Petri dishes, 100px x 100px.
User pictures on LiveJournal and associated cultural practises.
Version 2.0: a further exploration of the phenomenon.
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This paper is a further exploration of the "user pictures" feature of the Live Journal weblogging application but also “user pictures” as a media form developed by users of the application and members, at the same time, of Live Journal as a social aggregate. As we can already see, a software application platform, content made available there and participating individuals play multiple roles, are tied in multiple ways and through multiple aspects in what can be called a socio-technical “seamless web” (Hughes, quoted in Latour 1988) or alternatively a “media mix” (Ito 2004).

This version rests in an uneasy symbiosis with its predecessor. It cannot exist without the former, upon which it relies for introduction into the matter, which here is omitted. But at the same time it uncovers the incompleteness of the previous piece, by further developing issues only hinted at earlier. It is not also a simple repetition of themes previously addressed – consider this a blossoming of the former. Like a flower and a fruit, both can be appreciated separately, are better understood together, and do not tell us the whole truth about the tree.

The paper addresses, in turn, following issues:

- in my opening remarks, I argue for the importance and validity of Live Journal as an object of research
- I look once more at the basic characteristics of user pictures on Live Journal
- I look at user pictures from the perspective of John Fiske's theory of popular culture and consider its necessary adjustments. Place of user pictures in a wider sphere of culture can be further explained by Mizuko Ito's concept of a media mix.
- I show how activities on Live Journal fit into ongoing discussions about intellectual property and

creativity by describing production of user pictures as a case of what Yochai Benkler calls peer production.

The Rehabilitation of Live Journal

My research endeavour starts with a belief that, in looking at Live Journal, one should see it as a complex creature: a space, a social aggregate, a collection of content, and a chunk of the mediated social reality. Moving beyond a commonly encountered, biased assumption that Live Journal is a *lesser* space in the online environment does not lead me directly to giving Live Journal merit. Instead, I would like to leave behind a priori judgements, to level the field before starting the analysis.

Internet research, in general, needs to address the issue of an easily appearing bias that comes directly from the involvement of the researchers, as participants and actors, in the new medium and new social space. Growth of the Internet, as Manuel Castells (2001) observed, has been stimulated by four original cultures, of which one was the entrepreneurial spirit, characterized by trust in mind-power, the potential to capitalize on it and by an orientation on the future and its positive outcomes. ”Internet entrepreneurs are creators rather than businessmen, closer to the artist” (Castells 2001, 61). As such, this culture is not necessarily alien to the spirit of academic research. Moving in this direction, Castells' narrative of the cultural history of the Internet makes implicitly a controversial claim that the four cultures were not antagonistic to each other, that the development of the medium and its sudden growth in the mid-1990s should not be described in terms of a conflict or sudden shift, a catastrophe, and that Internet growth, in its final phase, was largely driven by entrepreneurship.

The development of Internet studies conducted from a social or humanistic perspective coincides with the shift of the Internet from an elite to a popular medium. Still, some research predates the time, when the masses arrived *online*. These two tendencies: the entrepreneurial spirit – highly optimistic but lacking norms of research rigor - and a sense of ancestry, of prestige tied to greater experience – can serve to explain the bias with which Live Journal is looked upon.

The third explanatory element is a commonly accepted and rarely brought under scrutiny belief in the positive value of *being connected*. Connectedness as a value is present at multiple levels and locations: from youth, for whom constant connectivity with peers is a social norm, through users of blogs, for whom constant updates are necessary in order to function properly in the knowledge environment, to government policies that stress importance of connectivity over provision of skills or content. Among social researchers of the Internet, the implicit requirement of connectedness is at the base of an explicit argument that novelty of the Internet cannot be understood at a distance, that you have to *be there* to *understand.* It is less an argument about connectedness in a technical sense rather than about participation, about the sharing of the same symbolic and experiential universe as one's research matter.

Internet researchers, in particular those interested in the phenomenon of weblogging, seem to regard Live Journal as a space of lesser value, without devoting necessary time to observation. Partially, this can be explained by interdisciplinary nature of the field and a conflict between preoccupation with issues of quality of communication important for information studies and knowledge management, and the disinterested look at cultural and social phenomena of the ethnographer or sociologist. There is a tendency to evaluate different weblogging spaces, applications and *communitites*[1] (the three largely overlap). Commonly, part of this environment is described as the *blogosphere*: the weblogging environment, in which the Logos germinates. The term was coined by William Quick to describe "the intellectual cyberspace that we bloggers occupy" (Quick 2002). I see this bias as a result of an uncommonly large portion of data being collected *online* through personal experience, without necessary reflexivity.

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[1] The term *community* is commonly used to describe *online* social groupings. The term is also used in scientific texts, following Rheingold's Virtual Community [popraw, przypis???]. It is also the term used on Live Journal to describe any collective journal around which, presumably, a "community" forms. The term is highly imprecise and misleading, if we take into account the history of it's previous usage. These "communitites" are rather voluntary associations tied by common interests or characteristics. Fiske (1992a) proposes to talk about *social formations* associated with cultural forms and social interests. We can also point to Wellman's understanding of community as a network of interpersonal ties and a set of overlapping personalized networks (Wellman 2001) but such strict sociological view does not grasp the position and role of media forms that exist alongside human actors. This said, I will often use the term *community* to describe social formations that are part of Live Journal as a social grouping.

A solution can be found in basic assumptions of humanistic sociology, as developed by the Chicago School of Sociology. For its members, social reality is constructed in a historical process through human interactions. Cultural objects differ from natural things in that for humans they possess meaning and worth: they become values. they are values: with meaning and worth for humans. This is what Florian Znaniecki called the "humanistic coefficient". “Consequently, for the scientists this cultural system is really and objectively as it was (or is) given to those historical subjects themselves when they were (or are) experiencing it and actively dealing with it. In a word, the data of the cultural student are always 'somebody's', never 'nobody's' data. This essential character of cultural data we call the humanistic coefficient [...]” (Znaniecki, quoted in Plummer 2001, 38). Znaniecki observes that social reality is established through communication and interaction and since these are always limited in scope there are in fact many of what he calls “social worlds” (Hałas 1991). He therefore believed that personal experience constitutes an important source of empirical data. Znaniecki's methodology could well be applied to online research, as the researched environment is divided into a multitude of distinct and differing communities and the involvement of researchers in the medium can make personal experience a good source of data. But, as a flip side, unfamiliar *online* spaces become like blank spots on maps, in which figures of monsters were painted.

Parallels can be here drawn to the critique of the Habermas's concept and history of bourgeoise public sphere, which he presented in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. In an overview article, John Thompson (1994) lists four key critiques, one of them being the “neglect [of] the significance of other forms of public discourse and activity” (Thompson 1994, 91). He then adds: “Not only were popular movements much more important in the clearly modern period than he had previously allowed, but it is also clear that they cannot be adequately understood as mere variants of the liberal model of the bourgeois public sphere (any more than popular culture can be understood as a derivative of dominant cultural forms) (Thompson 1994, 92). While every parallel has bounds to its applicability, we can think in similar terms of Live Journal: as a space that is different, but no less

important, and not adequately understood.

I believe that Live Journal is an important research subject not only because it is means of gaining an ethnographic glimpse at the society (mainly it's younger generations) but also because it has many characteristics common with the rest of the *online* environment. I will try to show that processes visible on Live Journal are examples of wider issues of interest to those researching ongoing cultural transformation. That Live Journal is not an explanatory variable with the use of which encountered phenomena can be seen, in a recursive manner, as limited to the space itself. And that the merits of Live Journal go beyond a relatively open architecture that allows for easy collation of statistical data and social network analysis studies

. According to John Fiske, cultural studies use a model of validation that is not representative but systemic. If we agree that Live Journal is part of a larger online system, then Live Journal "is significant because it is a practice of a system, not because it reproduces other practices" (Fiske 1992). He then adds that abnormal or marginal instances of a system are significant because they point to the extremes it is capable of. Rather than thinking of Live Journal as abnormal, I would like to consider it an *online* research frontier. Rather than dealing with "intellectual cyberspace", I would rather like to investigate *online* life in its banal wonder.

A comment has been made that sums up well the approach towards Live Journal that I have been critical of: "That's one of the problems with researching LJ as a social network - it's well developed, but it quickly makes you want to stab yourself in the face " (quoted in Sunir 2004). As a participant of the space, one is allowed to react in any way to the experience. But among researchers, as Georg Simmel has stated, "it is not our task to accuse or to pardon, but only to understand" (Frisby & Featherstone 1997).

Characteristics of a user picture.

Part of the difficulty of this research comes from the fact that an interdisciplinary approach has to

deal with greater complexity of the research subject. The difficulty is linguistic and epistemic: complexity is hidden by the use of a single term to describe what are in fact different aspects or even different phenomena.

This research, if it needs to be located, fits most closely into the field of cultural studies, defined by their focus upon symbolic or cultural forms and covering “social processes involved in [their] production, transmission and reception” (Giddens et al 1994, 1). While my initial goal was more sociological: an interest in the pragmatic aspect of these forms, their place inside and effects they have upon human lives – content analysis turned out to provide insufficient data to catch Znaniecki's humanistic coefficient.

Alternatively, we can altogether do away with disciplinary distinctions. Bruno Latour (2002) reminds us that Gabriel Tarde, one of founding fathers of sociology, in a book titled *Monadologie et sociologie*, proposes to see all sciences as becoming branches of sociology in the future and to do away with distinctions between *associations* of different sorts. The word “society” can, according to Tarde, be attributed to any *association*, any assemblage of units. The tendency to do away with oppositions, while constantly acknowledging heterogeneity of elements, is proposed by ANT theorists (see for example Law 1992) in the field of science, technology and society studies. Similar view on the relation of cultural forms and societies, in which they circulate, is expressed by theorists of postmodernity (see for example Lash and Urry 1994).

As has been mentioned at the very beginning, Live Journal is many things at once. For our purpose we can describe it as a collaborative online publishing system that allows its users to produce, receive and interact with content. Around this content, asynchronous communication develops in a range of social configurations – and also becomes system's content. We can describe Live Journal as a personal publishing system, a social networking site or a virtual community (in itself an assemblage of those, thus presenting a fractal structure). It can be any of these to a given user or group. In fact, the openness of the architecture means that the list of uses, the facades with which Live Journal presents

itself to us, is long. Live Journal is a generic tool for content manipulation, which particular *communities* use to fulfill specific and different common interests and needs. There are parts of Live Journal that have the feel of a social networking site – and those that have the feel of a porn web page. To make matters more complicated, users often engage in multiple communities, their use of the system is rarely clear-cut. Finally, where we draw a boundary of the system in fact a continuity exists, as the system interacts with other *online* applications. The necessity to extract "specimens" out of a continuous cultural phenomenon is the fallacy of the cultural analyst (Fiske 1992). Similarly, user pictures exist in a wider cultural, symbolic environment. Later we will try to describe this through the theoretical concept of "media mix".

To quote Tarde's view on "vast regular mechanisms" such as the social, or in our case the Live Journal: "their components [...] pertain to them by one side only, but through the other sides, they escape from the world they constitute." They are "artificial being[s], made only of sides and facades of beings." (Tarde, quoted in Latour 2002).

In the end, Live Journal is simply a database of content, accessed by an aggregate of users through a limited range of modes defined by system's administrators. It becomes something more than a generic database through the power of its brand name, investment of time and attention by its users, usefulness of the interface and functions (all of which we can see as certain facets preselected from among many potential ones).

Similar complexity can be found among user pictures on Live Journal: a file assigned to each Live Journal, for which an initial use was devised but which, the moment the system started, began blossoming into a phenomenon more complex. We can distinguish between a *prescribed* understanding and use of pictures offered by systems administrators and their *actual* uses. This is roughly comparable to de Sassure's distinction between *langue* and *parole*. We can also see them as made up of several layers: a *code layer*, a *content layer* and an *interactive layer* – the three-layer model draws inspiration from Benkler's model of information access and regulation (Benkler ???consumers). These layers

overlap to an extent.

To quote the LiveJournal FAQ once more, "[u]ser pictures are icons or avatars used to represent yourself, your moods or feelings, your interests, etc. They are displayed in numerous locations on LiveJournal [...]" (FAQ Question #1). Each picture has to be a .GIF, .JPG, or .PNG file, not larger than 100 by 100 pixels and with a file size not greater than 40kb. User pictures are the only files stored on LiveJournal servers other than text content. At *code level*, user pictures are just spaces allocated in the database that can contain content which meets technical requirements of format and size. At *content layer*, user pictures become images visible in users' browsers. As mentioned before, system's administrators offer both minimal advice and guidance as to what a user picture is to be, suggesting only that it is used to represent oneself[2]. At this layer, by looking at actual images we can see that the function of pictures is understood by users broadly and there is large variation among particular uses – which I tried to categorize in my former paper. A single metaphor does not suffice here, an individual set of pictures, what I call a *user picture pool* can resemble an ID document, a lapel badge or bumper sticker, the wall of a bedroom or a handbag full of trinkets. At the *interactive layer* we see pictures as material artifacts tied to social practices. Upon opening a Live Journal account, a user has to search out pictures for his pool and make certain they meet the technical requirements.[3] Later on, *user picture pools* can be further attended to. They also becoming points, to which interactions are anchored. For the majority of Live Journal users, user pictures are not overly significant. For me most interesting are specialized practices, in which pictures play a role, of which two are for me particularly important:

-production and circulation of icons: user pictures become a defined media form used by dedicated communities of *icon makers* (and their *clients)*;

-use of user pictures by fandom, for which they become one of forms of expression.

These specific uses require possession of certain skills and conventions, often specific to a given

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[2] This general representative function makes it possible to study user pictures in the context of users' identities.

[3] This proves existence of a certain level of multimedia literacy, as an average Live Journal user is required to and seems able to crop and reformat images.

community or their range. They also depend on a greater sensitivity to aesthetics and meanings conveyed by user pictures. Finally, many members acquire a higher level of multimedia literacy and are proficient in working with visual content. The two sets of practices and two *communities* overlap, as they share a common aesthetic. Thus use of pictures by fandom can be seen as an instance of icon-making.

Summing up, we can say that user pictures are prescribed at the code layer, but become open media at content and interactive layers. I will later argue that this configuration, which I compare metaphorically to a petri dish, is supportive of *online* creativity.

User pictures as popular cultural production.

Live Journal is a space in which popular culture grows. Cultural forms are not only passively consumed, but also actively produced, though without breaking the logic or the boundaries of a wider cultural system shaped and dependent upon dominant media. It therefore fits the theoretical model of popular culture devised by John Fiske (1992b).

While we can consider the selection, preparation and display of pictures by any Live Journal user as a form of cultural production, most significant examples are provided by two above-mentioned groups: icon-making[4] and fandom communities. They are distinct due to the fact that their members attach greater attention to user pictures: norms of presentation and evaluation of pictures are established and the pictures become a symbolic “currency” that circulates within these communities. In the case of icon-makers, common interest in icons was that community's sole defining principle, before interpersonal ties were established.

Icon making is a social activity. Producers display their icons, share them or make them to order. Their clients seek out new icons and place orders as they tend to their *user picture pools*. Icons are

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4 Unless noted otherwise, the term “icon” is reserved for user pictures produced and circulating in communities tied to icon makers – in order to distinguish these from the rest of user pictures.

being compared, judged and discussed. This takes place in three types of social configurations:

-an individual icon maker publishes icons in a journal (often set up for this purpose, in addition to a personal journal) and often makes them available to other users;

-a group of icon makers sets up a community, in which they cater to the needs of other members by producing icons, often based on their requests;

-a community exists for the purpose of running peer-judged icon making competitions; entry into such a community is often dependent upon community valuation of one's work[5].

In each case, icon makers work within a prescribed canon that defines the elements and aesthetics of an icon, which conventionally consists of three elements: a portrait, a background and a motto. Exceptions exist and are recognized as distinct styles: icons without text or with an embedded video or animated sequence. It is the specific rules that guide the selection of content for each of the three elements that turn icons into prime examples of popular cultural content, characterized by production at the interface of dominant cultural industries and everyday life (Fiske 1992b). The portrait is usually that of a popcultural icon[6], a celebrity or of a fictional character. Alongside actors and characters played by them we also find animated characters, especially from *animes*, Japanese animated series, or computer and console games. For some icon makers, one or several preferred celebrities or characters become their trademarks, parts of their individual artistic style. There are also communities devoted to a given character, product or genre.

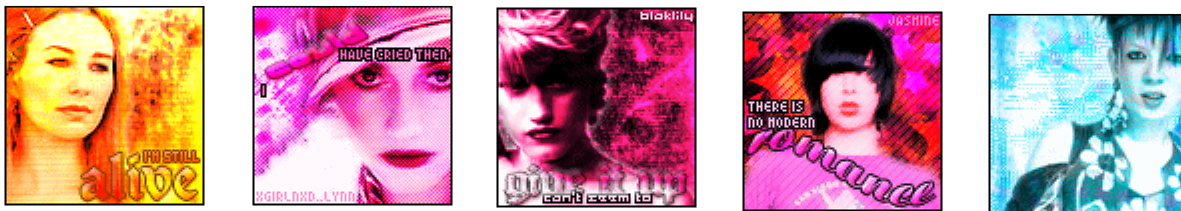

Figure 1. The style of xgirlnxd, an *icon maker* – defined by celebrity choice and an aesthetic.

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5 There are also communities for which icons are one element of a journal's layout, which is evaluated as a whole. Acceptance in a community based on produced content is a wider practise on Live Journal. Some communities exist with the purpose of exchanging members' photos and evaluating their looks.

6 I use the term "popcultural" not as an equivalent of "popular cultural" but to describe a dominant cultural form associated with mass "pop" or "Hollywood" culture. "Popcultural icon", used as a synonym for celebrity, should not be confused with the word "icon" used alone.

Content of individual user picture pools can be placed on a spectrum, ranging from pools dominated by a single celebrity figure to collections of several different ones. Additionally, some users use icons that include own portraits.

Selection of figures for user pictures can be explained by several factors. One of them is identification with the icon figure, the way a viewer identifies with a movie character . Fandom, as Fiske (1992b) observes, involves “active, enthusiastic, partisan, participatory engagement with text” as well as production of own texts. We can also expect that for some users popcultural icons become true avatars, emblems not only of their social and cultural allegiances, but individual identities.

Icons are also tools of self-expression and a spectrum can be charted, based on the extent of expression afforded by the form, which partially depends on the breadth of the communication channel: the amount of information that can be conveyed. By working with three distinct elements: a human figure, a text and an abstract, colorful background space, icon makers increase the communicative potential. Information in an icon is so condensed that there is no ground, all elements are figure. Additionally, a qualitative difference exists between passive users of icons and active icon makers, with only the later having true control over this cultural form. We can draw a parallel here with the general distinction between producers/users and consumers/users of new media (Castells 2001). I believe this distinction leads to the formation of inequalities in symbolic power that define nature of many *online* social groupings. Others, for example Benkler, argue that a decentralized and democratic online environment (like the one we encounter in Live Journal) enables all individuals to become users: “participants in the production of their information environment” (Benkler ???). This is true, though the extent is often negligent.

To understand icons, or any other popular cultural production, we need to establish its position in the wider cultural sphere, particularly in relation to what Fiske calls dominant media and to the cultural products of the dominant media industry.

Fiske's view of a recipient of dominant cultural content is optimistic and rests in sharp contrast to a school of thought started by the pessimistic outlook of Adorno and the Frankfurt School: “people are not a passive, helpless mass” (Fiske 1987). For Fiske, the sphere of popular culture exists *alongside* dominant culture. In it, same materials circulate for a different purpose: that of pleasure, not profit. Cultural industries provide most of cultural content, but popular culture treats it as “raw material”, as “goods to speak with” and finds its own uses and interpretations or even builds own content on this base. Cultural industries can only produce a repertoire of text, the way news media industries are agenda-setting. But when these repertoires are used by people to make popular culture, the activity lies beyond the control of dominant cultural institutions.

The autonomy of media recipients and their uses of cultural products is a controversial claim. While it is obvious that by producing popular culture people create a distinct cultural sphere, the extent to which this sphere is autonomous, or even anarchic, is what remains uncertain. Fiske rightly observes that everyday life is filled with practises of cultural production and that modern cultural experience is not limited to passive consumption of commodified forms. But I would not agree with the consequences he draws from this fact. Fiske quotes de Certeau and Eco, who both describe popular culture through military metaphors and see it as a sphere of struggle. de Certeau writes about fleeting tactics of the weak used against well-organized forces of the strong; Eco talks about semiotic guerrilla action that brings back a critical dimension to passive reception of content (Dery 1993). After de Certeau, Fiske (1992b) describes this as a consequence of the cumbersome, unimaginative and over-organized nature of the powerful, opposed by the creativity, agility and flexibility of the weak. As the powerful construct places where power is exercised, writes Fiske, the 'weak' make spaces within those places that they temporarily occupy. Fiske compares a popular reading of a text to *dwelling* in a *place* that belongs to the landlord, but is made into our own *space*. He then comments on the inability of cultural industry to control the use of its products in everyday life: “To attract consumers is to attract tricksters; encouraging consumption encourages trickery, robbery, la perruque” (Fiske 1992b, 41).

I believe that popular cultural practises encountered on Live Journal should lead us to more conservative conclusions. Fiske's position does apply to fandom's activities, characterized to a greater extent also by the need for mischief, for subversion of dominant content.

Figure 2. Fandom's subversive productions.

In the case of icon making communities, I did not encounter signs of a cultural struggle, examples of trickery, proof of the kidnapping of a popcultural icon. Fiske is right that icon makers are active producers, guided by pleasure and not profit motive. And they make do with what they have: images of themselves and products of cultural industries. Fiske (1992b) proposes to expand Barthes' distinction between *writerly* and *readerly* text with the category of the *producerly*: one that is accessible to a reader "comfortably accomodated within the dominant ideology" (Fiske 1992b, 104) but also has the openness of a writerly text that challenges the reader to rewrite it. For Fiske, a producerly text has "meanings [that] exceed its own power to discipline them", it is "beyond its own control" (Fiske 1992b, 104). I think that while dominant cultural forms, as they circulate in everyday life, become producerly, icon makers do not take advantage of this quality. Symbiosis or parasitism seems a better metaphor than struggle for activity that multiplies a cultural form without subversion. We are dealing with a cultural sphere that is additional, not alternative, to dominant culture. In our consumer society, a popular rebellion should constitute of a turning away from financial economy. The question therefore becomes

whether, for icon makers, participation in popular culture displaces their participation in dominant culture: whether they still go to concerts, purchase T-shirts and gadgets and buy glossy magazines with images and gossip about their favourite celebrities[7].

Fiske believes that cultural tactics of everyday life erode and weaken the system, making possible future structural changes – and this, ultimately, seems to be at stake of the argument about conflictive nature of popular culture. But activities observed in icon making communities are better described by a distinction made by Alberto Melucci between collective action that involves a breach of the limits of compatibility of the system and one that is order-maintaining (Melucci 1996). Icon making is an activity of the latter sort and thus will not lead to structural changes of the system

Fiske's theory of popular culture as an alternative economy and sphere of circulation does not provide tools to understand self-expression through images of popcultural icons, as it does not account for the interaction, or even interlocking of the producer herself and the content at a symbolic, imaginative level, in acts of popular cultural production and experience.

That is partly because the Internet, which has transformed popular culture, is not accounted for in this theory. Before the Internet, as Fiske writes, popular cultural forms existed *somewhere* between the system of cultural production and everyday lives of users. Fiske describes three levels, at which popular cultural circulates: primary texts - original cultural commodities, secondary texts that directly refer to them and tertiary texts, parts of the process of everyday life. Tertiary texts are, for example, conversations, ways of dressing or forms of behaviour – they are fleeting, temporary phenomena of everyday life and often leave no trace in the form of a material artifact that can widely circulate. Before the Internet, circulation of another form of tertiary texts – popular cultural productions like zines, underground movies or fan fiction, was as limited as the possibility of personal publishing. The following diagrams pictures the circulation of content between dominant and popular culture before the Internet arrived:

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[7] *Displacement* of other types of activity in our everyday routines is often considered one of the key measures of Internet's effect upon users.

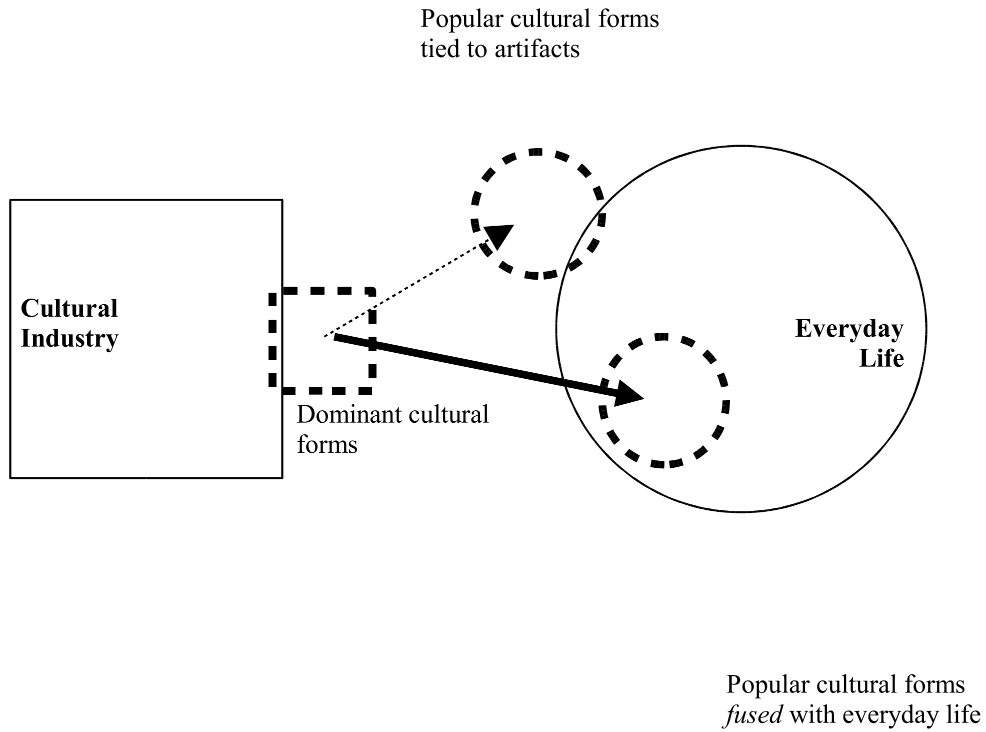

Figure 3. Circulation of cultural forms. Dominant forms are transformed into popular cultural products, a majority of them into ephemeral forms, lacking material artifacts.

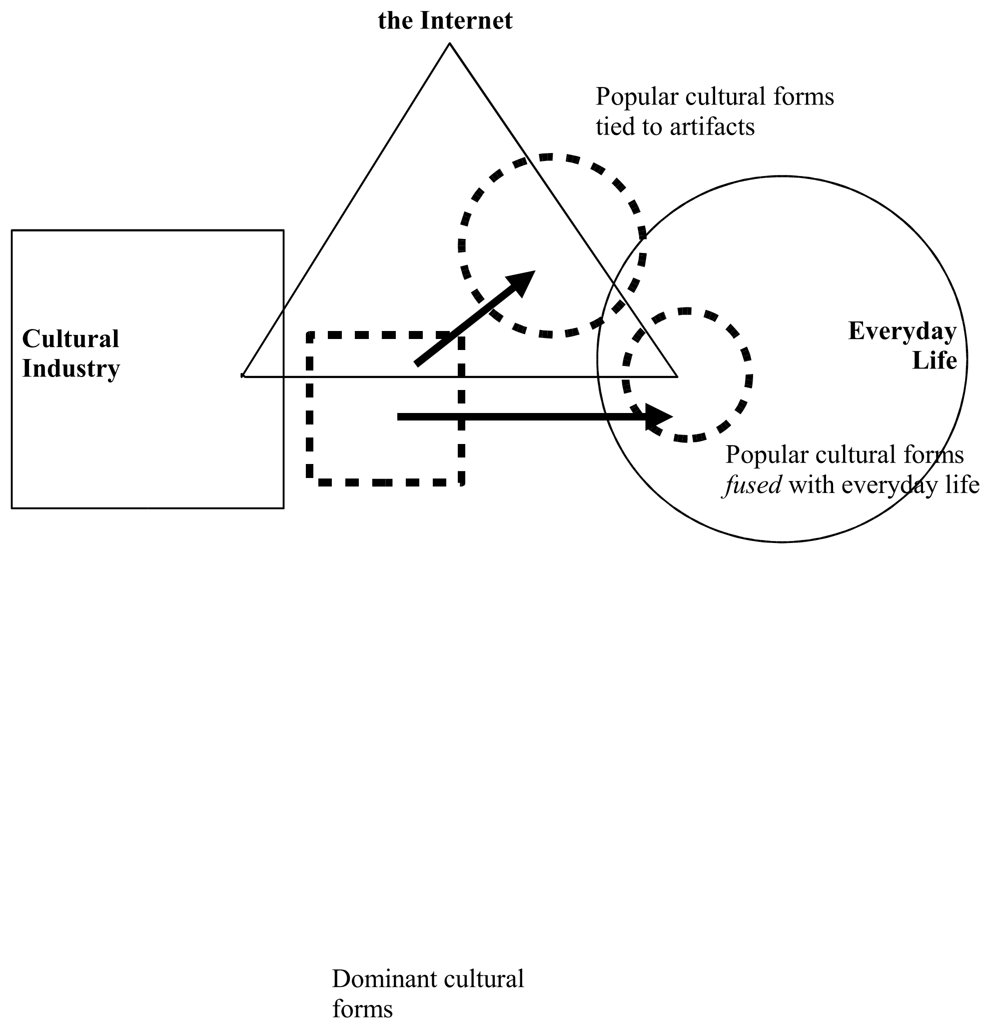

Figure 4. The effect of the Internet upon circulation of cultural forms. Dominant cultural forms now partially circulate *online*. Amount of popular cultural artifacts produced grows as the Internet enables popular publishing. Everyday life manifests itself online, where popular cultural forms of expression almost always leave material traces. Tertiary texts therefore become much less ephemeral.

Internet changes several factors described as crucial by cultural studies theorists – change can mosstly be ascribed to the fact that popular cultural practices become online texts with a material trace. Through the Internet, popular culture suddenly acquired a stable *place* rather than just a temporary *space*. Hakim Bey hoped that the non-commercial Internet will become a Temporary Autonomous

Zone, a modern age “pirate utopia”. Live Journal is an online space that should not be seen as a space where “powerful construct 'places' to exercise power” (Fiske 1992b, 32) but it neither is smooth, nomadic, anarchic. It is a space where humans might dwell temporarily, but content dwells forever, until the death of the server. Both Eco (quoted in Fiske 1992b) and Tarde (quoted in Latour 2002) believe that large systems are easy to trick by the small, whom they cannot effectively control. This changes in digital environments, characterized by ease of monitoring, tracking and data retrieval. In such environments, a feedback loop can be closed by the cultural industry, which can easily gain insight into the popular circulation of materials, based on which they can shape future production and marketing. In this perspective, the “friends only” option available on Live Journal becomes a powerful tool for the creation of spaces that are private, hidden and potentially pirate.

Internet also changes the manner in which “raw materials” for popular cultural production are acquired. Before the Internet, content could be obtained almost exclusively through shopping or reception of broadcast, push media. Vastness of World Wide Web's resources and the ease of duplication made possible by digitalization made possible a third mode: cultural *grazing* or *foraging*. In this mode, the individual has access to vastly greater content than that available through push media. While possibility of selection makes it similar to shopping, there are no necessary financial costs, with time being the only investment – contingent on amount of content available. The metaphor of foraging can probably be applied more widely to all interactions with online content, where quantity of content poses greater difficulties than its cost.

For Jenkins (1998), cultural poachers are *bricoleurs*: “someone who works with his hands and uses devious means compared to those of a craftsman” (Levi-Strauss 1966, 16). *Bricolage* is characterized by “making do with whatever is at hand”: a set of parts that is neither planned or invented, but found, assembled and appropriated. While online foraging is still a form of bricolage, it takes place in an environment of plentitude, where the range of materials “at hand” is vast and importantly represents close to all of current dominant cultural production. B*ricolage* can be seen as a

strategy of dealing with a state of abundance, in which no order is visible, no sense that the elements are "drawn together and properly assembled". Instead, elements are gathered over time and form a set that is less like an *order* and more like a *list* that "groups together, but it doesn't tame" (Law and Mol 2002, 14-15).

One more consequence, on which I want to focus, is that when dominant and popular cultural forms, as well as the sphere of everyday life, are transferred *online*, they begin coexisting in a single symbolic space. To a reader of live Journal content, dominant images of celebrities, same images reworked into icons and discussions revolving around them form a single experience. (Naturally, analysis will easily miss – and this becomes a methodological difficulty – practises taking place offline or in non-public spaces, which are that space's *dark content*). Personal experience suggests that these different cultural forms are experienced at the same time as clearly different, but also fusing and exchanging qualities, with an ease comparable to that with which bacteria exchange DNA fragments. This is an example of what Lash and Urry describe as postmodern condition, in which cultural forms increasingly form part of social reality that is not distinguished as different or specific. In post-modernity, "an audience is sensitized to the reception of such cultural objects because of 'semiotics of everyday life' in which the boundary between the cultural and life, between the image and the real, is more than ever transgressed" (Lash and Urry 1994, 135).

While this is a correct description, we can go on to try to discern consequences of such condition. In the case of icon making communities, the question is: what is the consequence of the mixing of *selves* and popcultural icons? I can only hint here at two alternative situations, dependent on the relative strength of the two forces. The *self* can dominate, treating the celebrity as its avatar, a puppet to play with, a building block of own identity. This might be the case of icons that include personal images, which then coexist, on equal standing, in a celebrity environment. Alternatively, the power of celebrities can manifest itself and the *self* will be shaped in the image of the icon.

Still, the selection of content should not be taken for granted. Digital media have transformed the

types of content made available in popular cultural production. At the beginning of the 1990s, Fiske could write: “With very few and very marginal exceptions, people cannot and do not produce their own commodities, material or cultural, as they may have done in tribal or folk societies. In capitalist societies there is no so-called authentic folk culture against which to measure the 'inauthenticity' of mass culture, so bemoaning the loss of the authentic is a fruitless exercise in romantic nostalgia” (Fiske 1992b, 27). Digital still, video and phone cameras, scanners, graphic and audio-video software make personal production of cultural commodities possible and the range of content that can be produced is great. Yet the world of Live Journal icons is monotonous like a depleted ecosystem, inhabited by popcultural celebrities and users themselves, living side by side with an array of eye-catching, dazzling, abstract backgrounds and simple slogans and mottos. The icon environment is highly aesthetic and conformist. Lacking are any traces of outside reality: natural or urban landscapes, internal settings, strangers and crowds that are part of our everyday existence. Friends and partners appear to play their parts on rare occasions.

User Pictures as parts of a media mix

Another conceptual tool for looking at user pictures as situated in a wider net of institutions, products and patterns of behaviour, is offered by Mizuko Ito's concept of the “media mix”, which she originally applied to Yugioh and Pokemon, two Japanese cultural phenomena. According to Ito (2004), media mix, as pioneered by Pokemon, was an “integration of media forms through licensed character content”. Such integration of different forms and products characterizes much cultural content today, as movies, TV series or music stars all blossom into a range of related forms and products. Henry Jenkins (1998) observes that it is often becoming increasingly more difficult to establish which markets are core or ancillary in what he calls, after Marsha Kinder, “entertainment supersystems”.In the case of Yugioh and Pokemon, the core of the mix is formed by a game, a media form that is interactive and thus

relatively open. According to Ito, media mix of Yugioh is much more than an aggregate of commercial content – it includes a social imaginary and the construction of identities and social relations. Ito argues, that these “other worldly characters and narratives” are disruptive of the ordinary. She observes that on the basis of the narrowly understood media mix, used as a citational network, grow unexpected practises and imaginings that form a “counter-hegemonic subculture of children in opposition to the hegemonic adult values” (Ito 2002). Alongside the market for media mix content develops a “grey market” of non-commercial exchanges, rogue imaginings and unexpected identities. For Ito, two points are crucial: that media mixes “challenge our ideas of childhood agency and the passivity of media consumption, highlighting the active, entrepreneurial, and technologized aspects of children’s engagement with popular culture” (Ito 2002); and that this popular culture is extroverted and hypersocial, “far from the shut-in behaviour that gave rise to the most familiar forms of anti-media rhetoric” (Ito 2004).

Ito's research on “media mix” forces us to reconsider the interpretation of icon making. We observe the same sort of hijacking of content for new, imaginative us. And the development of a social imaginary produced by media networks, but by now structuring users' subjectivities. In this imaginary, users and celebrities are equals and the latter are subject to the former's whims: in the world of icons, users stage celebrities in little productions, weighing 40kb or less, measuring 100 by 100 pixels. The question remains, in what ways Japanese media mixes differ from the media mix of Live Journal icons. Firstly, in the Yugioh mix subversive activity is present in the *offline* world, as players meet to play. On Live Journal, the activity is limited to the *online* space. *Offline*, icon makers create, in solitude, icons, while more passive members attend to other facets of their lives. On the other hand, in the media mix of Yugioh, the commercial component is more predominant, as participants are required to purchase card and video games. Icon makers can acquire raw materials for free. Finally, the two imaginaries differ. In the case of Yugioh, we are dealing with a fantastic, other worldly reality and a narrative that by itself puts children in the spot of main protagonists. The imaginary of the celebrity world is also fantastic but

not other worldly and therefore less disruptive. It's protagonists are idealized, constructed celebrity personas and the prescribed position of the child and the youth in this imaginary is that of an admirer and audience member.

(A short note on fandom production)

Icon making might be also offering only a limited scope for reworking or subverting content due to limitations of the form. Compared to a written text, a musical composition or movie, a small image offers little space for expression. Therefore, while still being instances of appropriation, they are subversive only to a small extent – mainly by tipping the balance between a celebrity and an individual from a prescribed state of inequality to one more favourable for the latter. Among different Live Journal communities, the limits of subversion using user picture as the medium are tested by fandom communities.

In this paper, fandom interests us only as a specific instance of icon making. Beyond that, fandom sometimes expresses its interests and allegiances through simple multiplication of content, without any transformations, by using them as user pictures. While I discern between icon making and fandom communities, the former is an example of fan production as well. The difference seems to come from the respective cultural forms to which a fandom is tied and the extent to which these are producerly forms. Music and movie stars are clearly less open, less inviting to popular reworking than cultural forms involving fictional characters. Both their fictional nature and, in the case of movies, the tension between the character and the actor, seem to invite appropriation. Still, it is hard to determine, from content alone, what rules apply to the selection of media forms for appropriation.

Henry Jenkins (1998) observes that fandom is rarely engaged in culture jamming: disruption and destabilization of mass media with the ultimate goal of opting out of media consumption. They are involved in poaching: appropriation that is more dialogic with dominant culture and respectful of mainstream consumption of the media. Cultural poachers mainly care about the right to self-expression

and reworking of cultural material for own ends and pleasures, but acknowledge that their position is marginal – though Jenkins (1998) notes that today cultural industries reciprocally appropriate popular cultural practises and aesthetics.

Icon making is peer production

Yochai Benkler (2002) argues that alongside the two traditional ideal-type models of production: the market and the firm (hierarchy) a third one is beginning to emerge, the mode of *commons-based peer production*. In this mode, “groups of individuals successfully collaborate on large scale projects following a diverse cluster of motivational drives and social signals, rather than either market prices or managerial command” (Benkler 2002, 2). While free software / open source production is the best known example of this mode, Benkler points to other “large scale collaborations in many information production fields [...] in the digitally networked environment without reliance either on markets or on managerial hierarchy” (Benkler 2002, 5). Production of user pictures taking place in some Live Journal communities fits this mode. Icon production takes place in conditions where necessary physical capital (hardware and software) is relatively cheap and abundant, pre-existing information and cultural resources are a good that is non-rival (consumption by one does not affect availability to others) and human creativity is a primary scarce resource. I should note that the accessibility and non-rival nature of necessary cultural raw materials becomes possible only if actors accept a norm of disregard for copyright regulations.

Functioning of the copyright regime serves to confirm the model of separate and distinct spheres of dominant and popular culture.With regard to copyrights, icon makers apply different standards to copyrights in the raw cultural materials owned by the cultural industry and their own rights as authors. The former seem to be disregarded and while it might be the case, that icon making is “fair use” of content, the issue is not even being addressed. In contrast, icon makers recognize their own rights and often define conditions, under which their works can be duplicated and used by others. Enforcement of

these rights takes place outside the formal legal system (which today automatically assigns copyright to any published content), through explicit community norms and social pressure.

Benkler observes that peer produced projects are modular – easily divided into relatively autonomous elements and granular – each module is relatively small, requiring only limited amount of effort from a contributor. If provision of icons to users requiring such is the project, then it meets both requirements, with each icon that is produced or requested being a small, separate task. While this provides some explanation as to why icons are made, issue of motivation is a broader one. We can point, after Benkler, to several factors. Benkler distinguishes between monetary, intrinsic hedonic and socio-psychological awards. The absence of monetary gains can be explained by the fact that:

- in a sphere or time of day that they associate with leisure, people are more attracted by socio-psychological benefits (Benkler 2002). Live Journal in general is a sphere not associated with monetary exchanges
- teenagers and young adults have few economic commitments and longer time horizons – in their case value of monetary return might be relatively low (Benkler 2002)
- lack of a convenient infrastructure that would facilitate monetary exchanges among Live Journal users, coupled with relatively small sums that could be asked for such services
- competitions and entry-level voting on the merit of produced icons as ways of providing non-monetary evaluation and incentives.

The last point can be further developed. In icon making communities, the position of an icon maker is established either in a competitive fashion through voting procedures and contests or through the appraisal by non-producing members of the community. Votes cast by peer producers or respect and gratitude shown by non-productive "consumers" become the non-monetary "currency" that constantly flows through icon making communities. These serve the additional function of a "quality control feedback loop". Benkler (2002) writes that distributed allocation of human creativity through self-identification for task is a highly efficient method of pairing actors and resources. In the case of icon

makers this means that any Live Journal user can decide to become a maker and furthermore select cultural content or style of icons she is most comfortable with. Voting or appraisal can serve to confirm or adjust these choices.

In his analysis, Benkler purposefully avoids normative issues, although he notes that these are substantial, since “at the level of political morality, what is at stake is the shape of freedom and equality in the emerging social-technological condition we associate with the Internet” (Benkler 2002, 12). These stakes are forcefully presented by Bauman in his concept of *communitas*: a mode of existence, present alongside the hierarchical society, that is a site of moral economy among equal individuals. Today, *communitas* is being invaded by “consumer market forces” because in itself it has little need of market economy. Bauman calls this “the most awesome of dangers threatening the present form of human togetherness” (Bauman 2003, 74). As consumption becomes the preferred mode of existence in a market economy, humans as producers become the “principal targets of assault”. Two crucial dangers are the destruction of individual productive capabilities and skills of sociality.

Seen in Bauman's categories, icon making communities have a strong *communitas* aspect: they are sites where human act as producers and strangers engage in non-market exchanges. Use of dominant cultural content as raw materials constitutes their weak spot, as ultimately they are dependent on ther provision by the media industry. Furthermore, icon making flourishes only under the condition that media corporations ignore their disregard for copyrights in content they appropriate. Fiske (1992b) is wrong in describing the cultural poachers in terms of conflict with the “landlord” - the relationship is symbiotic or parasitic. In this light, copyright and its enforcement become methods through which cultural industry can limit or cut off the supply of “raw materials” to popular culture. Cultural forms can still circulate in everyday lives, but in their dominant, prescribed states. A strong copyright regime does away with all the affordances to popular cultural circulation of content enabled by the Internet. A strong critique of such reversal is offered by Lawrence Lessig (2001), who calls the time before the Internet the “Dark Ages”.

Petri Dishes: Outro and Reprise

The twin paper of this one ended with a conclusion that a Live Journal picture, a *media slot* filled with *media content* is like a “petri dish filled with a selective medium that grows a specific type of microbes. Internet is filled with such dishes, small and large ones” (Tarkowski 2004). I used the metaphor to account for the vast range of practices and content that develop from in a medium with an simple but open initial architecture. Here, I would like to add that such *petri dish design* seems conducive to popular creativity. If we agree with Benkler (2000) that the Internet consists of layers built on top of the other, then we can see *online* social and cultural practices as occurring inside an envelope or container made of content, software and hardware (in the case of Live Journal, the infrastructure of that space exists at content layer). A hypothesis can be made that users prefer to act inside such containers rather than on their outside. As long as the architecture is not too restrictive, users are drawn by the presence of some (not necessarily optimal) interface and architecture, presence of social and cultural conventions, presence of others. This is due to conformism, but also a strategy of dealing with uncertainty by limiting the number of possible choices – the way all social institutions are such strategies. This is an argument similar to that made by Lessig (2001) about open architecture. But while Lessig is worried about code's openness, I would just like to point out, that many online users prefer minimally ordered environments from free open spaces. Live Journal is in that sense like a city, of which Bauman writes: “City dwellers are not necessarily smarter than other human beings – but the density of space occupation results in a concentration of needs. And so questions are asked in the city that have not been asked elsewhere [...]” (Bauman 2003, 104).

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