

Fanfic as adaptation:

The Phantom of the Opera case

Fanfiction como adaptación: el caso de

El Fantasma de la Ópera

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This article discusses the theoretical borders that separate adaptations of literary texts (by professional writers) and the activities of fans, especially fanfictions of *The Phantom of the Opera*. The theoretical approach brings the notion of “transcreation” and authors from the field of fan studies. The results include the recognition of fanfictions as a type of literary adaptation, and the notion of *The Phantom of the Opera* as an archive or as “archontic literature”.

KEYWORDS: Fanfiction, Phantom of the Opera, fan studies, adaptation, trans-creation.

Este artículo discute las fronteras teóricas que separan las adaptaciones de textos literarios (por escritores profesionales) y las actividades de los fans, especialmente las fanfictions de El Fantasma de la Ópera. El enfoque teórico trae consigo la noción de “transcreación” y autores del campo de fan studies. Los resultados incluyen el reconocimiento de las fanfictions como una forma de adaptación literaria y la noción de El Fantasma de la Ópera como archivo o como “literatura arcónica”.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Fanfiction, El Fantasma de la Ópera, fan studies, adaptación, trans-creación.

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INTRODUCTION

This article is a result from an initiative “OBITEL Expansions”, through which the authors represented the Centre for the Studies of Telenovela and the OBITEL³ Network on an international partnership of interdisciplinary research in the project *The Phantom on Film: Screen adaptations of Le Fantôme de l’Opéra: Routes of cultural transfer*,⁴ that aimed to analyze audiovisual adaptations of *The Phantom of the Opera*.

The Phantom of the Opera is perhaps among the most re-created narratives of all times. It is, as well, object of a large fandom. The original novel was published in instalments by Gaston Leroux in *Le Gaulois* in 1909-1910 and adapted for film for the first time in 1916. Since then it has inspired more than 50 audiovisual adaptations, ranging from black and white silent films such as Rupert Julian’s version (1925), a classic work early of horror, to the musical series by ABC.⁵ On Broadway, the musical produced by Andrew Lloyd Webber is the longest running show in Broadway history, with more than 10 000 performances since it opened in 1988.⁶ It is considered the most watched show of all time. The text has been the subject of artistic, academic and creative reinterpretation for over a century, worldwide. It has also attracted fans and became one of the greatest examples of classic or cult narratives. The love triangle between Christine, Raoul and the Phantom has been transformed into theater, musicals, films, TV shows and –why not– fanfictions (or fanfics, as we will be calling henceforth).

³ Iberoamerican Observatory of Fiction Television

⁴ The mentioned Project was coordinated by Prof. Dr. Cormac Newark at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, with the participation of researchers from the University of Edinburgh, the Royal Opera House of London, University of Tennessee, University of Udine, University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong Baptist University and the authors of this paper from the University of São Paulo and Paulista University.

⁵ A list of audiovisual adaptations is available at <https://thephantomonfilm.com/>, website that resulted from the international project “Phantom on Film”.

⁶ The musical *The Phantom of the Opera* opened in London’s West End in 1986, and on Broadway in 1988. It had its 10 000th performance on Broadway in 2012.

Since the origins of theater, and later on cinema and television, scholars and producers have been studying and developing adaptations of literary texts. The innumerable ways of recreating an original story reflect the appetite for many forms of consumption. The boundaries between creation and consumption of texts have been blurred in the past decades, and fan writing has started to receive more attention from scholars and from the media industry. From the late 1990 onwards, fans have been actively involved in online activities: writing and even filmmaking. According to authors such as Berger (2012), these cultural practices can be classed as adaptation of one sort or another.

It is important to bear in mind that spectators are living in an era of repurposing, and that appropriation and re-signification of texts and signs is present in our relation with all forms of art. In the case of *The Phantom of the Opera*, it is impossible to identify precisely the qualities that turned it into such a large archive of films, texts, scripts, references, songs, drawings, and so on. What we do know is that the proliferation of these intertexts intensified among fans after the Broadway musical, produced by Andrew Lloyd Weber in 1988, and even more after the popularization of the Internet.

Based on these guidelines and on theoretical approaches by scholars of fan studies such as Hills (2010), Booth (2010), Sandvoss (2013) and Gwenllian-Jones and Pearson (2004), among others, this article reflects on the theoretical borders that separate adaptations of literary texts (produced by professional writers and therefore called *adaptations*) and the activities of fans online (not commonly considered as adaptations). The main object is the large collection of fanfics related to *The Phantom of the Opera* that can be found on certain websites. In order to reflect and understand the creation of fans as representative of the universe of this literary text, we will argue that *The Phantom of the Opera* is no longer a piece of literature, but rather a compound of different stories.

We begin with a brief consideration of adaptation in cultural studies, thinking about texts as moving art or *archontic literature* (Derecho, 2006). This notion is related to what the Brazilian semiotician and poet Campos (2011) called “trans-creation”, a concept referring to the creative process involved in translations: his conclusion is that faithful or neutral translations of creative texts are nearly impossible, and that

the act necessarily includes re-creation, albeit with a sense of loyalty to the “spirit of the work”. We then present our empirical research, providing a sample of fanfictions focusing on particular elements of the canon present in the fan narratives. Our concluding findings covers the recognition of fanfictions as a type of literary adaptation, findings about the main tropes commonly present in Phantom fanfics and the notion of this famous narrative as an archive or as archontic literature (Derecho, 2006).

ARCHONTIC LITERATURE, TRANS-CREATION AND FANFICS

The notion of literary adaptation is vastly present in theoretical discussions in the field of cinema and television studies. We follow here the idea of adaptation presented by Stam (2006), understanding the adaptation as a result of intertextual references and transformations of previous texts that generate new texts on an infinite recycling loop. The author also believes that this process helps the popularization of a text, which we believe is the case of *The Phantom of the Opera* and its fan work.

Understanding fanfiction (or fanfic) as a literary adaptation in cultural studies is not completely new, but neither is widely accepted. Our aim here is to highlight a new perspective on the issue with the combination of two concepts: the idea of *trans-creation*, introduced by Campos (2011) referring to translation of poetry, and Derrida’s notion of *archontic literature*, applied to fanfics by Derecho (2006). Albeit translation involves a different aspect of texts and a distinct field of study, the use of this notion is applied to *The Phantom of the Opera* fanfics in order to emphasize that the process of recreating a story for a different audience and a different platform is also a process of adapting it to a new language.

Derecho (2006) defines fanfic as archontic literature, a term she borrows from Derrida’s definition of archives as ever expanding and never completely closed. According to Derrida, all archives are forever open to new entries, new contents. The archontic principle of a text is, then, to be the “internal drive of an archive to continually expand” (Derrida in Derecho, 2006, p. 64).

According to Derecho (2006), the adjective *archontic* is better to describe the intertextual relationship at the core of the literature than the terms *derivative* or *appropriative*. Both adjectives usually imply a negative connotation, for they refer to two texts, one being “less” than the other (in case of *derivative*) or one being “stolen”. In addition, they give an idea of property and hierarchy that lead ultimately to a limiting of creativity. On the other hand, *archontic* denotes a type of literature that is dynamic, unfinished and open to addition without the violation of any pre-established borders. Therefore, an archontic text’s archive “is not identical to the text but is a virtual construct surrounding the text, including it and all texts related to it” (p. 65).

Archontic texts are based on three theoretical aspects. The first is that they work by “repeating with a difference”, since they repeat something but also always with additions or changes. Secondly, archontic literature is about the reality of virtualities and potentialities. Derecho is inspired by Deleuze’s concepts of virtual and potential to claim that fanfic permits virtualities to become actual, assuming that every text contains a wealth of potentialities that can be realized by variation of the text. And third, archontic literature is characterized by relation. According to the idea of “relation” from Glissant, the relations between people, nations, ideas and words can never be fixed into identity, and does not privilege wholes over parts (Glissant in Derecho, 2006). Based on these premises, Derecho (2006) defends fanfics as a literature that exists through relation, since it does not aim to limit creative production over a text.

Following the perspective of archontic literature, another concept helps to build the argument that fanfic adds to a broader archive of a text. The notion of trans-creation (*transcriação*)⁷ introduced by the translator and semiotician Campos (2011), who offers a perspective on the ways translation shapes and transforms texts. Even though translation would ideally require a near perfect resemblance to the original, the author goes against the idea of hyper-fidelity, claiming that all translations are a new mode of creation. He adds that even the very concept of translation has been subjected to a progressive neological re-

⁷ Direct translation from the original in Portuguese.

elaboration, from the initial idea of re-creation to the coinage of terms such as *transcreation*, *reimagining* and *transtextualization*.

For Campos (2011), contrary to what one might believe, it is the relative value and not the eternal, canonized value that rules a literary text. He finds this relative value in the notion of Sartre who stated that a man can only embrace poetics in a specific time: the present. This reveals the “relative statement” of poetics. The same notion may apply to almost all texts on the current transmediatic context.

According to Campos (2011), after Benjamin proposed that the function of translation does not relate to the content, but to the meaning, he inverted the idea of translation (and the writing itself) as a service to the reader. He actually assigns to the original text the task of preconfiguring, of organizing the content, leaving to the translator the task of “attesting the affinity” between the languages. For Campos (2011), Benjamin does more than reconfiguring the function of translation in a broader sense. He recognizes the importance of the *enduring* of the text, the importance of the literature to last through generations and therefore to expand. By doing so, Benjamin changes the focus of the process of translation to the “essence” of the literature.

Campos associates that with the adaptation to cinema, since in his view the “distracted reception” reminds that of the viewer of a film. However:

The translator is a “reader-author”, in the extreme a “traitor” or a “usurper”. With the means of mass reproduction, the competence of the artist (in the example, the “literary”, but the reasoning can be transferred immediately to the cinema, where these “displacements” occur in a vertiginous way), traditionally the fruit of a “specialized training” is replaced by “polytechnic instruction” and thus “falls into the public domain” (Campos, 2011, pp. 54-55; translations by the authors).

This public domain is exactly where *The Phantom of the Opera* is and has been for a while. Concerning this classic narrative, it reaches the point when we no longer know who the translator is and who the reader is. If we were to imagine a fanfic inspired by the Broadway musical, would the fan be the translator of the musical? Or would Andrew Lloyd

Webber be the translator of the original while the fan is the reader? Especially when it comes to fanfics, another question would be who the traitor is, and who is betrayed? On one hand, the fanfic writer is easily seen as a traitor when it comes to the changing of something considered important by the other readers –for instance, creating a gay Phantom could initially be problematic–. On the other hand, some fans also feel genuinely betrayed when disappointed by Christine choosing Raoul over the Phantom, for example, which could be the first reason why they write a fanfic, after all: to change the things they did not like about the “text”, whether we would call it the “original” or the “adaptation”.⁸

Going even further, Campos (2011) risks another statement: “the more elaborate or complex a text is, the more possibilities of re-creation there are” (p. 16). Although Leroux’s work might not be considered a complex piece of literature, it does embrace many types of discourses. It includes at least theater, music and literature as forms of art. More than that, it has a potentially supernatural element, which increases the *elasticity* of a narrative (Gwenllian-Jones & Pearson, 2004). The comprehensiveness of the range of possibilities offered by this narrative opens infinite potential for adaptation, because it makes it easier to re-create. This range becomes even broader in the current *convergence culture* (Jenkins, 2009), approaching the condition of an open sea where creativity can swim happily away.

We might say that in a literary piece such as *The Phantom of the Opera*, which has been re-created so many times, the text itself gives way to a “spectrum” of the narrative. This spectrum reflects the vast collection of references and creations around itself. Thus, the text is no longer the secular work, the material, the inaugural element –just as when we look at a diamond we no longer think of the carbon that composes it; carbon is also the chemical element that forms graphite, which is visually nothing like diamond–. Nevertheless, the connections, the relations of the same element are responsible for creating two so apparently distinctive pieces. The original narrative of the *The Phantom*

⁸ For more about cinema and musical adaptations of the *Phantom of the Opera*, see the special issue of *Opera Quarterly*, Volume 34, Issue 2-3, spring-summer 2018.

of the Opera is then the conveyable element that creates the archontic literature through all its possible connections. This system forms the archive of the archontic literature.

Returning, therefore, to what Campos said about translation as tradition that travels through generations, and placing those premises within the perspective of cultural studies, we will find that the tradition of communication among young people in particular has been transformed in the last decades. This transformation has been accelerated by digital and social media. Even though, as we will see, fanfic did not start on the web, the transmedia environment and the convergence culture have certainly helped to expand the practice within online fandom.

THE PHANTOM FANS

As we have already mentioned, there many adaptations of *The Phantom of the Opera* are produced not only by professionals but also by enthusiasts engaging with the narrative. The basic definitions of Fan Studies –see Fiske (1992), Jenkins (1992) and Bacon-Smith (1992)– have become widely accepted: individuals that show a certain level of affective connection to the story are *fans*; they may also participate and generate related content. For the aims of this article, we chose the definition of fan proposed by Sandvoss (2013), which describes it as “the regular, emotionally involved engagement with a given narrative or text” (2013, p. 9). Thus, it is through the everyday processes of appropriation that the texts become fandom products, as the public master the mass produced object and create their particular emotional value.

In particular in this context, fans are not only those who love what media producers offer them to watch or consume but also those who are not satisfied with it: the latter always want more; they want to expand the narrative experience. Moreover, the experience of a narrative can be increased on the personal level or it can be shared in a community. Inside a community defined by its similar interests, the fan can also be identified as a producer of content, of experience and of memories.

Inside Fan Studies, fans are nearly always thought of in communities, hence the importance of reflections not only in respect

of the particular subject, but also in relation to the collective process of fandom. According to Hills (2002) within fandom there are constant cultural negotiations, not only between members of the community, but also with the producer and the media industry. Fans seek to distinguish themselves from the standard consumer, who watches programs without minimal engagement or emotional involvement. And by reading the comments, opinions, or reports of the other participants, they validate and reinforce each other's feelings.

The advance of the so called "waves" of Fan Studies (Gray et al., 2007) brought the theories to *digital fandom* (Booth, 2010; Pearson, 2010). Academic studies on digital fandom have been monitoring online fan communities since the early 2000s. Nowadays, in the era of *convergence culture* (Jenkins, 2009), researchers define the fan as an active viewer, who creates or produces content about the objects of his or her affection, comments on social networks or just read about the production and post on social network in order to share or find more information about the narrative.

As pointed out by Pearson (2010), "the digital revolution has had a profound impact upon fandom, empowering and disempowering, blurring the lines between producers and consumers, creating symbiotic relationships between powerful corporations and individual fans, and giving rise to new forms of cultural production" (p. 84). These changes were relevant to understanding the universe of fan production, or User Generated Content (UGC) as a serious activity, even if it is not necessarily innovative. According to Livingstone (1990), these creations are at the intersection between the media content and its interpretation. Sharing the practices of reception and production of meaning provides a plurality of points of view about the narrative, whether in relation to characters, script, specific scenes or even soundtrack. More than that, the increasing visibility of fan work, its continuing proliferation and its acceptance by commercial entities indicates a movement toward the decentralization of the source creator as a critical figure to the work's existence (Dahlberg-Dodd, 2019).

Fan activities range from posting a picture to creating complete fictional universes. Various modes of content production are explored, such as *fanzines*, magazines about the object; *fan fictions*, stories made

by fans that use elements and characters from the original work; *fan film*, scripted videos and narrative based on the work, such as satire; *mash ups*, created by combining elements from two or more sources such as a video with characters or situations from other shows; *fandub*, in which a scene acquires a complete different meaning from dubbing a new dialogue; *fansubbing*, the activity of placing subtitles in programs and films; *shipping*, derived from the word “relationship“, it refer to fans’ emotional involvement with a fictional relationship (it can be a romantic one or a friendship); *fan art*, the creative works like drawing or painting; and so many others that arise every day. The fandom of *The Phantom of the Opera* is especially rich in these various kinds of content, as the following few examples show.

The fandom of *The Phantom of the Opera* has many faces –or many masks–. It manifests itself on every contemporary platform: Facebook pages, tweets, fan art on Pinterest and Tumblr, videos on YouTube (that shows more than 2 million results for the keyword “Phantom of the Opera”) or Vimeo, and of course fanfics on websites devoted to them and interaction between participating fans. This fans are usually part of a gothic fandom, relating the environment of original story (the canon) with the performances inside fandom (Rush, 2018).

In order to analyze online fan engagement, we assume that reflecting on fictional narratives nowadays implies thinking about them within the framework of a new logic of creation and development. This mode of creation overflows the boundaries of the screen and establishes transformations at the poles of production and reception through the circulation of content anchored in the multiple media (or multiple platforms) that make up the contemporary communicational landscape.

Since the late 1990s onwards, many of our students are actively involved in “Web 2.0” phenomena such as online fanfic writing and fan filmmaking. These types of cultural practices can be classed as adaptation of some variation. Our students now live in an era of re-purposing; they are their own authors (or auteurs!) of content. They are also “digital natives” in that new social practices are often non-medium specific. Young people refuse (or are unable) to recognize the, often imagined, distinctions between different media (Berger, 2012, pp. 37-38).

Even if the story of *The Phantom of the Opera* is rather simple, the countless ways in which it has been (and still is) re-created has transformed the original text into an immeasurable hypertext, or an archive of texts where the set of fanfics relates, as we have been arguing, to the notion of archontic literature (Derecho, 2006). It is of course difficult to identify with any certainty the elements that make the *Phantom of the Opera* so susceptible to adaptation, but its intrinsic potential for transmediality – a novel, full of non-fiction tropes such as footnotes, set in a theatre, in a context of opera and ballet, and so on – is surely one of them. The melodramatic style and the classic love-triangle too, so contiguous with opera itself but also so suitable for many other kinds of narrative, and the tremendous success of the West End and Broadway shows add further dimensions to content that is already very rich: there are fanfics based on the book, on the musical, on the films, and even on previous fanfics.

Jenkins (2009) believes that for many fans, the non-commercial nature of fan culture is one of its most important characteristics. These stories are the fruit of their love; they operate in an economy of donation and they offer their stories to other fans who share the same passion for the characters. Being free from the trade restrictions surrounding the original texts, they gain new freedom to explore themes and experiment with structures and styles that could not be part of the mainstream versions of these universes.

Although all this types of fan creation are fascinating, we will now focus in one specific practice of fans: the fanfics. The stories created by fans show engagement and creativity but above all they show potential variations and possibilities of a storyline. We will argue that fanfics, which relate directly to the original narrative, are a form of literary adaptation, although their value is often underestimated simply for being the work of fans and not professionals (Hellekson & Busse, 2014). More than that, we will try to highlight how fanfics may be a rich research object for the study of audiences and narratives.

PHANTOM FANFICS AND THE CANON

In fanfic language the “canon” is the original setting of a story. A fanfic that follows the canon will preserve the main couple or the general

storyline (i.e.: Christine and the Phantom or Christine and Raoul). All fanfics are by definition non-canon stories but the level of fidelity to the canon may vary. This is relevant for this study to justify the method we use in our empirical exploration, which is related to elements (or tropes) of the original *Phantom of the Opera* book.

Fans of literature and series can become so intensely attached to the canonical universe of the series that what the creators produced was no longer enough: fans feel the need to create their own stories within that universe. Jamison (2017) believes that the beginning of fan fiction writing –usually associated with *Star Trek*– is part of a cultural movement from the mid-1960s that led to the breakdown of the paradigm in which stories and characters belong to their authors. Readers became more and more active expressing their opinions in fanzines and creating stories involving characters from the stories they followed. Since then, fanfic has spread, exponentially so since the popularizing of the internet: online fanfic provided alternative models of what it meant to be an author. At first, the so-called ficwriters might just read the stories, but communities provide a lot of encouragement for readers to cross the threshold and present their own stories. And once a fan presents a story, the feedback inspires him or her to write more and better.

This practice does not require authorization from the original authors of the story, nor does it imply any commercial intent on the part of the ficwriters. The only expectation, common throughout the fandom universe, is readers' feedback, their comments while the story is developing. Despite constantly encountering resistance from the original creators of the stories, the fanfic practice has only expanded. As Jamison (2017) points out, teasing the hegemonic state of art has always been a function of the cutting edge, and it proved no different with fanfics. She claims that "Fanfiction is the madwoman in mainstream culture's attic, but the attic won't contain it forever" (p. 13). And she concludes by saying that:

Writing and reading fanfiction isn't just something you do; it's a way of thinking critically about the media you consume, of being aware of all the implicit assumptions that a canonical work carries with it, and of considering the possibility that those assumptions might not be the only way things have to be (Jamison, 2017, p. 13).

For fanfic communities, then, the “canon” implies not only the original setting of a story, but also the cultural universe on which it and subsequently their own stories are based. Fanfics are inspired on the canonical universe of the original story, and not on the narrative course or set of conflicts that the storyline presents. Thus, these stories can have numerous associations with the original plot, such as: an alternative ending; extensions of the lives of these characters in other universes; the return of a character who died in the original story; formation of couples that were not foreseen by the author of the original (very common in homosexual slashfics);⁹ the scenario as the protagonist of a story with other characters; crossovers, when a character from one story appears in the universe of another story (i.e. Harry Potter vs. Frankenstein); among many other options.

Although the possibilities of fanfics seem infinite, however, there are certain rules that a ficwriter must follow. Although created from an alternate element of the original, these stories must make sense within the canon. Fan writers cannot alter the character’s “self” without a valid explanation. As Pugh (2005) notes, writers can:

Set the story in a different timeline, cross it with other fictions, write it off or end it or make it go in a different direction, but they must ultimately work with a particular set of people, who have to behave and speak like themselves in every situation (Pugh, 2005, p. 67).

The canons are in this way capable of constant re-signification of the product upon which the fictional community works, which may occur parallel to the original product. They are the fruit of collaborative production, evolve over time and serve as a structural basis for the stories that will be written by the fans. Often, the fanfics of the same canon come to possess a great similarity between them, sharing themes, storylines, and style. The representation of a character can occur in a different way from the original work, for example, but this difference can appear in several fanfics. This constitutes a parallel meaning to that present in the original product, particular to certain representations; the

⁹ [Slash fic](#) is a fanfic subgenre that focuses on sexual relations between fictitious characters of the same sex. These characters are not usually in a love relationship in the original narrative.

implication is that the freedom to innovate within this representation is also not complete, since authors try to adapt to what is being produced by other ficwriters.

Fanfics, situated as they are at the point of union between the industry and the consumer, help us understand that, in the process of adaption of a narrative, different interpretations –whether from professional producers or fans– cannot be isolated from one another. In the case of *The Phantom of the Opera* fanfics, the number of previous adaptations (films, theatre, and so on) keeps the original text at a safe distance, since it is a relatively old text with a long history of adaptation. This makes our object of study particularly interesting for this debate: the sense of a single “owner” of the text is doubly attenuated (apart from anything else, it is in the public domain also in the literal, copyright sense). Thus the novel has been transformed into a narrative much broader than many other similar sources.

The world of online fanfics presents a challenge to empirical studies for its vast and widespread dimension. A fan can create stories and share them on his or her personal blog or Facebook page, but there are also platforms that reunite millions of fanfic. For the purpose of this article, we will take a brief look at one of the biggest: *Archive of Our Own* (AO3). We have chosen this website for having four characteristics: 1) relevance inside fanfic community, 2) large number of fanfics of *The Phantom of the Opera*, 3) fanfics written in English and 4) a search tool that allows filters.¹⁰ The filters worked as a tool to narrow down the number of fanfics to be analyzed. Another important platform is *Fanfiction.net*, but it does not permit the copying and pasting of fanfics and therefore limits their examination using software for text analysis.

The exploration of *Archive of Our Own* (AO3) presented here is not comprehensive empirical research and neither is it intended to be. It is more of a diagnosis, as it were, of the creative work of fans based on *The Phantom of the Opera* with the aim of reinforcing that a thorough study of adaptations must consider the work of fans as part of the “archive” of the work. The *Archive of Our Own* is a website that

¹⁰ The search for fanfics used the keywords “Phantom of the Opera” (with quotation marks) on September 19th, 2017.

describes itself as “a fan-created, fan-run, non-profit, non-commercial archive for transformative fanworks, like fanfic, fanart, fan videos, and podfic (audio recordings of fanfic)”.¹¹ Fans can share their art, their drawings, their stories and their opinions. A search for “Phantom of the Opera” returned 1 713 results. With the aim of narrowing this number down we used the following filters: English language, complete fanfics (finished stories), single chapter, and 800-1 000 words (the reason for applying this last filter was in order to be able to compare fanfics of similar length, i.e. long enough to allow a storyline to be built.) At the same time, we had no intention of analyzing long texts (of more than 1 000 words) since our goal was not a qualitative analysis of the narrative, but rather an overview of tropes and elements connecting these narratives. In this sense, we were more concerned with finding out what fans were highlighting in these stories than with how they were writing them. The qualitative analysis of longer fanfics will constitute the next step in our research.

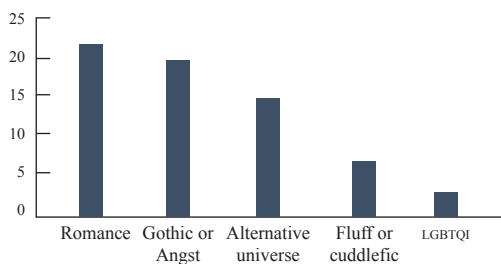
With these filters we identified 62 fanfics by 50 different authors. It is interesting to look at the authorship because it relates directly to the fan. The author “ponderinfrustration” wrote the largest number in this sample –eight out of the 62 stories–. He or she has written in total 116 fanfics with *The Phantom of the Opera* tag on this platform and 247 fanfics in total, and is a member of five fandom groups: three of *The Phantom of the Opera*, one of *Sherlock* and one of *Harry Potter*. Another author that came to our attention is “chris-daae (AILiSeki)” who wrote three stories from this sample and 42 fanfics in total with the Phantom tag –which is all of her/his work–. The author’s profile name is a clear homage and he or she is a member of five fandom groups, all about *The Phantom of the Opera*. This information is important because it highlights that despite some of the authors being people who are passionate about writing above all, and would write about almost anything, there are many authors who are *bona fide* fans of what they are writing about. The canon is what moves them to creation –just as it is the creation in which they move, so to speak– and this is why we can say that we are looking at the work of fans of *The Phantom of the*

¹¹ See <https://archiveofourown.org/>

Opera. The affection and engagement is the key to the creative relation they build on this platform and many others.

The stories from our sample show also a plurality of genres, although the majority is aligned with the original –a gothic romance–. This fact reinforces Rush’s (2018) argument that there is a direct correlation between the content and presentation of *The Phantom of the Opera* and the type of fan response it tends to evoke. This also helps to emphasize the connection of fan fictions with the notion of adaptation as transcreation since the freedom of writing is the main characteristic of the fanfic but still the authors willingly retain the aesthetics of the canon.

FIGURE 1
THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA FANFICS GENRE



Source: The authors with data from Archive of Our Own.

In total 21 fanfics were a romance between Christine and Erik (the Phantom), while 19 were gothic or “Angst” –a tag from the German word for “fear” commonly used on AO3–. This means that 40 out of these 62 (64.5%) stories were a romance or a gothic thriller in the atmosphere of Leroux’s original. There were also 14 fanfics (22.5%) set in an Alternative Universe (tag “AU”), such as the one set in modern Hollywood, or the one in which Erik is an “overdramatic dork”, among a few crossovers (i.e. Erik and Sherlock).

One surprising finding concerns the slash genre. Slash fanfiction is probably the fastest growing digital genre. According to Massey (2019), the most common genre among fanfiction writers entering the publishing industry is the LGBTQI e-book market. Thus, it would make

it the fastest growing digital genre globally. However, our sample was skewed more towards stories with a mild romance –or what in fanfic language would be categorized as “fluff” or “cuddlefic”–. Six fanfics depicted an erotic relationship between characters (Christine and Raoul or Christine and Erik); only two of those were homosexual, and they were subtle, with no explicit sex. We highlight two excerpts here: in the first, the “you” is Raoul and the story relates to his relationship with Christine, although he truly loves Erik:

When a soft goodbye tumbles from your lips, and she glances up at you to inquire as to what you meant, you pretend that you don't hear her. Not to spite her, or because you are overwhelmed, but because this moment isn't for her.

It's for him.

For Erik.

Fin.

(The Underlying Checkmate, by australiansurmise)

In this second example, the narrator is Nadir Khan “the Persian” –a surprisingly common crossover– and he is thinking about his relationship with Erik, the Phantom.

My heart shrivels in upon itself as I remember who and what I am: an old fool, so long in painful, unrequited, and unacknowledged love with a monster. I know now that it didn't matter how I felt, Erik truly loves Christine Daae. I never stood a chance. Erik did not – does not – love me. Never me.

(Watching, Wanting by imitateslife)

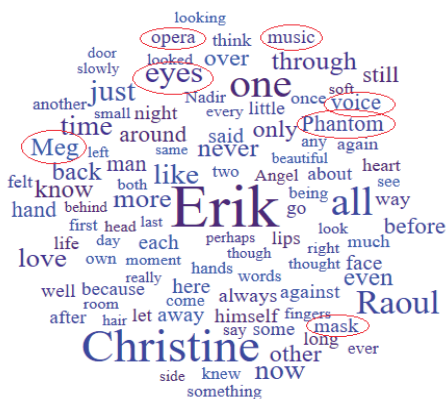
From those examples, one could imply that the fans of *The Phantom of the Opera* may want to enlarge the experience and continue the love story with a sort of “respect” for the canon. Despite three parodies (one in which Erik falls in love with a cat, one in which Meg Giry gets drunk, and a very confusing third one in which Raoul claims to be gay but yet asks Christine out on a date) and a few funny crossovers, the prevailing feeling in the majority of the stories appears to be sympathy

and longing. This rather contradicts the old preconception that fans only want to joke around and that they do not take their work seriously.

With the aim of investigating the relation of these fanfics with the canon we used two freely available software packages for text analysis: Textalyser and Worditout. For this analysis we inserted on these tools all the written text from all the 62 fanfictions that compose our sample. The goal was to identify the most used words and expressions and define tropes that connect the fan fictions to the original story by Leroux. Textalyser is an open access tool that counts words and expressions (combinations of 2 or 3 words) that appear regularly on the written analyzed piece. The results from Textalyser show that the 10 most frequent words include the main character “Erik”, mentioned 320 times, followed by Christine (239) and Raoul (151). This obvious result indicates that the fanfics do uphold the original love triangle that is present in almost all adaptations.

After using the tool for text analysis, we used Worditout for visualization of the results. This tool is also open access and creates word clouds, which are useful resources for an overview of the tropes found in our sample of fanfictions. The following word cloud shows in larger letters the most used words in all 62 fanfics:

FIGURE 2
WORD CLOUD OF *THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA* FANFICS



Source: The authors with data from *Archive of Our Own*.

The cloud helps to visualize the tropes that give a distinctive identity to the Phantom fanfics. The first result is clear: Erik and Christine are the characters that appear in the largest number of stories. Even if this seems obvious it does have a meaning: that Erik being the most present word shows that the fanfics are not about any old Phantom or any mysterious man with a mask –they are about *the* Phantom, Erik, from Leroux’s novel–. Even if the endings vary or the storyline takes different paths, the couple is the symbol that supports the canon of almost all the stories, and this asserts their link with the original story. As in some of the films, Raoul appears to have a supporting role, with Christine and Erik center stage.

Other words that are frequent and may constitute tropes are *Phantom*, *Meg*, *voice*, *opera*, *music*, *eyes* and *mask*. Again, these represent important elements from the original story as well. And, notwithstanding that many spin-off adaptations locate the story elsewhere, in these fanfics this is not a Phantom in just any place –these stories are talking about *music* and *opera*–. One of the most interesting findings from text analysis of this small sample is that the phrase “The Opera House” is one of the three-word expressions used most often; it occurs the same number of times, in fact, as “I love you”. Notwithstanding fan fiction’s penchant for crossovers, the musical theatrical setting remains an essential part of this canon. Of course, this does not indicate any fidelity to the canon, but it does not indicate a complete loss either. As Stam (2006) points out, the standard negative rhetoric regarding adaptations commonly relies on what the narrative “loses”, while ignoring what it “wins”. Hence the importance of finding not only the new elements but also the ones that are not lost.

It is interesting, though, to have Meg as an element even more mentioned than the mask. Meg appeared in 12 fanfics (mentioned 101 times), being the main character in at least four of them: two in which Meg and Erik are a couple (or a *ship*) and two about the relationship of Meg and Christine –one as friends and another one as a lesbian couple–. Even if on a small scale, this can be an example of the already mentioned fact that ficwriters also like to be inspired by other fanfics. Meg, it would seem, is a character who has become more relevant in the fanfic universe, whether as a supporting character brought to a prominence

undreamt-of in the original (a common technique in fanfic) or as an important character whose presence merely reinscribes the canon.

Moreover, also among the most common phrases are “all I ask of you” and “point of no return”, a clear indication of the debt that *The Phantom of the Opera* fandom owes to the popularity of Lloyd Webber’s musical. What this means is that these fan fictions are conceived within an expanded canon, one that includes an adaptation made more than 75 years after the publication of the original. Truly, *The Phantom of the Opera* is no longer a book, but an archontic text (Derecho, 2006).

FINAL THOUGHTS

We trust it is clear from this exploratory article that fan work is an important part of the universe of *The Phantom of the Opera* archive. First, because the fans are in great part responsible for the story’s long survival: adaptations are only a viable proposition for the media industry while there are fans to consume them.

Second, and above all, because a story like *The Phantom of the Opera* has already effaced the boundaries between what may and may not be considered an adaptation of the original. In general, the study of adaptations can no longer ignore the creative work of fans, especially within digital media and social networks. Fan-created content such as fanfics represent re-creations or *transcreations* that might derive directly from the original or might, as especially in this case, even be inspired by subsequent adaptations. More than that, this content will inspire yet more, continually expanding the story.

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