

Article

# Destination Antwerp! Fan Tourism and the Transcultural Heritage of *A Dog of Flanders*

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**Abstract:** Antwerp, the fictional home of Nello & Patrasche from *A Dog of Flanders* (1872) written by Marie Louise de la Ramée, attracts thousands of tourists every year to see the city and get close to the fictional text. European children’s literature such as this inspires dedicated fans who long to make more real the imagined spaces described by authors. The city and associated monuments and markers become sites of secular pilgrimage; people traveling to them experience children’s literary culture as local heritage. Traveling across borders, visiting these European spaces of children’s literature, taking official and unofficial tours, and listening to the stories which people share while physically present help to secure a place in which international fans can play with notions of local identity and cultural heritage. Or, as Yi-Fu Tuan argues, “When space feels thoroughly familiar to us, it has become place.” This case study seeks to interrogate the importance of place in the transcultural fan community of *A Dog of Flanders*. I analyse the touristic pilgrimage to Antwerp and the social/communal rituals associated with what John Urry calls the “mediatised gaze” as fans inhabit spaces typically reserved for city locals. This paper also considers the importance of place in the transcultural fan community of European children’s literature, discussing how glocalization allows texts to travel across international borders and encourage transcultural appropriation.

**Keywords:** fandom; tourism; *A Dog of Flanders*; Antwerp; transcultural; Japan; glocalization

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Taking into account the multitude of technologies, networks, texts, practices and venerated sites of pilgrimage with which fans build a sense of self, community and cultural capital, this paper seeks to interrogate the importance of place in the transcultural fan community of children’s book *A Dog of Flanders* (1872) written by Marie Louise de la Ramée (pen name Ouida). Set in and around Antwerp, the story centers on young boy Nello and his dog Patrasche whose strong bond and ultimately tragic end have attracted more international attention and affection from Japanese and American fans than Flemish or European. Guided by their knowledge of the book, Ouida’s descriptions of the countryside, surrounding villages and the Cathedral of Our Lady at the heart of the city, fans can visit real life locations they associate with Nello and Patrasche’s tale of happiness and hardship. Thanks to the popularity and cultural significance of the Japanese anime television series *A Dog of Flanders* (1975) Antwerp attracts large numbers of organized tours of predominantly Asian visitors—Japanese and South Korean making up the largest international contingent—who want to see the countryside where Nello found Patrasche, where they lived and struggled to survive, and visit the actual spot in the cathedral where Nello glimpsed the famous paintings by Antwerp’s own Peter Paul Rubens before he died.

For the tourist walking around the city, seeing real sites that inspired Ouida’s descriptions of Flemish life in the later 19th century, modern Antwerp becomes the fictional city of Nello and Patrasche as set out in the book and first seen on Japanese television in the 1970s. Notions of space and place are changed so that a foreign city becomes a familiar site for fans of the book and subsequent media

adaptations, traveling to enhance their appreciation of the story and increase their transcultural capital. Antwerp, and by extension Flanders, becomes an international destination that confers fan identity. The city and associated monuments and markers become sites of secular pilgrimage; people traveling to them to experience children's literature as cultural heritage. Visiting Hoboken (modern suburb believed to be where Ouida originally pictured Nello and his grandfather living), entering the cathedral, seeing the statues erected to celebrate the tale, and listening to the personal stories which guides and fans share in those spaces make the city of Antwerp a secure place in which fans can play with notions of identity and cultural heritage, or, as Yi-Fu Tuan argues, "When space feels thoroughly familiar to us, it has become place" (Tuan 1977, p. 73). For Will Brooker, discussing fan pilgrimages in general, most sites are "multiply coded" (Brooker 2007a, p. 430), and thus fandom connected to place differs for each fan. Fan pilgrimage is about pretending, performance and making the new from "the familiar and quotidian" and so fans that travel to Antwerp approach locations described in the book and depicted in the adaptations "with their own agenda" and "are able to transform 'flatscape' into a place of wonder. They bring their own urban imaginary, their own maps of fiction and their own angles on the everyday" (p. 443).

This paper thus argues that the study of children's literature fan geographies highlights the importance of fan histories and the affective connections offered when passing through venerated fan spaces. Furthermore, combining methodological approaches from media studies, fan studies and phenomenological geography allows us to form a more intricate picture of how fans relate to their object of fandom and construct a transcultural framework for understanding the relationship between international communities and individuals, global texts and geographies, mediated memories and emotions. This paper therefore also considers the importance of place in the transcultural fan community of European's children literature, discussing how European texts travel across international borders and encourage transcultural appropriation. Transculture is defined by Mikhail Epstein as "a new sphere of cultural development that transcends the borders of traditional cultures (ethnic, national, racial, religious, gender, sexual, and professional)" (Epstein 2009, p. 330). It is about the reception and adaptation of foreign cultures, but also about understanding how national texts can cross international borders and become representative of both. I use the term transcultural appropriation in this way so as to encapsulate the international adoption of the original book, the Japanese television series, other international film adaptations and the fans who continue to read about Nello and Patrasche globally.

### 1. Antwerp, the Boy and His Dog

With the rise of modernity in the early twentieth century and the growth of popular culture since the 1950s people have looked to their favorite films, TV series, books, comics, games and cartoons to build a sense of identity and form social relationships with others. As media fan texts diversify so too does the fan community, and notions of what makes you a fan change according to the financial value and cultural distinction people apply, and the social and economic contexts of the communities in which we live. At the same time, increases in the standard of living and leisure time have meant the tourist industry has also changed, growing exponentially as new technologies and methods of travel open up every corner of the globe at relatively low cost. While tourism based on texts and icons of popular culture is neither surprising nor new, it has become an important part of what it means to be a fan. From visiting the fictional home of Sherlock Holmes at 221b Baker Street to finding the birthplace of Charles Dickens in Portsmouth enthusiastic followers have been able to make connections to texts and people through travel since the Victorian era. Now, those interested in promoting such texts and authors use tourism to reach out to new audiences and open up new ways of engagement. What has become apparent in contemporary tourism is that fans of popular texts are more visible, willing to spend the money, and able to travel further in order to get close to and interact with their favorite film, TV show or book. Fans replicate the ephemeral and emotional experience of watching and reading by

immersing themselves into familiar spaces and places they have only previously encountered through the screen or page. Fandom is now physical just as much as tourism is now mediated.

In the vein of tourists recording their holidays through pictures and reviews, fans recount their travel experiences through the photographic recreation of popular texts, making vlogs and writing blogs. Processes of encountering mediated tourist sites, taking pictures, and seeing other fans in those spaces helps to create and tell a story. As the story is recounted through video and social media, it contributes to the act of becoming a fan, staying a fan, and displaying a fan identity over time. Therefore, it is important to recognize the significance of narrative to the understanding of tourism and practices of fan pilgrimage. Warner Brothers' Leavesden Studios in north west London, filming location for the *Harry Potter* series of blockbuster movies; the Swiss Alps, spectacular backdrop to numerous adaptations of Johanna Spyri's *Heidi* first published in 1881; Great Missenden in Buckinghamshire, former home and now final resting place of Roald Dahl. All these places, like Antwerp, attract fans of children's books. European children's literature inspires dedicated fans who long to make more real the imagined spaces described by, and related to, famous children's authors.

For many, the popularity of Ouida's story in Japan, the United States and any country other than Belgium is surprising. It was not published in Flemish until the 1980s when the city tourist board finally started to recognize the appeal for international visitors. The story was reclaimed by residents of Antwerp but only in the sense that locals wanted to understand why a story set in Flanders would be so popular to outsiders. Born to English and French parents in Bury St Edmunds in the United Kingdom, Ouida traveled to Belgium for inspiration to write. Spending only a few days in Antwerp, she based *A Dog of Flanders* on what she saw there, the people she met and the landscape she traveled through. Witness to the harsh realities of peasant life and how children and animals were recruited to help families earn a living, Ouida based Nello and Patrasche on the young boys with their cart dogs selling milk around the city streets. In the story we read about Nello and his grandfather finding Patrasche left for dead by his cruel master at the side of the road. Caring for him, Nello forms a strong bond for the dog and they soon become the best of friends. Living hand to mouth meant there was no time for play or luxury and Nello soon steps in for his grandfather who can no longer make the trip from their village to the city to sell milk. Despite the hardship Nello is inspired by his love of painting and the artwork of Rubens, always trying to get a glimpse of the master's works in the cathedral. After his grandfather's death, rejection from the local community, losing his home, accusations of arson, and failure to win the local art competition, Nello is left destitute and seeks escape from the ice and snow in front of Rubens' "The Elevation of the Cross" and "The Descent from the Cross". Patrasche finds him but they are both too tired and no longer able to go on with life. Thus they die huddled together in warm embrace.

This tragic ending is probably the most defining element to Ouida's romantic story of friendship and loyalty, and it is also the most contentious. Subsequent adaptations by Hollywood have always ended with Nello and Patrasche surviving and being helped by the community that originally rejected them: Nello wins the art prize and becomes apprentice to a famous artist; Patrasche no longer has to work. All American versions, five films to date, thus emphasize reward for the couple's hardship and efforts to make the best of their impoverished lives.<sup>1</sup> The original Japanese anime series, and two other animated versions of the story, do conclude like the novel: Nello and Patrasche die in front of the artwork on the cathedral floor.<sup>2</sup> Despite being made for young audiences these versions of the story maintain the tragic ending so as to underscore the love and sacrifice the couple share in making Nello's dream of seeing the paintings come true. Indeed, it is the appeal of Nello and Patrasche's friendship and loyalty to each other, right up to their death, which makes this tale of life in 19th century Flanders so popular in Japan. Conversely, the fact that it was written by a British author who spent little time in

<sup>1</sup> See *A Dog of Flanders* (Film, USA, 1914), *A Boy of Flanders* (Film, USA, 1924), *A Dog of Flanders* (Film, USA, 1935), *A Dog of Flanders* (Film, USA, 1960), and *A Dog of Flanders* (Film, USA, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> See *A Dog of Flanders* (TV, Japan, 1975), *My Patrasche* (TV, Japan, 1992), and *A Dog of Flanders* (Film, Japan, 1997).

Antwerp and older Western film adaptations of the story lacked a sense of regional authenticity, meant *A Dog of Flanders* got little attention from Flemish audiences.

## 2. Japan and *A Dog of Flanders*: A Transcultural Children's Story

The success and renown of *A Dog of Flanders* in first America and then Japan highlights the continued cultural fascination for nostalgia brought about through the adaptation of popular children's texts in film, television and wider popular culture. In previous work on nostalgia and LEGO fandom I argue that digital technology allows for the remediation of old children's media and thus serves a growing fan culture centred on the remembering and recollecting of childhood and associated memories of play (see [Geraghty 2018](#)). These activities can be seen as part of wider cultural trends epitomized by a continued fascination for the past and bringing back older texts for a new audience. Adapting international products around the particularities of a local culture (in this case Flemish) is a tried and tested business model. Early attempts at bringing Ouida's novel to life on the big screen exemplifies the historical trend in Hollywood film production where classic literary texts are chosen for adaptation to attract as wide an international audience as possible while at the same time responding to criticism from those who continued to attack cinema as lowbrow and populist. The search for international audiences, however, does not imply that all audiences expect the same or are even familiar with other national literary traditions. For Maria Nikolajeva, "[t]he notion that there is a 'common' children's literature in all countries in the world is a misunderstanding [ . . . ]. With very few exceptions, children's literature in different countries has little in common" ([Nikolajeva 1996](#), p. 43). Even though we cannot speak of one type of children's literature (or by extension film adaptations), as this would simplify differing national contexts and modes of consumption, we can speak of an increasingly international flow of children's culture in all its forms—predicated on the growth of social media networks, the use of the internet by children, and the global distribution and exhibition of children's media in differentiated local markets using specialised marketing techniques.

The dominance of Hollywood within this international market is in many ways down to the ebb and flow of Disney's cultural and popular appeal through history—their success in animated movie output in the 1930s and 1950s, followed by television and music production in the 1980s and 1990s, and now mega franchise output like *Star Wars* and *Marvel*. Moreover, the adaptation of children's literature by Hollywood, sold to audiences around the world, highlights the problematic nature of both globalization and its refinement through glocalization ([Robertson 1995](#), p. 30). [Gutierrez \(2009\)](#) first introduced the concept of glocalization to children's literature scholarship in her study of picturebook retellings of Philippine fairy tales and in recognising this work I would argue children's literature is inherently global in nature as stories circulate through adaptations; then blended, translated and amalgamated with local traditions and frameworks to produce glocal iterations of the original. For Sung-Ae Lee, "a 'glocal' text . . . emerges when a culture appropriates a global text and localizes it by imbuing foreign elements with local flavor: glocalization exists as a dialectic between the pressure of uniformity and an affirmation of the local" ([Lee 2014](#), p. 280). Also, while one might lay the blame for the dominance of Hollywood at the door of globalization or suggest that different national contexts for children's literature provide evidence of glocalization, we have to understand that all cultural texts, and characters within them, circulate across borders, generations and time periods. So while Disney is often considered the primary exporter of children's media content, we should look to Asia and countries like Japan for a counterpoint to this dominance; children's video game franchises like *Pokémon* and the anime studio Ghibli have become global media brands which are also leaders in international children's markets. This reversal in how international media texts influence national stories and audiences would appear to be even more important considering the fact that the 1975 anime *A Dog of Flanders* frames how Japanese tourists, and even local anime enthusiasts, imagine Antwerp and the surrounding rural landscape.

In the documentary *Patrasche: A Dog of Flanders* (2008) Didier Volckaert and An van Dienderen dissect the popularity and appeal of the story for Japanese readers.<sup>3</sup> Through interviews with the director of the 1975 anime series, members of the Japanese/Antwerp tourist offices, and a survey of the various adaptations they argue that Ouida's original story resonated with Japan because of its negative ending. Nello and Patrasche die achieving the goal of seeing Rubens' paintings but there was more meaning in that Nello failed to win the art competition and that he could not raise himself up out of poverty. Indeed, that he and his companion remained happy throughout their trials and hardships resonated with Japanese audiences. The loyalty shown for each other mattered more than individual success. There was nobility in death. For Japanese audiences brought up reading and then watching the story of Nello and Patrasche the text translates without translation: "Fans become fans of border-crossing texts or objects not necessarily because of *where* they are produced, but because they may recognize a subjective moment of affinity regardless of origin" (Chin and Morimoto 2013). Likewise, in attempting to get closer to the characters and recreate their friendship, first through adaptation then through travelling to Antwerp, fans are creating their version of the text. It changes in both nature (from a Flemish to Japanese cultural product) and context (from being little known to Flemish readers to becoming a national television phenomenon). The anime series attracted over 30 million viewers when it originally aired on Sunday nights in 1975. As a result of this shift in cultures of production and national contexts, Japanese children who grew up reading and watching *A Dog of Flanders* had an imagined ideal of Antwerp and Flanders that does not and never did exist in reality. How Antwerp and Flanders were depicted by Ouida was a criticism of the original book but also of subsequent American adaptations. Fans travelling to see Antwerp for themselves are not going to be familiar with what they will find there. However, as will be discussed with reference to notions of pilgrimage and tourism, fan expectations are not necessarily based on reality. It is the fiction that draws them closer.

### 3. Fan Tourism and the Search for Place

Roger Aden uses the term "symbolic pilgrimage" to characterize the process fans go through when they watch television series repeatedly, getting closer to the text by shutting out the everyday distractions of life in their living rooms and other personal spaces. Will Brooker describes it as "a trip without drugs, a journey and return without leaving the easy chair" (Brooker 2007b, p. 149). For Aden, the text itself becomes a sacred site, which fans travel to and return from when watching: "Symbolic pilgrimages feature individuals ritualistically revisiting powerful places that are symbolically envisioned through the interaction of story and individual imagination" (Aden 1999, p. 10). There is a preparation ritual to insure fans are not disturbed—getting snacks ready, locking the door, shutting off the lights, taking the phone off the hook—that "removes the participant from the everyday and brings him/her closer to the fiction" (Brooker 2007b, p. 155). Fans create a map of their favorite text that means something on a personal level, whether it is through the watching or rewatching of specific episodes or the emotive relationship created within a community of fans that share those experiences with others. The text, the story, becomes somewhere to go to, a "promised land", when fans want to escape the material world (Aden 1999, p. 4).

However, Matt Hills contests the metaphorical reading of pilgrimage offered by Aden's focus on the fictional text. He asserts that it does not take into account the desire for fans to travel to the places where their "promised lands" are filmed or set and thus suggests that "'inhabitation' of extratextual spaces . . . forms an important part of cult fans' extensions and expressions of the fan-text relationship" and is "an affective-interpretive process which spills into and redefines material spaces" (Hills 2002, p. 144). Recognizing the contemporary importance of the "runaway" Hollywood production to Vancouver, both Brooker and Hills have discussed how fans of television series made in the city treat

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<sup>3</sup> See *Patrasche: A Dog of Flanders* (Film, The Netherlands, 2008).

visiting shooting locations as a form of actual pilgrimage. Travelling to sites once glimpsed or identified becomes a way of getting closer to the text and ascribing personal meaning to it. For example, making the intangible tangible by achieving a proximity to the “real” Kent Farm (a private dairy farm in the Fraser Valley outside the city) if you are *Smallville* fan or a “real” Caprican building (the Vancouver Public Library downtown) if you are a fan of *Battlestar Galactica*. This liminal positioning of the fan is described by Brooker as offering an experience where they “hover on the borders between actual and fictional, holding both in a double-vision of alternate realities” (Brooker 2005, p. 13). The allusion to the religious pilgrimage is clearly made; both Hills and Aden ascribe some of the language of religious ritual and pilgrimage to the practices of travelling fans who must touch or be on the spot where their favourite character/actor once stood. But both Brooker and Hills emphasize the importance of being there—having a place to go to and feel at home. Similarly, Cornel Sandvoss asserts that, “The Physical places of fandom clearly have an extraordinary importance for fans” (Sandvoss 2005, p. 61). Popular tourist cities like Vancouver act as an “urban imaginary” for Brooker, where a single point of geography—an alley, a building, a street—can, with an adjustment of “frequency”—a certain way of looking, a stretch of imagination and a leap of fan faith—transport the visitor to another, fictional world. One pilgrim sees this quad of Simon Fraser University as *Earth-X-Files*; the other sees it as *Earth-Caprica*; and the same pilgrim is quite capable of switching between the two, with a reprioritizing of investment, a different imaginary angle, a shifting of vision, a change in “vibration”, a retuning (Brooker 2007a, pp. 438–39).

As a global tourist destination and international location for the popular children’s story *A Dog of Flanders*, I would argue that Antwerp also offers Brooker’s “urban imaginary”. In the case of Ouida’s depiction of the city and Flanders, however, I would call it the “rural imaginary”—where visions of a romanticized Flemish lifestyle and countryside have become for many fans a very tangible and obtainable reality. Locations that inspire fan pilgrimage have real world uses and they are not just used or visited by fans, therefore they have to actively make these places special—either through physical transformation of the space (adding familiar objects like dolls and statues of the characters) or performance in that space (taking photos where the characters were described as living, walking and ultimately dying). Stijn Reijnders has developed this idea of fans transforming real places through their imaginative engagement with space and text by applying Pierre Nora’s concept of “*lieux d’imagination*” (places of the imagination). He argues that places of the imagination “are not so much concerned with collective memory, as collective imagination. *Lieux d’imagination* are physical locations, which serve as a symbolic anchor for the collective imagination of society. By visiting these locations, tourists are able to construct and ‘validate’ a symbolic distinction between imagination and reality” (Reijnders 2011, p. 8). Further, using their imagination, Reijnders outlines how fans seek physical and material references to their favorite media texts (p. 114): for example, sitting in a particular seat at an Oxford pub made famous in *Inspector Morse* (p. 51); mimicking James Bond’s actions in exotic filming locations around the world (p. 78); or bringing the story of *Dracula* to life by visiting Transylvania to experience sights, sounds and smells described in the novel (p. 100). *A Dog of Flanders*’ “rural imaginary” offers multiple physical and emotional connections to enhance the fan tourist experience. The guided tours organized by Japanese companies and the physical markers erected by the city council and tourist board to commemorate Ouida’s story are the conduits through which fans transform their daily symbolic pilgrimage to the text on page and screen into a physical pilgrimage to Antwerp in rural Flanders.

John Urry in describing different kinds of touristic gaze—the vision that occurs when traveling—refers specifically to the “mediatised gaze.” Able to extend engagement with texts by inhabiting the world, tourists become part of the text: “Those gazing on the scene relive elements or aspects of the media event” (Urry 2002, p. 151). Examples of such sites become venerated memorials to popular culture: “Traditional elite institutions build shrines to symbols of faith, patriotism, and knowledge. But popular shrines communicate the legitimacy of popular experience, even if it is lurid, frivolous, or downright kitsch” (Combs 1989, p. 74). For Hills, being in a place matters more because it allows fans

access to extratextual pleasures and affords them the opportunity to reinterpret the text since “*the media cult cannot be entirely reduced to metaphors of textuality*” (Hills 2002, p. 145). Seeking out locations allows fans to extend their relationship with texts: “Cult geographies also sustain cult fans’ fantasies of ‘entering’ into the cult text” (p. 151). These locations can be open to the public, made significant because of what media texts are associated with that space; or they can be private, made special by the rituals and performances in which fans participate. In the case of the Cathedral of Our Lady in Antwerp, the sacred religious site used for worship and housing great works of art, momentarily becomes a fan owned space: its significance for Nello in the book, the fact he and Patrasche die there gazing upon the Rubens masterpieces, and its depiction in all media adaptations of the story gives privileged viewing to those visitors who see it as more than just a church. It is a mediated space. The physical marking out of space, recording the visit through film/photography and getting as close to the spot where the friends are meant to have taken their final rest, represent the accrued textual knowledge over years of repeated reading and viewing of *A Dog of Flanders*. Visiting the cathedral becomes a chance to embody the tragic story of a boy and his faithful friend.

As Brooker (2007a, p. 429) describes fan pilgrimages to filming locations, they become “sites of play and carnival, poetry and magic.” Fans use stored memories of their favorite texts to interpret and find their way around both the fictional and real space—“viewing the present through an archive of the past” (p. 433). Therefore, taking pictures of buildings, landscapes and people in and around the cathedral and then comparing those images with descriptions and shots drawn directly from the mediate text allows fans a certain amount of control. They can see how they were made, how space was controlled and manipulated by the writers and directors of both the live action and animated versions; gaining such knowledge taps into a fan preoccupation for learning and developing their expertise. It also offers fans another more personal connection to the text; when watching and rewatching—reading and reading—they can imagine themselves being there, they are now forever closer to the text, to Nello and Patrasche. Memories of the visit continue to influence how they engage with their favorite text after the fact; as a result, the text is irrevocably transformed for and by them from that physical experience. I would call this a topography of becoming a fan, where memories of how being in that special and familiar space influence and enhance their relationship and emotional connection to the media text post return. In their work on geography and memory Owain Johnson and Joanne Garde-Hansen argue that the two are inextricably linked. Memory is defined by geography and geography defined by memory; actions that take place in a memorable space last longer and memories of the physical environment add a level of detail to memories of events occurring in that space: “Memory is a fundamental (geographic) aspect of becoming, intimately entwined with space, effect, emotion, imagination and identity” (Jones and Garde-Hansen 2012, p. 11). In terms of being a fan, memories of the tourist site (preserved in pictures) and what they did there (performance or rituals) strengthen the connection to the media text and form the basis for their fan story after the event.

While the importance of the fan collective, groups of fans and specific communities is not in dispute, more recent fan scholarship has centered on fandom as a form of temporal identity, an extension of the self as they age. This aligns with Anthony Giddens’ concept that modern identity formation is individualistic and subjective, creating a “trajectory of the self” where people are constantly trying to define themselves and their self-identity through reflexive examination of their “life-cycle” (Giddens 1997, p. 14). It follows that fandom too should be considered individual and subjective—not all fans attend conventions with others, socialize online or welcome/agree with newcomers. Likewise, Hills (2014) has studied what he calls “becoming-a-fan” stories which articulate the emotional connections created between text and individual fan, when they can first remember this happening and how it has developed over time. He identifies that fans often describe their first memory of watching and liking a film, book or TV show in terms of a “conversion” and during the course of life this narrative of becoming a fan turns to “transference” as they talk about sharing their love with other fans, take pleasure in seeing others become fans, and even how they stopped being a fan. Guided tours become mobile sites for this narrative exchange: the guide asks questions, tells related stories of

the author, shares the latest information from the city and encourages fans to revel in memories of the characters they grew up watching. Discussion between fans turns to how long they have been fans, when they first watched the anime series or films or read the book. The knowledge gained on tour can also encourage people to encounter new things, new versions of the story perhaps, or reassess the original Ouida novel. Fandom is therefore transformative, transforming and transformational; texts can shift in and out of favor with fans, fans can like and dislike multiple texts at the same time, and fan attitudes towards texts might change significantly over long periods: “Returning to discourses of becoming-a-fan enables a focus on transformational moments, as well as on the gradual mediations, prefigurations and transfers of fandom” (Hills 2014, pp. 17–18).

While I agree a focus on such stories can help scholars understand individual fan motivations and identities, I would also stress the importance of place and space in those narratives of becoming. As Jones and Garde-Hansen argue above, memory and geography are linked and therefore stories that articulate a fan identity will have a specific geographic anchor (more physical than Reijnders’ concept of the symbolic anchor discussed earlier) upon which memories of becoming, conversion and transference are inscribed. Also, as Rebecca Williams argues, fan tourism is “a practice riven with conflicts and contradictions as fans negotiate both highly commercialized and non-commodified spaces, and form their own views on the apparent ‘authenticity’ of these various experiences” (Williams 2018, p. 100). Therefore, whether memories of a fan tourism site are individual (having your picture taken in front of the “real” cathedral in Antwerp), communal (fans travelling together as a group on a tour, engaging in conversation about *A Dog of Flanders*), or commodified (purchasing souvenirs such as postcards, toys and models based on the anime series from surrounding tourist shops) through their retelling we can draw connections between fans, groups, practices, children’s literature, real places and cultural spaces.

#### 4. Destination Antwerp: Locating Glocal Fan Geographies

My survey of the fan pilgrimage to Antwerp for *A Dog of Flanders* helps to contextualize the movement and practices of fans in geographical spaces and relates to Hills’ discussion of “affective play.” This term “deals with the emotional attachment of the fan” and “suggests that play is not always caught up in a pre-established ‘boundedness’ or set of cultural boundaries, but may instead imaginatively create its own set of boundaries and its own auto-‘context’” (Hills 2002, p. 112). In terms of media, memory and geography, attachment, and a sense of belonging are created through physically being in Antwerp where the story is set and various adaptations have been filmed, recreating moments of viewing, and sharing the experience with other fans after the trip. Thus we might be able to understand fan tourism and memories of becoming a fan after entering specific fan spaces through the lens of phenomenological geography. This concerns the study of place and space, taking into account “practical and emotional aspects of day-to-day existence . . . habitual movements and unselfconscious senses of place” (Moore 2006). For David Seamon, phenomenology is “the description and interpretation of human experience. A major effort of phenomenology is to identify and describe broader, underlying patterns—e.g., the lived expressions of environmental embodiment—that give order and coherence to the richness and ‘chaos’ of human experience as it is lived as everyday life” (Seamon 2006). The way we react and interact with our natural and built environment helps define a sense of identity through place. The media we use in those spaces also contribute to this sense of place, whether it is talking on one’s mobile phone walking through town or taking pictures of famous landmarks.

In the vein of tourists recording their holidays through pictures and reviews *A Dog of Flanders* fans recount their travel experiences through the photographic recreation of the physical surroundings: the streets of Hoboken, the Cathedral of Our Lady or the Grote Markt etc. Processes of encountering mediated tourist sites, taking pictures, and seeing other fans in those spaces helps to create and tell a story. As the story is recounted through video and social media it contributes to the act of becoming a fan, staying a fan, and displaying a fan identity over time. For John Urry, the 19th century flâneur was the forerunner to the 20th century tourist: the flâneur was “able to travel, to arrive, to gaze, to move on,

to be anonymous, to be in a liminal zone,” now by taking photographs tourists are about “being seen and recorded, and of seeing others and recording them” (Urry 2002, pp. 126–27). Similarly, when *A Dog of Flanders* fans pass through the mediated spaces of Antwerp, taking photos to preserve the moment and celebrate their fandom, fans are displaying their fan identity. Fans perform, communicate and remember mediated spaces of popular culture whilst at the same time accumulating cultural capital.

For many fans, the greatest pleasure lies in the attempt to take and make meaning from established media texts—engaging in the creation of a social experience with other fans and asserting their own identity and self over those who have produced them. Or, as Henry Jenkins writes, when fans embrace popular texts, they “claim those works as their own, remaking them in their own image, forcing them to respond to their needs and gratify their desires” (Jenkins 2006, p. 59). Fans “actively assert their mastery over the mass-produced texts” which provide the building blocks “for their own cultural productions and the basis for their social interactions” (Jenkins 1992, p. 23). Yet, in understanding media fandom as site for struggle and meaning making we need to acknowledge the importance of taste in the creation of distinction: the distinction between fan groups, what they produce, what they value, and what gets re-circulated within culture. As noted by John Storey, “for [Pierre] Bourdieu . . . the category of “taste” functions as a maker of ‘class’ (using the word in a double sense to mean both a socio-economic category and the suggestion of a particular level of quality)” (Storey 2012, p. 224). Fans therefore continually display their socio-economic class and what they deem quality when they make distinctions of taste between the media texts they value and those they seek to criticize and ignore. Mark Duffett states that as distinctions are reproduced individuals accumulate more “cultural capital” and are able to claim a place in society “by acquiring a stock of knowledge that reflected their particular social position.” In relation to fandom, “to successfully exploit this stored knowledge is to display your cultural capital and therefore align yourself with a very particular social grouping . . . Taste is therefore a means we use to competitively classify ourselves as social beings” (Duffett 2013, p. 130).

Building on notions of cultural capital, Matt Hills explains that seeing distinction as an important part of fandom “allows us to consider any given fan culture not simply as a community but *also as a social hierarchy* where fans share a common interest while also competing over fan knowledge, access to the object of fandom, and status” (Hills 2002, p. 46). Fans create their own boundaries, internally contesting who is the better fan, greater fan, most knowledgeable and worthy fan. The community is often deeply hierarchical and involves a systematized structure of sub-cultural taste and political discourse which Mark Jancovich terms “cult distinction” in his 2002 article on cult movie fans (Jancovich 2002, pp. 306–7). These discourses of taste and distinction are rooted in the personal value fans attach to the central media text and its associated paratexts. Fans either produce a sense of distinction between themselves and the mainstream (non fans), defining the fan community in opposition to how they are constructed by other groups and the media, or they distinguish levels of fandom amongst the group, testing status and knowledge through quizzes, the accumulation of rare goods, and seeking unique physical or ‘real life’ experiences. As I have discussed throughout this paper, traveling to Antwerp offer Japanese tourists the opportunity to increase their cultural capital as fans of *A Dog of Flanders*. However, the positioning of the story as an international text, even more popular abroad as it is at home, makes this a form of transcultural capital: firstly, because it is enhanced by the fact fans have travelled far and invested time, money and effort to be there; secondly, because they recognize much of the local geography and houses as if they were residents; and, thirdly, they return home with a greater knowledge and appreciation of *A Dog of Flanders* as a cultural product and, more importantly, the “rural imaginary” of Antwerp.

## 5. Conclusions

In 2016 a new sculpture to commemorate and celebrate Nello and Patrasche as icons of Antwerp was unveiled to the public. Located in front of the cathedral the new piece of artwork replaces two very minimalist concrete memorials originally placed to acknowledge the ties between Japan and Flanders thanks to *A Dog of Flanders*. Yet, sponsored by Japanese car manufacturer Toyota, such markers tended

to suggest that the love of the story was largely from one direction: the story being more famous overseas than at home. The only other statue dedicated to the story was designed in 1985 by sculptor Yvonne Bastiaens and was moved from the Grote Markt to Hoboken partly due to the fact drunk revelers tended to damage it at night; unaware of its international significance. With this in mind, descriptions on sculptor Baptist Vermeulen's studio website would seem to indicate that Antwerp has finally started to recognize the cultural impact of Nello and Patrasche's friendship: "Antwerp has a new striking symbol. Copenhagen has its mermaid, Brussels its Manneken Pis, and now Antwerp has Nello and Patrasche. With this A-typical and touching Christmas story and this beautiful work of art we will conquer the hearts of the people."<sup>4</sup> The sculpture is large, depicting Nello with his arms around Patrasche at rest; the cobble stones spread over the couple like a blanket. It is intended for children to come and sit on, reflecting on the two's tragic end and their enduring love for each other.

Vermeulen's sculpture has already started and will no doubt continue to act as a focal point for fan tourism. It has become a literal touch point for international fans of *A Dog of Flanders* who arrive in Antwerp seeking affirmation of the story and a physical place to connect with those well-loved characters. Yet, also, with the tourist board and local artists so keen to emphasize the touching nature of the story—describing the new monument on par with other symbols of national identity, tying it in with Christmas and its related festive celebrations—it would appear that local residents are now more welcoming of Nello and Patrasche's fabled friendship and all the sentiment that it represents. The placement of Vermeulen's statue is the result of the transcultural reappropriation of a Flemish children's story written by an English author and transformed into a Japanese cultural phenomenon. *A Dog of Flanders*, through continued adaptation and fan tourism, has finally returned to a familiar place almost three decades after international fans had already made Antwerp their adopted home. As children's literature Ouida's tale had failed to find an audience in the region it was set or the language it was written in. However, through processes of adaptation and fan pilgrimage—a "rural imaginary"—the story is now being celebrated as transnational cultural heritage.

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<sup>4</sup> See <http://studiotist.be/portfolio/nello-patrasche-a-story-friendship-sculpture-by-studio-tist-batist-vermeulen/>.

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