Skewed intimacies and subcultural identities: Anne Boleyn and the expression of fealty in a social media forum

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Abstract

The aim of this research project was the investigation of a subculture surrounding the famous Tudor queen Anne Boleyn; what that possible subculture means for those involved, and if it constituted part of a new phenomenon of female orientated online subcultures; cybersubcultures. Through the analysis of film, TV, historical literature and fiction, the research illustrates how subcultures are perpetuated through generations cyclically. The research then documents the transition from the traditional or 'classic' subcultural model of the 60s to the 21st century cybersubculture and fandom, suggesting a new way of thinking about subcultures in a post-subcultural age. The research suggests that the positioning of Anne Boleyn as a feminist icon/role model, based mainly on a media-mediated image, has formed a subculture which thrives on disjointed imagery and discourse in order to form a subculture of peculiarly subtle resistance. This new cybersubculture reflects the ways in which women are now able to use social media to form communities and to communicate, sharing concerns over men and marriage, all whilst percolating around the media-mediated image of Anne Boleyn as their starting point. These interactions – and the similarities they shared with the 'classic' subcultural style - form the data for this research project. The behaviours are analysed by using a symbolic interactionism approach which best develops the relationship of the fans against this mediated image; it show the ways in which the fans gain meaning through the various media depictions of Anne Boleyn and then integrate them into their own lives, exploring issues of masquerade and commodification in the process. Symbolic interactionism also shows how fans engage with Anne Boleyn's myriad representations as a wronged woman, tragic figure, temptress and traitor. These images are then interpreted through a contemporary 'pseudo-feminist' lens. One of the underlying questions posed by the research is: do the fans sufficiently understand the complexities and contradictions in moulding such a divisive figure into a feminist icon? If so, then this can be seen as a 'flawed project of persuasion' on the part of Anne Boleyn's partisans, and part of modern fandom's usurpation of the conventional reading of texts as a whole. Regarding the question of the 'flawed project of persuasion', the research hypothesises that these fans gravitate toward Anne Boleyn partly because she is a contentious figure; feeling disenfranchised themselves, they covet an icon that also projects that persona. As proto-feminists they have chosen a high-achiever, someone who was challenging and remains challenging because of what they represent; this further cements the fact that the fans are subcultural, because they are rebelling against the norm in the choice of their icon – the fact Anne Boleyn herself rebelled against societal norms only closes the case as far as they are concerned.
Certain identities carry different social capital, despite the fact that participants in a subculture may have similar interests, styles, or aspects of identity. For example, both participants in fan culture and members of dominant culture perceive women negatively. Media often portrays fangirls as desperate and crazy, while fanboys are generally given more leniency and often have redeeming qualities: “Fanboys are allowed more agency and can be heroes, whereas fangirls are either invisible or weak yet odd girls” (Busse 2013). Gender, and in particular female sexuality, also plays a role in aut