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# Encomium on the Overlord

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## I. Teaching Hobby Horses How to Ski

As academic interest in fan communities continues to flourish, scholars have become increasingly intrigued by what's known as "fan activism": that is, by the ways in which fans work together "to address civic or political issues through engagement with and strategic deployment of popular culture content" (Brough and Shresthova 2.3). These efforts are often organized and sometimes enacted online, a space that's enriched fans' ability to connect both to one another and to their favorite celebrities. Indeed, as media scholar Lucy Bennett notes, more and more celebrities are turning to social media specifically "to mobilize their fans in various philanthropic and activist projects"—to encourage their own forms of fan activism ("Fan activism" 1.1).

What's gotten scholars so jazzed about this phenomenon, in part, is the potential that many see for transference: ways in which fans' practices of engagement in their own spaces might productively cross over into engagement with social issues in the wider public sphere. For example, in her recent case study of two fan groups heavily invested in activism, the Harry Potter Alliance (HPA) and John and Hank Green's Nerdfighters, Neta Kligler-Vilenchik argues that "participation in nonpolitical online participatory cultures can serve as a gateway to civic and political participation" (17). As she notes, the HPA is a fan-organized community that aims to connect the fictional content of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series "to real-world concerns" (10). Focusing on issues of "literacy, equality, and human rights," the HPA offers its members the opportunity to translate what they see as the books' promotion of "engagement and tolerance" into concrete efforts to enact change in the real world (11, 12). To that end, the group's projects have included raising funds to support survivors of the devastating 2010 earthquake in Haiti and advocating for the passage of marriage equality legislation in the United States (Kligler-Vilenchik 20).

Similarly, the Nerdfighters take a broader, but still civically minded, approach to social change (Kligler-Vilenchik 28). The group is made up of fans and followers of

the “VlogBrothers,” popular Young Adult author John Green and his brother, Hank, who began posting their video blogs (or vlogs) on YouTube in 2007 (Kligler-Vilenchik 8). Echoing the content of many of these vlogs, the Nerdfighters' efforts focus on helping their members to become better-informed citizens about issues like immigration, monetary policy, and foreign affairs (Kligler-Vilenchik 37, 38). Further, members contribute to small non-profit sites like Kiva.org, an organization that provides “small loans to people without access to traditional banking systems” and the Greens’ own “Foundation to Decrease World Suck” (10). Indeed, although the organization’s credo, “Decreasing World Suck,” leaves room for “individual Nerdfighters to interpret” precisely what “‘World Suck’ (and decreasing it)” might look like, Kligler-Vilenchik argues, the community has ultimately been able to translate its members’ sense of “collective belonging” into an “increase [in] participants’ sense of civic agency” (29).

Celebrities themselves can also directly inspire activism by directing their fans' attention, money, and civic attention towards a specific social or political cause via social media. In her study of Lady Gaga fandom, for example, Bennett highlights the singer's strategic use of Twitter to "instigate mobilisation [sic] and direct action" among her fanbase surrounding particular causes that "appear to operate in an effort to produce social change" ("If we stick together" 140, 141). Gaga has urged her fans, her "Little Monsters," to participate in a campaign pushing for the repeal of the US military's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy, as well as in fundraising efforts designed "to support homeless youths" ("If we stick together" 140, 144, 141).

Though the level of Gaga’s success is distinctive, Bennett argues, her decision to use social media to encourage fan activism is not. Rather, “celebrity use of social media” as a vehicle for social change has become increasingly common (“If we stick together” 140; Bennett, “Fan activism” 1.1). Indeed, fans’ participation in activism in and of itself is not new; as Bennett notes, many fan communities have a rich history of such practices (“Fan activism” 3.1). However, as these recent studies suggest, scholars have become increasingly intrigued by the Internet’s ability—particularly through social media—to make fan activism both more common and easier to trace (Brough and Shresthova 1.1). The value of studying such phenomena has been underscored by Henry Jenkins, the erstwhile granddaddy of fan studies. Jenkins

argues that, “Just as studying fan culture helped us to understand the innovations that occur on the fringes of the media industry,” studying the organization and practices of fan communities may "show us new ways of thinking about citizenship and collaboration" within the public sphere (257). The transformative potential of fan practices, then, may extend far beyond “open[ing] up new possibilities” in a community's favorite media texts into doing similar work in civic and political spaces (Jenkins 266).

There are rich veins for research here, to be sure.

However, it’s worth noting, I think, that the approach that many have taken to this question—this potential connection between fan practice and social change—has in some ways constrained our study of the “new possibilities” that this relationship might open up. As the examples above suggest, there are many fan practices that seem to fit neatly into scholars’ preconceived notions of what sorts of behaviors might have transferable value into the public sphere. However, I would argue that by focusing solely on what those of us outside of a fan community have already identified as valuable within that community—that is, those activities or practices that have the valence of civic or political potential—we risk overlooking those practices that the fan community *itself* identifies as engaging with and potentially transforming the public sphere, a definition that may not align with that held by outsiders.

That is, fan communities may be engaging in practices that, to an outsider (to us!) don’t read as traditional acts of social change, or don’t look like the kinds of fan activism we’ve seen or defined in other fandoms. Within the community itself, however, these practices are understood as acts intended to encourage social change. Thus, if we approach fandom spaces on the lookout only for those forms of fan engagement that *we* perceive to have crossover appeal—that is, that we as outsiders think fans might use to address what we define as civic or political problems—then we may cut ourselves off from some of the very “new ways of thinking” that, as Jenkins suggests, we’re going to these communities in order to behold.

In this piece, then, I apply such an approach to the fan community of actor Misha Collins, a regular on the CW Network series *Supernatural*. Ultimately, after attempting to listen carefully to how this community defines its own relationship to and practices of social change, this study suggests that a central effect of Collins' rhetoric on Twitter has been to persuade many of his followers, his fans, to embrace the notion that meaningful social change can be enacted not only through traditional civic and political means but also through seemingly random acts of art and public performance. This alternative approach to social change is embodied by the Greatest International Scavenger Hunt the World Has Ever Seen (GISHWHES), an annual event hosted by Collins in which participants are encouraged to disrupt the normalcy of their community's everyday lives by engaging in public acts of art and creation.

Central to his success in making this argument, I assert, has been Collins' adoption of a performative Twitter persona nicknamed "the Overlord," a world-hungry revolutionary with a flair for the dramatic:

> Misha Collins
> @mishacollins
>
> FYI: meg·a·lo·ma·ni·a n.1. A psychopathological condition characterized by delusional fantasies of wealth, power, or omnipotence.

Misha Collins
@mishacollins

eh, that definition doesn't quite fit me-I'm not occupied with "delusional fantasies of wealth, power, etc." they're more like action plans

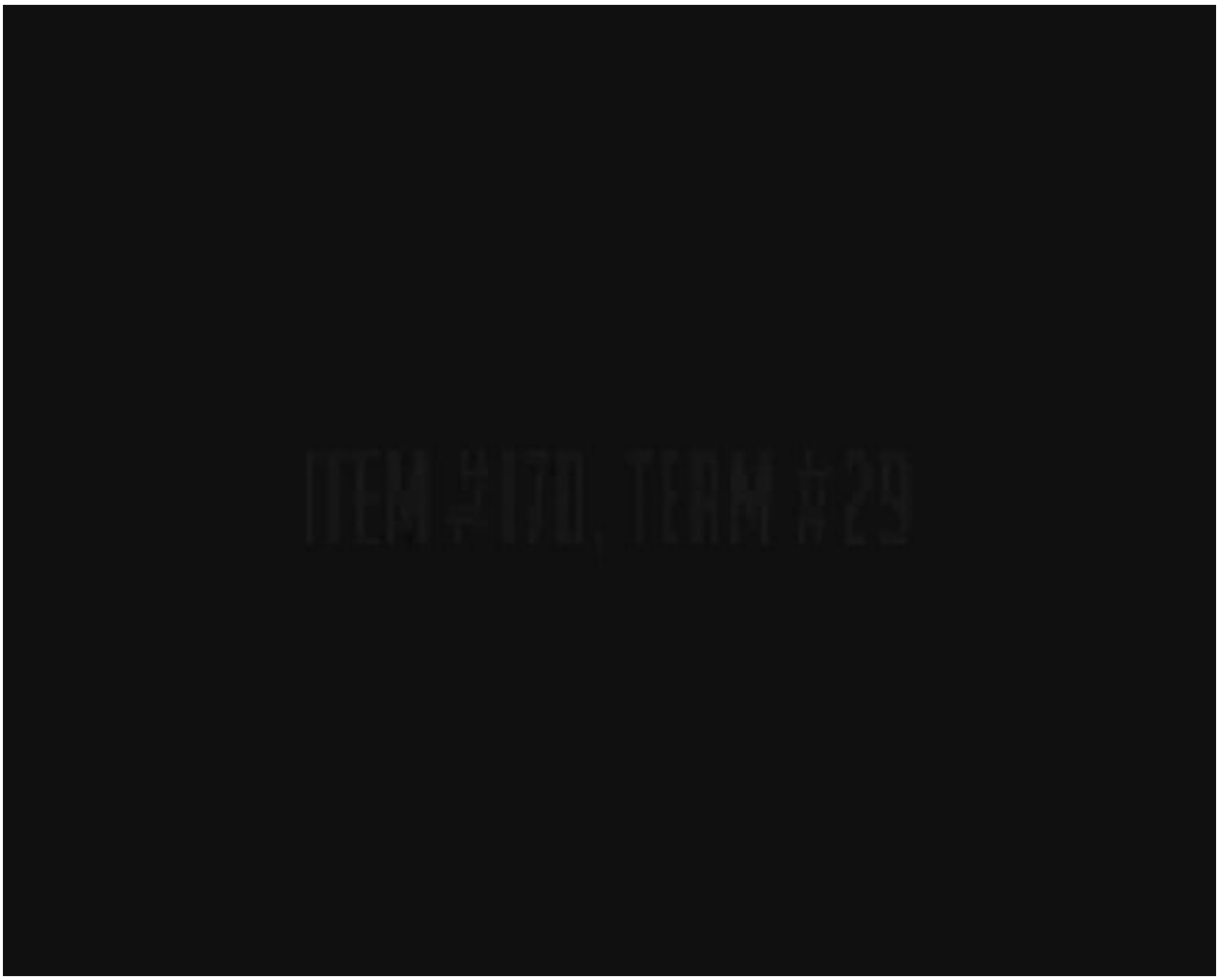
Through Collins' bellicose and sometimes surreal rhetoric, the persona of the Overlord serves to foreground the performative nature of a celebrity's identity onTwitter—something that many other celebrities make at least some effort to conceal. In this way, Collins has created a unique ethos, one more akin to the leaderof a rebellion than a Hollywood star, and he's drawn on this over-the-topauthority to convince his fans to participate in GISHWHES.

For one week each year, GISHWHES teams race not to locate certain items, but to make them: that is, participants create specific objects d'art and publicly perform acts of both surreality and kindness.

Participants may be asked to ride Big Wheels in formal wear—

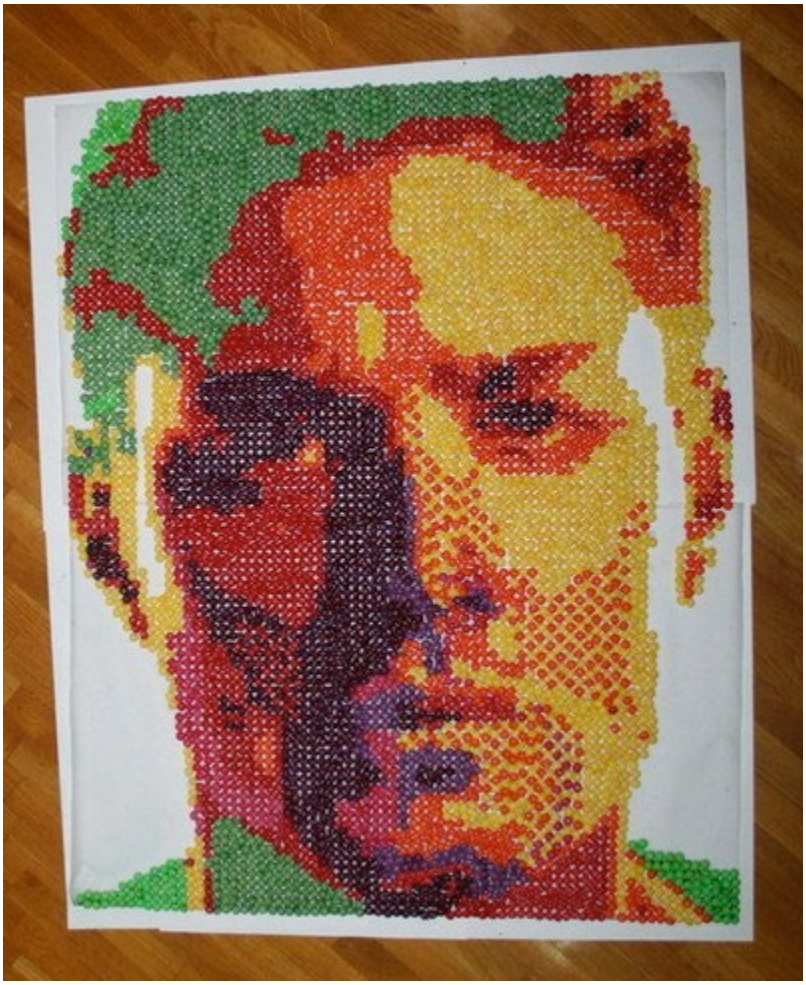
GISHWHES Item #99
OLIVIA RAE

To do random acts of kindness—




Item #170
TEAM 29

to build portraits out of Skittles—



ANXOXO, Item 40: Create a portrait …
SILVENHORROR

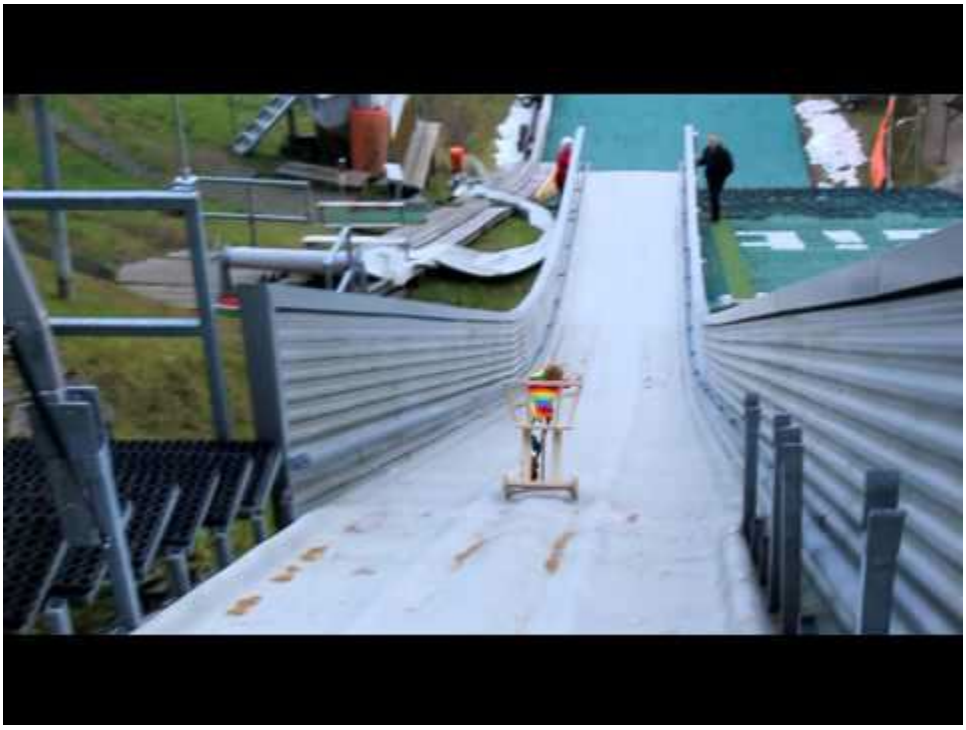
or to toss nuns down water slides.

[Video: AlternateScreen]

On the surface, to those outside this community, most of these actions don't read as legible acts of fan activism or social change.

Ok, that's putting it mildly.

Because, come on. How can you change the world by teaching a hobby horse how to ski?



Rocking Horse Ski Jump

MIMTSCHAN

Storify, the original platform for this piece, is no longer available, and the remainder of this article could not be reconstructed.