to fans of *The Untamed*) image of Wei Wuxian closing his eyes as he falls, or, more generally, the familiar image of someone dangling over a cliff—an image which has resonances in different ways across different national media contexts. I intend this deep dive into the recurring images within *The Untamed* fan video to model for viewers how repetition can gather affect, building and transforming in meaning and emotional weight as it unfolds in waves in fan works.

Scholars of fandom and fan fiction have written about the centrality of repetition in fan engagement, whether through repetition of beloved tropes or revisiting and rewriting of key moments in fan fiction. Writing about fan fiction, Kristina Busse describes the “creative potentials” of repetition. She argues that repetition has the “power ... to structure interpretation and organize ... pleasure” (Busse 2017: 14–15). The repetitions at work in fan video make visible (and audible) the creative power and pleasures of repetition in fan video remix. In my video essay, I argue that *The Untamed* already invites fans into the pleasures of repetition through its own internal structuring, and in turn such repetitions fuel creative authorship and engagement. While *The Untamed* may be a particularly prime example of modular affectivity, these same logics of affective repetition play out in fan video authorship more broadly.

Some Notes on Form

It is my intent that this video essay, through its use of image and audio repetition throughout, convey at least a taste of the experiences of fans who engage with multiple reworkings of a beloved narrative, including the ever-expanding ocean of fan video works. One of the challenges of making fan videos, or even video essays about fandom, is that they will speak with more emotional impact to viewers already invested in the audiovisual source in question. I hope that, in this video essay, even for viewers

unfamiliar with *The Untamed*, the repeated imagery of Wei Wuxian falling will begin to build layers of meaning, associations, and emotional weight (and perhaps a little empathy for this poor character forced to fall to his death again and again in the collective mind of fandom ...).

My video embodies three key elements of its argument: aesthetic modularity, image-audio moments, and transcultural audio conversation:

Aesthetic modularity: Unlike many video essays that stick to one stylistic technique throughout, the different sections of this video essay integrate different aesthetic traditions present in fan videos across various creative and cultural contexts. Parts 1 and 3 deploy typographical text in aesthetic, analytic, and (hopefully!) humorous juxtaposition. Part 2 incorporates source audio in conversation with image and text, a popular fan video technique over the last decade, especially on YouTube. Parts 3 and 4 feature rhythmic editing common to contemporary short form fan edits found on TikTok and Instagram. Part 4 draws on a type of match on action and graphic matching featured in certain long-standing genres of fan videos (most specially multifandom meta vids) to make connections across multiple familiar images from a wide variety of media sources. Part 5 mashes up audio as well as video, reworking fan edits themselves into a sort of compilation video meta mashup. All of these are techniques that fan video authors use to reframe familiar image-moments to convey meaning and affect to their viewers.

Image-audio moments: The audio that serves as soundtrack throughout the video essay includes multiple fan-created remixes and covers of the *Untamed* musical theme “Wuji.” This underlying audio remix serves as the backbone to this video essay, and in so doing points to the corollary dynamic of audio-moments that gather affective weight, meaning, and impact through repetition and recontextualization within contemporary fan and remix cultures.

Transcultural audio conversations: The concluding segment of this video essay weaves together short form videos that feature popular audio excerpts from songs from a mix of national contexts such as the Hindi “Teri meri prem kahani,” the American “Freefalling,” and the British-produced “Skyfall” (the last highly popular as a song used in fan edits because of its James Bond film origins). These audio-moments bring with them their own culturally specific affective and ideological weights, which then intersect with the chosen image-moments from *The Untamed*, exponentially creating meaning and affect in a dynamic network of intertextual references. Such audio intertexts often bring music from the video editor’s own cultural context, or they feature music that has gone “viral” and spread beyond the confines of its original context. Often, (though

certainly not always, as in the case of “Teri Meri” featured here) these dynamics result in Chinese source visuals being edited to the music of Western artists, highlighting transcultural affinities and frictions in their interplay. This is certainly the case for the example of “Skyfall,” which necessarily inflects *The Untamed* with the ideological weight of the highly British James Bond series. As such, these audiovisual syntheses and their affective resonances represent the complex transcultural circulation of media within online spaces.

Notes/Media Sources

This is a videographic remix interpretation of the essay “Affective Repetition in *The Untamed* and *Untamed* Fan Videos,” which I co-wrote with Charlene (Xiaomeng) Fu. This essay is included in the collection *Catching Chen Qing Ling: The Untamed and Adaptation, Production, and Reception in Transcultural Contexts*. Ed. Yue (Cathy)Wang and Maria Alberto, Peter Lang, 2024.

Translations by Charlene (Xiaomeng) Fu.

This video essay includes excerpts from fan videos and edits by: @hua.weiying, @lanzahnlnvr, @lwjxwx, @pileofgoo, @lunatic_mo, @.lzhan, @rhiannon.mmm, and @v.egas1.

This video essay includes music remixes and covers by: @asterparfait, @watermeloncat, @gimvsen, and @junas.d.

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Biography

Louisa Stein is associate professor of film and media culture at Middlebury College. Louisa is the author of *Millennial Fandom: Television Audiences in the Transmedia Age* (University of Iowa Press, 2015) and co-editor of *A Tumblr Book: Platforms and Cultures* (University of Michigan Press, 2020), *Sherlock and Transmedia Fandom* (McFarland, 2012), and *Teen Television: Programming and Fandom* (McFarland, 2008). Louisa's work explores audience engagement in transmedia culture, with emphasis on questions of cultural and digital contexts, gender, and generation. Louisa is also mother of two fans, and in her spare time she edits fan videos and video essays.

Review by Anne Kustritz, Utrecht University

Repetition and homogenization have long marked popular culture's abject status. Yet, if all Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer found in the culture industry was a stultifying sameness, how much more so must their critique weigh against fan works, which by their nature reproduce and repeat cultural elements that are already ubiquitous? Stein's video essay "On the Art of Affective Repetition" productively questions this longstanding problematic, both by examining what can be gained aesthetically through repetition and by using the networked digital context of contemporary transnational audiences to complicate classic critiques of the culture industry. As Stein points out, several scholars argue that repetition in fan works builds rather than evacuates complex, nuanced forms of expression. In "On the Art of Affective Repetition" Stein accentuates this both aesthetically as well as through the evocative concept of "aesthetic modularity."

In this, she and other fan studies scholars draw more or less explicitly on the tradition of Soviet montage, as exemplified by Sergei Eisenstein's conceptualization and use of "intellectual montage" in films including *Strike* (1925) and *Battleship Potemkin* (1925). There, Eisenstein famously argued, in tension with Adorno, that repetition does not flatten out culture, but rather creates original meanings by bringing seemingly contradictory elements into contact. Stein's work furthers this argument by asking how transnational circulation and reception also complicate this picture. Eisenstein relied on highly visceral imagery in his most famous montage sequences,

such as blood spattering from a slaughtered cow in *Strike* or a baby in peril in *Battleship Potemkin*. He assumed a largely universal and unconscious or even subliminal process would create a uniform reception experience for audiences, for instance transferring the feelings of disgust and brutality evoked by the slaughtered cow to the spliced images of the slaughtered proletariat. However, in “On the Art of Affective Repetition,” Stein via Lori Morimoto asks how this picture changes when the audio-visual collage in question sutures images and sounds whose chains of association differ transnationally and may be altered and reordered by diverse transnational actors. Much like the remix practices in question, Stein’s addition of digital transnational audiences reinvigorates longstanding debates about the meaning and function of repetition in popular culture, constructing new possibilities through the juxtaposition.

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Review by Rukmini Pande, Jindal School of Liberal Arts and Humanities

Stein’s video essay and statement reflect on how fan videos of the Chinese TV series *The Untamed* exist in a network of transnational and transcultural fan spaces, each with their own culturally specific locations, references, and (re)interpretations of the original text(s). The potential of both fan pleasure and conflict reflected in these interconnected, yet disparate texts make for a compelling analysis. Stein’s focus on repetition as both a form of fan “pleasure” as well as a fan “practice” encoded in the videos is also reflected in the narrative flow of the video essay, exemplifying the same practice. As Stein points out, the fan videos are reinterpretations of multiple “canonical” sources, as the original web novel the series is based on has also been adapted into numerous other textual and visual forms. This illustrates the fluidity of fan interpretations as they can move between and remix different versions of the same events and characters. Stein’s essay therefore captures her central thesis of modular affectivity extremely effectively. Fan videos have also historically served as a pathway for fans to discover new media texts as they use fan favourite tropes

regarding characters, relationships, and/or narrative arcs to intrigue fellow fans into viewing the source material in its entirety. Stein's video essay emulates this format as well, functioning to both analyse its subject(s) as well as entice the viewer into perhaps exploring the genre itself further.

Some questions however remain. As Stein's statement points out, the ways in which power circulates in these (re)interpretations is rarely equal. Even as transnational and transcultural flows of media have become accelerated through operations of streaming services, these operations are subject to various structural power differentials, also evident in fan reception and recirculation. This is traceable in the "sudden" rise in popularity of Chinese *danmei* series such as *The Untamed* in anglophone fandom communities for the last few years. The explosion of interest has often, inadvertently perhaps, erased their own specific generic contexts and history. This process has also granted exceptionalism to those texts which can garner interest from western audiences and eventually, the academics who study them. So, even as Stein's essay highlights the use of a non-anglophone source (a Bollywood song) in a fan video, there are definite differentials in which intertextual references are seen to be more "universal" than others. Finally, I'd also like to pause to meditate on the implications of the statement's observation that the selected fan videos are hosted on a variety of different platforms such as YouTube, Bilibili, TikTok, Instagram, and Xiaohungshu. It is important to remember that these platforms are not neutral, with different levels of accessibility, and with algorithmic and content moderation/censorship fundamentally influencing the creation and circulation of the fan videos under consideration.

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