

The Labor of Curating: Fandom, Museums, and the Value of Fan Heritage

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IN DECEMBER 2019, GERMAN NEWS CHANNEL N-TV BROADCASTED A special program on the world premiere of J. J. Abrams's *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker*. Among the interviewees featured in the report was Thomas Manglitz, co-founder of the fan-run museum¹ Stars of the Galaxy in Mönchengladbach, Germany (hereafter SOTG). Housed in a former indoor swimming pool vacated by the city, SOTG displays production materials and merchandise from a variety of science fiction productions. However, the vast majority of the amateur museum's displays are dedicated to the *Star Wars* franchise, ranging from action figures to LEGO sets, replicas, and collectible figurines. Because of this focus, SOTG has become a popular destination for local and regional press, as well as fellow fans, to interview Manglitz about *Star Wars*, including the history of the films, the success of the franchise's merchandise, its fan community, and the story behind the museum itself. Although Manglitz himself frames the project as a hobby without any economic agenda in such reports, the curatorial work of the fans behind SOTG should not be considered as mere leisure. Rather, following Mel Stanfill's plea to study fan practices and projects through a labor framework and "ask who benefits from these activities" (131), fan curating should be acknowledged as a form of work that creates cultural and economic value for different agents.

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Taking SOTG as a case study, this article argues that *do-it-yourself heritage institutions* (Baker and Huber; Baker) like SOTG are central sites for understanding the cultural and potentially economic value fans generate with their curatorial labor. Like other fan productions, SOTG subsists “in multiple economies [and] value systems simultaneously” that add value to certain objects and contexts “without receiving equivalent monetary value in return” (Stanfill 168, 131). First, SOTG preserves and exhibits objects that are often sidelined by state- and industry-run film and media heritage institutions and exhibition projects, which are primarily interested in original production materials while paying less attention to mass-produced merchandise and personal fan memories. Second, the opening of a museum in a provincial German city without any evident connection to the franchise is not only free promotion for Lucasfilm and Disney, but it also inscribes the global franchise specifically into local contexts that are usually neglected in their exhibitions. Third, Mönchengladbach benefits from the media attention SOTG creates, the visitors it attracts, and the special events it organizes throughout the year for its inhabitants. Considering the value SOTG establishes for these agents, it is important to point to the potential imbalance of power in these constellations, even if the curatorial work performed by Manglitz and his peers increases their fan cultural and fan social capital (Hills, *Fan Cultures*).

Fans’ curatorial labor oscillates between fans’ gift economy and commodity culture in its implementation of a “self-authorized” (Roberts and Cohen) idea of “fan heritage.” SOTG demonstrates how from within local community networks certain topics, objects, and personal stories important for fan culture are prevented from being forgotten or excluded from the history of pop cultural texts like *Star Wars*. As such, a project like SOTG also signals the importance of studying labor beyond digital contexts (Terranova). Scholarship on fan labor and issues such as the gift economy, compensation, content creation, and exploitation has predominantly focused on online practices (Stanfill and Condis; Stanfill; Busse, “In Focus”; De Kosnik). The following analysis of SOTG, however, redirects such questions to offline spaces and practices by examining “on-ground fan labor” (Peaslee et al.) and its impact on the cultural life of their local communities. This focus on on-ground labor is therefore following the example of scholarship on local fan-organized popular music heritage

activities (Baker; Baker and Huber; Moore and Pell; Roberts and Cohen) in highlighting the public impact and breadth of curating as fan practice beyond private collection practices (Tankel and Murphy) or forms of mentorship (Kompare). Indeed, although many fan curators may not have a comparable “formal training or background in archiving or museology” to professionals employed in established heritage institutions (Brandellero et al. 35), their activities nevertheless “have come to fill an institutional void of preservation and remembrance, becoming more institutionalised and professional in the process” (Brandellero and Janssen 237).

The impact of fan labor is assessed through a qualitative analysis and not quantitative assessment of numbers regarding costs, income, and revenues. As will be discussed in more detail, Manglitz is hesitant in interviews to provide information about SOTG’s finances or even visitor numbers, which makes a quantitative evaluation difficult. Besides, although it is difficult to measure the value of fans’ work, there is no doubt that fans do indeed create value through their endorsement of heritage, the city, and the franchise. Hence, this article focuses on media coverage of SOTG and the information Manglitz is willing to offer in his interviews and the different initiatives and collaborations that are publicly advertised, as well as fan accounts of its program. The value created by these activities will be analyzed through the lens of three different forms of fan labor that Stanfill describes as promotion, content creation, and “lovebor”: the act of visibly loving a fan object (165-66).

The first section discusses curating as fan practice and argues that SOTG creates a specific “fan heritage”: the autonomous collection, preservation, and exhibition of tangible objects related to their fandom, as well as the intangible, and often personal, stories behind them. The second section analyzes how this specific notion of “fan heritage” creates value for different agents within and beyond fan communities, specifically focusing on how fan curators, the heritage sector and the media industries benefit from SOTG. Finally, the third section outlines the impact of fans’ on-ground curatorial work on the local cultural and tourism sector, which establishes associations between Mönchengladbach and *Star Wars* even though the city has no direct evident connection to the franchise besides the fan-run museum.

Curating as a Fan Practice

Fan and museum culture are inextricably linked. On the one hand, museums have targeted fans as some of their primary audiences. In addition to specialized film and media institutions, other kinds of museums and science centers have collaborated with the media industries in the organization of projects on popular franchises and the display of related objects and materials (Bartolomé Herrera and Keidl). On the other hand, fans have collaborated with museums in the making of exhibitions, either by contributing to People's Shows (Pearce 36-88; Francis) or by lending them singular items or complete collections. In some instances, museums integrate complete fan collections into their archives while in other cases entire museums are built around fans' collections.² Finally, museums address the topic of fandom either in the form of special, temporary exhibitions or as a section in their permanent, survey exhibitions on film history.³ In all of these instances, fans perform several forms of labor, ranging from collecting to preserving, archiving, and contextualizing before or during the run of an exhibition. However, while state- and industry-run film and media museums and exhibitions might seek dialogue with fans in formats such as People's Shows, the curatorial authority remains with their professionally trained staff.

Examples in which fans are able to participate in and contribute to museum projects represent to a certain degree a "museumification of fan culture," a phrase coined by Dorus Hoebink et al. in their discussion of The Museum of Pop Culture in Seattle, which was built around the collection of Microsoft cofounder Paul Allen. However, their discussion indicates that "the museumification of fan culture" comes with a downplaying of fans' individual values, meanings, and interpretations in favor of legitimizing popular culture through a more objective and universal contextualization beyond fandom to justify a museum on popular culture. Consequently, a museumification of fan-related objects might be a more fitting description than the museumification of fandom and fan-specific perspectives per se. In fan-run museums, on the other hand, fans are not obliged to follow similar objective and universal contextualization strategies. One of the main differences between fan-run formats is that fans have the sole curatorial agency in their projects, allowing them to develop "a

strong *curatorial imprint* . . . with clearly stated aims and objectives” (Brandellero et al. 35, emphasis added).

SOTG’s distinctive curatorial imprint is evident in its display of merchandise and collectibles in its current location in a former indoor swimming pool.⁴ SOTG stresses the material and textual qualities of merchandise beyond economic factors or fan consumption. The name *Filmfiguren Ausstellung* alone gave a clear indication of the museum’s curatorial approach. In German, “*Figur*” can refer (1) to a fictional character, as in a movie, play, book, or comic; or (2) to the tangible material portrayal of a human, animal, or abstract body, for example, in the form of a toy. SOTG’s former name communicated a dual curatorial approach that is still evident in the museum today. It emphasizes how particular movie characters are adapted into toys and what different qualities these objects bring with them. But it also uses the detailed materialization of movie characters into tangible objects as a way to communicate information about the characters to the visitors. Thus, the exhibition enables visitors to investigate the film text itself *as* merchandising while also encouraging them to explore the film text *through* merchandising. Ideas about adaptation and variation are central to this approach, as the variety of different figurines and their modes of presentation frame them as the result of a thoughtful conception of narrative into objects.

The exhibition design reinforces the curatorial imprint by highlighting the material characteristics of the toys, collectibles, and replicas, in addition to the narrative functions that the depicted characters and objects have within the *Star Wars* storyworld. Simple display cases dominate the exhibition section about up-scale, hand-made collectible figurines and replicas. The minimal decoration directs visitors’ attention to the craftsmanship involved in the production of the objects on display. They highlight hand-sewn gowns, the striking modeling of faces and bodies, the authentic look of replica weapons, as well as the expensive collectible figurines posed to recall key scenes. In other sections, different-sized dioramas display action figures in carefully recreated locations taken from the *Star Wars* universe that enable visitors to revisit the fictional text through its material remediation. Individual sequences are spatially broken down into different sections within particular dioramas, such as one example depicting Luke Skywalker’s arrival at the spaceport Mos Eisley, when he met Han Solo, and the escape in the Millennium Falcon from A

New Hope. Together, these two very different approaches equally emphasize (1) the faithful adaptation of the fictional audio-visual text into tangible figures, (2) the skills needed to produce the objects on display, (3) the material or decorative characteristics of the objects, (4) the complex worlds created in the *Star Wars* universe, and (5) how the qualities of the fictional text come to life through costumes, props, and make-up. Since 2017, when the museum began to include original costumes from science fiction productions other than *Star Wars*, the latter point has become more central. The curators highlighted this shift by changing the name to Stars of the Galaxy, which is more inclusive than its previous name and puts more emphasis on storyworlds and actors referenced by them than on the merchandise.

Crucially, however, the museum is not just a project run by fans; it also preserves and displays the work of other fans alongside the stories of how these works were made. In addition to the fan-made action figure dioramas, the museum shows two replicas of the Star Destroyer—one is made with LEGO bricks and the other one is a life-size replica of the spaceship's interior—that the makers had to get rid of due to space restrictions. If it had not been for SOTG, where they are now on display and are regularly highlighted in media coverage, these fan productions and the stories behind them would have been lost ("Wir waren wieder"). That the preservation and accessibility of fan works is important to SOTG is also evident in the curatorial team's work on a database in which such information would be stored and therefore be accessible to others in the future ("Follow me").

By highlighting the work and skills that go into the making of dioramas, the value that derives from the fans' curatorial work is not a conception of "fan heritage" pandering to that of established film and media heritage narratives and canons. Rather, it represents the mounting of a fan-specific heritage that is based on the principles of fan communities. Fandom is not merely incorporated into an exhibition narrative but is inherently part of the curatorial process and the exhibition content. Consequently, SOTG's creation and dissemination of a "fan heritage" operates independent of "authorised" local, regional, or national conceptions of heritage (Roberts and Cohen). Fans do not ask for inclusion, for example, into German definitions of film and media heritage—or, at least, I did not encounter any statements in my research that showed fans actively seeking the acceptance of

established authorized institutions. Film and media museums might address fandom in their exhibitions, but by adapting the framework of the museum and curating collections and exhibitions autonomously, fans are able to “strategically represent themselves rather than submitting their archives to be filtered through the words and space of state-based institutions” (Moore and Pell 261).

If the inclusion of fan objects into official heritage institutions legitimizes “inferior mass objects [as] part of sanctified cultural categories” (Hoebink et al.), fan-run museums such as SOTG affirm fandom and related (personal) practices, and not just its objects, as a self-determined cultural category worth being collected and preserved. Fans themselves maintain control over their collections, works, ideas, and history, and the message of a project like SOTG is closer to “don’t mess with our heritage” than “please accept this as heritage.” Thus, the fan curators give gifts to their communities in a dual sense. First, they do collect fan works and then make them accessible for others with the aim to preserve them for the future. Second, their exhibitions in themselves represent a fan work that, in its entirety, offers fans an experience that nonfan-made exhibitions cannot offer as they either exclude fan works (Lucasfilm exhibitions) or lack fans’ independent curatorial imprint (established heritage institutions). But as the next section argues, not only fan communities but also the heritage sector and media industries are beneficiaries of fans’ curatorial labor.

The Value of Fan Heritage Within and Beyond Fan Communities

Focusing on museums run by music fans, Sarah Baker argues that amateur archives and museums share “similar goals to national institutions with regard to preservation, collection, accessibility and the national interest.” However, they “do so with limited financial support and rely primarily on volunteer labour, grant funding, memberships and donations to continue running and are often dealing with significant space constraints” (47). The same is true for SOTG. Even if the lack of numbers and different financial models make it hard to determine to what extent fan labor translates into economic capital, the vast attention SOTG has received among fan communities and

the press indicates the cultural and social value fans create for themselves and for others respectively.

Like fan stores and clubs, fan-run museums are part of subcultural networks and intermediaries that represent a crucial space for community building (Woo). Woo argues that no “practice can exist—at least, not for long—without the support of institutions,” which provide “an economic and organizational base for subcultural activities” (132). Despite the admission fee that visitors have to pay to enter exhibitions, the time and finances invested by the curators behind SOTG can be considered as a gift “by fans for fans,” a phrase regularly used in reviews for the exhibition (Jovanovic). The idea of SOTG as a gift derives less from fans’ financial investment and more from the time and skills invested in creating content of interest for fans and the potential for them to engage with the past and present of the text and each other in the exhibition. SOTG provides a performative space for fans to practice their fandom, commemorate and remember their object of fandom, and enact and embody inherited memories about what it must have been like to be a fan in the past, and ultimately also create new experiences and memories as individuals or with fellow fans (Roberts and Cohen 252).

By running SOTG and organizing special events in the city and region, fans do promotional labor for fandom in more general terms. Their appropriation of the reputable institutional framework of the museum allows fans to take control over their public representation and establishes associations of fan culture to the ideas and goals of public education, aesthetic values, and cultural history. SOTG might not convince everyone about the importance of science fiction and merchandise, but it nevertheless gives fandom an image of determination and organization. The systematic museumification of fan culture by fan curators contradicts the many unfavorable media representations of fans (Geraghty 13-31), especially those images perpetuated in reality TV shows on collectors that present them as uncontrolled consumerists.⁵ Transforming a former swimming pool into an exhibition space for merchandise may still seem kooky to sceptics, but the active role that SOTG has taken on in the public life of the city challenges the stereotype of the antisocial fan. In the museum, fans’ material collections are reframed from obsessive patterns of consumption and hoarding into something that is of interest for the wider public and carries the potential for community building.

Still, if we follow Andrew Flinn's two broad types of independent, nonprofessionalized heritage activities, SOTG is not "driven . . . by a political agenda in which the preservation and use of historical materials might play a role in serving a set of political aims." SOTG is better "characterized as largely inspired by interest, or leisure, or even antiquarianism" (8). This, however, does not mean that SOTG has no impact on the social organization and self-perception of fan communities. SOTG might be an expression of lovebor for the *Star Wars* fan community itself, but the created value is not distributed equally among fans, including those working in the museum. Fan scholars have demonstrated how cultural, social, and economic capital fuels the hierarchization of fandom (Busse, "Geek Hierarchies"; Chin; Fiske) and highlighted that "fandom's gift economy is . . . fundamentally asymmetrical" (Turk) when it comes to participation. Indeed, participation in the making of the exhibition is far more restricted than other fan practices such as reading and commenting on fan fiction. This is due not only to the on-ground nature of running the physical site of a museum, but also because of the economic capital necessary to start such a large-scale project. Beginning with the formation of collections to the actual rent and advertisement for a public exhibition, a project like SOTG requires immense startup capital to set up and keep running and is not affordable for all fans. Manglitz's growing prominence due to his media appearances elevates him to the role of "executive fan" (Fiske; Hills, *Fan Cultures* 20–36). By speaking about his personal fandom, he becomes a representative for other *Star Wars* fans and therefore also has the power to shape notions of what it means to be a fan.

Considering this power, it is important to bear in mind that fan gifts "are designed to create and cement a social structure" (Hellekson 115). Fan-run museums create highly hierarchical and gendered fan community structures, giving the predominantly male curators empowered roles in their media representations of the museum. The uneven gender dynamics evident in the reports on SOTG suggest that the fan-run museum does not strive for bigger social change when it comes to providing fangirls more prominent roles in conceptions of fandom. Following the notion of object-based fan practices, such as collecting, as primarily reserved for male fans (Rehak), and also in line with the gendered and hyper-masculine branding of action figures as boy toys (Scott), the anecdotes Manglitz shares in his

interviews frame fan curating and *Star Wars* fandom as a rather masculine endeavor. In several instances, he talks about women who do not understand their husbands' fandom, force them to give away parts of their collections, or are completely unfamiliar with *Star Wars* altogether ("Wir waren wieder," "Star Wars-Ausstellung," "Interview"). Fangirls appear only occasionally in these reports, and when they do, they do so primarily as volunteers or contributors but never as equal curators ("TV-Bericht"). This becomes evident in one video in which curator Christine Prießnitz shows prominent visitors around who constantly refer to Manglitz as her superior ("Waldi und Fabian"). Furthermore, the organization of Slave Leia parties for adults is a heteronormative objectification of the franchise's most prominent female character and represent a sexist integration of Leia into "fan heritage" ("Hier ist das Paradies"). SOTG follows the example of other highly gendered nonfiction practices that deal with the hobby of collecting and the past of their fan objects and communities that put male perspectives over those of fangirls (Keidl, "Gatekeeping").

Another beneficiary of fans' curatorial labor is the heritage sector. Even if national film and media archives have become key agents in preserving and exhibiting film and media culture, these institutions cannot systematically collect and display everything. They continue to simply recreate and adapt established narratives and canons that of established narratives and canons that revolve around notions of significance in relation to the production, exhibition, and reception histories of film and media (Trope). Although merchandise and fandom are addressed in major state-funded film and media exhibitions, the material traces of both have a comparatively small presence within these institutions. For example, while select merchandise might find its way into the exhibitions and collections, the material culture of the preproduction process of toys is not addressed in as much detail as other aspect of film and media production. To this present date, no major film or media museum in Germany has comprehensively covered in a dedicated exhibition the work of select toy designers or the production, distribution, and reception of film- and media-themed playthings. Film and media museums might promise (and integrate merchandise into) a look "behind the screen" or "behind the scenes," but the stories "behind the toys" remain untold in these venues.

In turn, fan-run museums take on exactly these objects, stories, and practices that do not fit into such established film and media museum

narratives and canons. SOTG's collection and exhibition of merchandise and collectibles preserves parts of film and media history and takes on work that is simply marginalized in publicly funded institutions in Germany. Therefore, fans are doing content labor for the heritage sector as they document, archive, and preserve objects of media heritage that will be available to the heritage sector at large if needed—most likely without providing these fans with the same curatorial agency in the making of potential exhibitions beyond their contribution in formats such as People's Shows as fans have in their own exhibition venues.

Moreover, fans perform promotional labor for the institution of the museum itself, generating interest in the practice and process of curating and museum management. While museums have made their programs more approachable by breaking with the dogma of “don't touch, just watch” and integrating popular culture into their exhibitions since the 1980s (Vergo; Moore; Trope), the everyday work processes of the museum remain less accessible. Film and media museums might promise a glimpse into the inner mechanisms of the media industries, but they rarely enable similar insights into the curatorial and actual production process of exhibitions such as allowing regular visitor tours through unfinished gallery space before the official opening of a show. SOTG, on the other hand, incorporates challenges of running a museum into their exhibition by (spontaneously) bringing visitors into spaces currently in development, framing the experience of the exhibition as a curatorial work in progress (Volker). Dust, noise, and explanations about the transformation of the former swimming pool into a museum are integrated into the exhibition. Such looks behind-the-museum-scenes therefore offer visitors simultaneously finished and unfinished sections and curating as hands-on and approachable “lovebor” that become part of the museum exhibition itself (“Wir waren wieder”; Rip).

Finally, fan curators perform labor for the media industries, albeit the relationship among fan curators and the media industries is fragile. All museums that don't have the official support of a film company must protect themselves against legal actions for copyright infringements if they display objects associated with the franchise. Manglitz's reaction to certain interview questions demonstrates how museums tactically circumvent any overt connections to a copyrighted text or insights into their finances. Avoiding answering budget-related questions in interviews, he instead uses a nondescript “currency transfer” into “monthly

pocket money,” thereby leaving it to the viewers to calculate how many months they would have to save their own “pocket money” to afford the acquisition (“Follow me”). Likewise, Manglitz provides only vague information about partnerships, not going beyond logos of supporters on their website, indefinite mentions of initial contact with Disney after it purchased the rights to the franchise, partnerships with Hasbro that include the donation of prototypes and action figures for dioramas in exchange for dioramas for toy fairs, and connections to the city of Mönchengladbach that resulted in the lease of the indoor swimming pool (Thiele; “Follow me”).

The anxious relationship between Lucasfilm and fan producers becomes mainly evident when Manglitz reminds interviewers that they are not at a *Star Wars* museum but an exhibition of merchandise that also includes *Star Wars* toys (“Die Pierre M. Krause Show”). Such cautious discursive framing is also visible in names of other fan-run museums that refer to “galaxy,” “toys,” and “stars” rather than *Star Wars* or character names, avoiding copyright infringements by focusing on more abstract terms.⁶ Lucasfilm as a company, and George Lucas himself, have shown a fraught relationship to fan productions, showing encouragement to fan works that stay close to the film trilogies while condemning those that break with the normative morals presented in the franchise (Brooker 164–71). In sum, while Lucasfilm is open to fan productions and to a certain degree encourages them, the company also wants to control what the fans are doing, and museums are not excluded from the company’s surveillance of fan practices.

However, of importance is not only what kind of labor fans perform but also what thematic openings left by Disney and Lucasfilm their museums are filling. Even though Lucasfilm-produced exhibitions like *The Magic of Myth*, *Identities*, and *The Power of Costume* celebrate the success and vast fan community of the franchise, they focus on original production materials and the creativity of Lucas as the main auteur behind the space opera and neglect ancillary products, as well as fan-made works (Bartolomé Herrera and Keidl). *Rancho Obi-Wan*, which is run by *Star Wars* fan and former Lucasfilm employee Stephen J. Sansweet, is the only fan-run museum supported by Lucasfilm. Sansweet is allowed to use a name that directly refers to one of the most iconic *Star Wars* characters, and the board of the charity organization includes two high-profile Lucasfilm employees

(“Board of Directors”). In this regard, Rancho Obi-Wan’s focus on merchandise and memorabilia complements official Lucasfilm-produced exhibitions, even if it is not directly produced by the company. As a matter of fact, one of Sansweet’s trademarks has been his reassurance that he has bought the merchandise all by himself with the standard Lucasfilm employee discount of 10 percent (Gross), thereby investing his income back into goods sold by his (former) employer.

SOTG is not an equally important addition not only because of its focus on merchandise and fan works but also because of its national and regional character. As Matt Hills argues, “America is defined as the unspoken, taken-for-granted home of *Star Wars* as a franchise,” thereby giving a certain geographical hierarchy to the franchise (“From Transmedia Storytelling” 222). This hierarchy manifests itself in the *Star Wars* exhibitions that tour globally but do not show any attempt to include region-specific information at their temporary display sites. In this regard, SOTG grounds the global franchise in German local contexts, as they frame *Star Wars* heritage as part of Germany’s broad cultural history. If Lucasfilm stresses in their exhibitions and other media on the franchise’s history the global success of *Star Wars*, fan-run museums highlight the popularity and the impact of the franchise through their labor in specific regional contexts and everyday environments where fandom exists and is practiced. They are part of a larger trend of fans producing a “fan geography”: the mapping and documentation of local spaces of fandom for global franchises beyond shooting locations, themed environments, and other nonfan-run, for-profit attractions.⁷ Fan-run museums inscribe the franchise into the local identity of their fan communities and the cultural life of the city.

SOTG and the Cultural Life of Mönchengladbach

With its program and initiatives, SOTG enhances the cultural life of Mönchengladbach. The city had no obvious connection to *Star Wars* prior to the opening of the museum. Never has Mönchengladbach had any role in the production of any of the films, series, or merchandise. Neither has the city hosted any significant events related to the franchise, such as German premieres of the films, nor does any talent associated with the franchise have specific ties to Mönchengladbach.

Despite the lack of such connections that usually make places attractive destinations for fans (Beeton; Williams), Manglitz and his peers have established Mönchengladbach as a landmark for *Star Wars* fans from scratch—without even presenting significant original *Star Wars* production materials, only more or less mass-produced and commercially sold merchandising, as well as some hand-made fan productions related to the franchise.⁸ In other words, fan curators perform promotional labor for the city, as it is only because of SOTG that Mönchengladbach is associated with the franchise and broadcasters like N-TV visit the city and advertise the project to potential local and nonlocal visitors.⁹

Overall, the organization of events should be acknowledged as content labor that transforms Mönchengladbach into a destination city for fans as much as it offers leisure and entertainment for those already living there and in the surrounding areas. Besides their permanent exhibition, SOTG organizes several events at other locales in the city and throughout the region that also support local retail economies, such as special exhibitions or demonstrations of lightsaber fighting techniques in shopping centers and stores, which draw potential customers into commercial spaces (“Filmfigurenausstellung in Rheydter Galerie”; “*Star Wars* Event bei EDEKA”; “Familientag”). Additionally, the museum participates in organizing special events that are part of larger municipal initiatives, such as concerts and readings within city-wide culture festivals. One such festival is *Nachaktiv* (Nocturnal), for which cultural institutions all around the city present a special program (Program, “2016”; Program, “2018”). By participating in these events, the museum actively contributes to the city’s cultural life and adds to the overall allure of the city’s cultural showcases by covering popular culture.

SOTG also organizes special events on their own initiative. For example, the museum organized the German premiere of the documentary *Elstree 1976* (Jon Spira, 2015), which explores the experience of *Star Wars* extras during the production, release, and hype of George Lucas’s *A New Hope* (1977). The film was screened in the presence of Anthony Forest, one of the extras in *A New Hope*, who was supposed to play Luke’s friend but was ultimately cut from the film (Jedrychowski). The museum also twice organized the SaberCon convention, which coincided with the release of J. J. Abrams’s *The Force Awakens* and Gareth Edwards’s *Rogue One* in 2015 and 2016,

respectively. For two days, the convention brought together fans, merchandise vendors, and minor film celebrities who had worked behind and in front of the camera on the franchise. Guests at the 2016 event included Bill Hargreaves, who built some of the models for the first trilogy, Paul Blake, who played the role of Greedo, and Alan Harris, who played the bounty hunter Bosskas.

SaberCon is one example in which the administrative support of the city and the range of sponsors becomes visible. In an article for the city magazine *Hindenburg*, the organizers thank a list of sponsors and the city department (“Fantastische Welten”). Although they do not provide concrete numbers here either, the list indicates that support was received from the city, as well as from local businesses. The “thank you” note ended with the museum curators’ expression of interest in organizing another pop culture event for Mönchengladbach and its inhabitants (“Fantastische Welten”). However, the event was not repeated in 2017, perhaps as a result of an unexpectedly low visitor turnout, as mentioned in the article.¹⁰ Nevertheless, such events generate coverage in regional and social media and demonstrate how the museum is anchored in the cultural and economic life of Mönchengladbach.

Finally, SOTG has collaborated with and advertised on various online tourist sites. For example, commercial websites like Erlebnis-parkDeals feature special offers with reduced entry to the museum (“Gutschein 113”; “Filmfiguren-Ausstellung Mönchengladbach”). In addition to mentions on tourist websites such as Tourismus NRW that advertise the museum alongside other heritage institutions (Dames), SOTG appears in reference to hotels in Mönchengladbach. TripAdvisor, for instance, includes a list named “Hotels Near Stars of the Galaxy,” and the museum appears on lists of hotels such as “Things to Do Near Dorint Parkhotel Mönchengladbach” or “Things to Do Near Minto.” SOTG has become part of a wider network of tourist industries that links the museum to hotels and hotels to the museum, showing that potential museum visitors might become hotel guests in Mönchengladbach and hotel guests in the city might become museum visitors.

Indeed, fan labor is one of the major pull factors for visitors to organize an outing to SOTG. Fan-run museums cannot compete in size and scale (and also budget and visitor numbers) with official Lucasfilm exhibitions or other industry-run sites, but they stand out

because they provide encounters with, and experience of, fandom and fan productivity itself. They highlight the industrious originality of its curators and a fan perspective on the franchise and its fandom. Visitors are motivated to visit the museum not only because of their interest in the franchise but because they want to see and engage with other fans' productivity—be it the collections they have built, a persistent interest in the craft of building dioramas and replicas, or the transformation of private and other spaces like a swimming pool into a gallery space. Especially in regard to the location of the museum, themes of time and space are particularly highlighted in media and visitor reports. The unusual location of a former indoor swimming pool is emphasized throughout coverage on the museum and plays a major part in framing the exhibition as the above-mentioned “work-in-progress” project that constantly expands and changes because of fans' unceasing work on the exhibition in their free time. Because SOTG allows such insights into the making and running of the museum, fan labor becomes one of the museum's main attractions and an additional means of differentiating the fan-run museum from Lucasfilm-produced exhibitions, which do not offer the same “by fans for fans” philosophy. Consequently, the museum represents a form of fan-induced tourism, that is, visits to attractions that are motivated by engagement with other fans and their work in specific local contexts (Keidl, “Behind-the-(Museum)Scenes”).

Conclusion

In 2019, the fan-run exhibition Outpost One opened in the small city of Dassow in Northern Germany. Built in a former grain storage facility, the exhibition of approximately 13,000 square meters with life-sized *Star Wars* dioramas is based on the owner's private collection. Media reports about Outpost One address the same themes as those on SOTG, covering how the growing collection of a private collector became so big that he decided to display it in a public space, the repurposing of an unusual building into an exhibition, the history of *Star Wars* and its fandom, as well as the endorsement of local tourism associations (Köhnemann; Leithold; “*Star Wars*’-Museum”). In addition, similar projects on *Star Wars* exist in other countries, such as the Galaxy Connection in Arkansas or the Star Toys Museum

in Maryland. Moreover, fans run museums on other media franchises and characters, such as *Superman* (USA), *Batman* (Thailand), Laurel and Hardy (Germany and UK), or *Mad Max* (Australia). Further studies of fan-run museums will enable new understandings of how such places and spaces not only encourage and enable fan mobility, but also develop alternative networks in which fans move in relatively small and unknown places like Mönchengladbach. Fan-run museums demonstrate how fandom has penetrated contemporary life beyond their respective fan communities and closed off spaces usually associated with fandom. They point to the on-ground labor that fans are performing in their respective communities, their direct environment, the heritage sector, and the media industries.

However, as Mel Stanfill and Megan Condis argue, “fan labor, like duct tape or the Force, has a dark side and a light side, and it holds the universe—or at least fandom—together.” On the light side, the labor of fans creates value and meaning for their respective fan communities and fandom in general. On the dark side, fans’ productivity and financial investments benefit third parties without any considerable financial stakes or particular interest in the fan community. As this article has argued, in the case of SOTG, this is Disney and Lucasfilm and the city of Mönchengladbach, both in terms of the cultural life for its inhabitants as well as the tourism industries that host potential guests. But film and media heritage institutions also benefit from the work of the fans, as these amateurs take on work that is neglected by the professionals. The costs of buying exhibits, renting exhibition spaces, building display cases and dioramas, and the time in managing the museum arguably generates disproportional economic value for others than the fan curators. This is the case even if fan curators behind the project benefit from their work through public appearances and the increase of their cultural and social capital in their respective fan communities. And even if “fans also love what they do . . . and it is unlikely [that they] form labor unions or go on strike anytime soon” (Stanfill 156), it is important to further examine the potential exploitation of them by other more powerful agents in their respective local contexts.

Notes

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1. My use of the term fan-run museum draws from Amanda Brandellero et al.'s definition of similar projects on popular music heritage. They define "amateur and fan-run archives and museums as a set of practices around the collection and preservation of popular music histories and material culture set up by people with no formal training or background in archiving or museology While individuals may lack formal training in heritage practices, all initiatives share a strong curatorial imprint, driven by one or a few individuals acting selectively as gatekeepers, with clearly stated aims and objectives" (35).
2. For instance, *Zusammen Sammeln* (Collecting Collectively, 2016), which followed the idea of the People's Show by showcasing the hobby of collecting by inviting private collectors to display some of their favorite objects alongside those from the Deutsches Filmmuseum's own archive. Another example from the Deutsches Filmmuseum is *Charlie, the Bestseller* (2012), which explored the popularity and transformation of Charlie Chaplin's tramp character across various merchandising. *Charlie, the Bestseller*, was built around the collection of a single fan who later sold it to a foundation that gave it as a permanent loan to the museum's official collection. Finally, the Museum of Pop Culture in Seattle, which was built around the collection of Microsoft cofounder Paul Allen.
3. For example, the permanent exhibition of the Deutsches Filmmuseum in Frankfurt, the Museum of the Moving Image in New York, and the Australian Centre for the Moving Image in Melbourne have been referring to fans or featuring sections on fandom.
4. The project started under the name *StarconstruX* in 2005, which showcased approximately thirty dioramas with more than three hundred four-inch action figures, seventy life-size movie figures, and original, as well as replica, movie props. In 2011, the curators moved the exhibition into a former indoor swimming pool facility ("*StarconstruX*").
5. Collectors of popular material culture have regularly been reported on in national newspapers and appeared in reality TV shows dedicated to antiques, collectibles, or practices of hoarding, such as *Antiques Roadshow* (1979–present), *Collectors* (2005–11), *American Pickers* (2010–present), *Britain's Biggest Hoarders* (2012–present), and *Pawn Stars* (2009–present). In these shows, the act of collecting has been of bigger importance than the history of the toys, or detailed knowledge thereof.
6. For example, *The Galaxy Connection* in Arkansas and the *Star Wars* Museum in Maryland (both USA) focus on *Star Wars* merchandise but do not mention the franchise in their titles. The same is the case with the newly founded exhibition *Outpost One* in Germany.
7. In more detail, "fan geography" refers to the interest of fans in translating a global franchise such as *Star Wars* into local contexts and specificities of their everyday environments. Fan-curated museums are not the only example of this interest in the local specificities of fandom. Other examples are autobiographical writings, the sharing of images on blogs, and the recollection of spaces of fandom in podcasts. The content of these works ranges from representations of fans' domestic spaces to representations of their favorite cinemas, stores, and clubs, as well as the creation of maps.
8. The only original objects from any *Star Wars* film are parts of the set design for the desert planet Tatooine from *A New Hope* ("*Digital Tour Guide*").
9. In addition to N-TV, for example, public and private broadcasters such as ARD, Südwestrundfunk, Westdeutscher Rundfunk, RTL, and ProSieben have reported about the SOTG or have interviewed Manglitz about *Star Wars*.
10. Currently, the website and the Facebook page for the event are unavailable, indicating that the event has been placed on hold for an extended period.

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