MAKING CULTURE ON YOUTUBE:

CASE STUDIES OF CULTURAL PRODUCTION ON THE POPULAR WEB PLATFORM

by

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(Under the Direction of Anandam Kavoori)

ABSTRACT

This dissertation discusses three popular YouTube video bloggers (vloggers), Mr. Chi-City, Shaycarl, and iJustine, and their relationship to the site as a vehicle for cultural production. It employs a framework for studying cultural production on YouTube that focuses on its key components: authorship, performance, and narrative. It discusses the significance of the interaction between the YouTube space (conceptualized as a platform) and its users, both of which are imbued with their own agency to negotiate the dynamics of the space. The dissertation contends that vloggers, using the tools made available by the platform as a site of cultural possibility, produce work that is sophisticated and variable, all while being constantly engaged with feedback solicited from and offered by other users. It uses the language of participatory culture and produsage to draw out this relationship and suggests ways in which the elements of cultural practice on the platform play themselves out on the increasingly influential space.

INDEX WORDS: YouTube, cultural production, narrative, authorship, performance,
                platform studies

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DEDICATION

For Laura, my greatest cheerleader.

For my family.

I am proud to make you proud.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: YOUTUBE AS A PLATFORM

In less than a decade of existence, YouTube, the video sharing web service currently owned by Google, Inc., has proven itself as a major force in global culture. Its massive reach and its business practices have come under scrutiny not only due to the prevalence of things like intellectual property breaches on the site (e.g., Breen, 2007), but also, and perhaps more notably, because of its novel place in the industrial and economic complex of moving image media, long dominated by television and film, which were until recently the only games in town (e.g., Marshall, 2009). A catch-all location for all manner of user produced video content, and, increasingly, a space for record labels, television networks, and motion picture studios to publicly house portions of their own archives, YouTube has developed into a monolithic media empire. The kinds of content offered on the service, nearly all of which is contributed by individual users (even if those "individual users" happen to have names like Viacom or 20th Century Fox), is, by now, well known. Someone browsing YouTube can find seemingly anything: cute animals, classic television episodes, archival news reports, citizen-produced journalism projects, video blogs, film clips, stunts and practical jokes, cultural "remixing," and more. Even with content so diverse (and from sources so divergent as major film studios with unlimited resources and lonely video bloggers armed with only their laptop's built-in webcam), YouTube has maintained a public tagline, meant to be read as an ethos: "Broadcast yourself." These two words lay bare the way YouTube's operators hope to construct their site in the public imagination: that YouTube is a space to create, to consume, and to share.

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As YouTube has come under both popular and academic scrutiny, it has become clear that the site defies pigeonholing. Television scholars have attempted to incorporate YouTube into a discussion of the moving image's changing role in daily life, discussing the site as if it were a *form* of television itself (Lotz, 2007). Others have positioned the YouTube user as an agent readied to upset existing media power relations, as the site allows its users to take the reins of media production, and to assert dominance over narrative, "changing the audience's relationship to commercial media" (Strangelove, 2010, p. 181). Each approach (be it one that addresses the site as a continuation of existing media forms, or one that views it as a competitive industrial apparatus) contains some valid arguments. It would be faulty to dismiss years of critical scholarship on the televisual image, just as it would be faulty to ignore the shifting of power structures that enable a site like YouTube to find a broad user base (and to take eyes off of television and film as they have been typically construed). But each position is also necessarily limiting. Due to the sheer mass of the YouTube space, and the varied modes of content listed above, developing some sort of "unified theory" of YouTube is simply not a workable proposition. There is value in each of the critiques noted, and in many other strains of scholarship being developed around YouTube throughout many disciplines and methodologies.

The dissertation that follows represents an effort to conceptualize YouTube as a location of cultural practice, and to reconstruct the productive experience of its user-creators. Through textual studies of three prevalent YouTube video bloggers ("vloggers") whose regular engagement with the camera and with the specificities of YouTube's architecture mark them as direct embodiments of a kind of cultural production unique to YouTube. Through this, I intend to gain a more nuanced perspective on the mechanics at work in producing content for YouTube; specifically, I hope to answer the question:

How does the relationship between YouTube and its user-creators work to

produce culture?

Perhaps more directly, are there any specific characteristics inherent in this relationship that

manifest themselves within the underlying components of cultural production: **authorship**,

performance, and **narrative**? I highlight these three terms because without these concepts it is

difficult to conceive of the act of producing culture at all. In the process of reviewing material for

this project, these three concepts began to make sense as part of a general framework for

understanding how video blogs are generated as cultural products. These inductive categories

(authorship, performance, narrative), which I refer to herein as the components of cultural

production, comprise general categories tied to the interactivity of the YouTube space, and are

helpful for a theoretical understanding of the process of creating videos; however, these

components are not mutually exclusive, as will be discussed in detail later. The subjects of the

three case studies that make up the backbone of this dissertation have been chosen because they

relate to these component concepts, in ways both direct and interwoven.

The structure of this project, then, relies on the three case studies: Chapter 4 examines

vlogger Shaycarl and his continuing video blog project/reality sitcom "The Shaytards" as an

exercise in production that is a useful example for how authorship operates on YouTube. Chapter

5 discusses vlogger Mr. Chi-City as a performer who, while never showing his face, uses

YouTube as a dramaturgical space in which to act out a very specific identity. Chapter 6 looks at

YouTube sensation and former "lifecaster" iJustine, whose combination of exhibitionism and

production savvy allow her to use the space as an outlet for constructing a personal narrative. In

discussing any of these concepts in relation to YouTube it is impossible to avoid the immediate

and interactive nature of the site itself; further, these components of cultural production continually interact with one another.

The early parts of this dissertation are about building a language and a method with which to discuss these concepts, and with which to work toward a clearer exploration of the central question. In Chapter 2, the present literature on YouTube is discussed, particularly in terms of the user experience with YouTube as a site of participatory culture and the specific nature of the vlogger as a cultural producer, and in Chapter 3 I attempt to defend the use of textual analysis as a method that is useful for building a conversation around issues of cultural production in online video. And since it is difficult if not impossible to discuss the nature of a *user* without first mapping the terrain of what is *used*, the remainder of this introductory chapter is dedicated to sketching the architecture of YouTube as a space of cultural possibility; more specifically, to establish the parameters of YouTube as a platform.

The Platform Study

The use of the word "platform" as a conceptualization of online or technological spaces is not an entirely novel concept. The word itself has been bandied about in countless corporate environments, typically to refer to technological products (either online or offline) in terms of how they might be monetized. In an effort to put a more particular definition on platforms in this context, Gawer & Cusumano (2012) distinguish what they call industry platforms in terms of their internal and external capabilities for business. The notion of an internal platform is akin to a company's building of a diversified portfolio of holdings; platform in this context refers to a concentrated center of production meant to keep costs low and consumer offerings diverse. But Gawer & Cusumano (2012) also note the rise and prevalence of external platforms, "products, services, or technologies developed by one or more firms, and which serve as foundations upon

which a larger number of firms can build complementary innovations, in the form of specific products, related services or component technologies" (p. 4). Some of the notable external platforms cited as examples include software like Windows and Linux, mobile technologies like the iPhone, social networking sites like Twitter and Facebook, and video game consoles. The utility of creating innovative platforms is notable, but also comes with its own set of problems: most notably that the developers of external platforms are reliant on others to create content, and to otherwise invest money and labor into platform development.

Viewed through a less corporatist lens, platforms in practice are sites of immense creative, financial, and interactive possibility, and in this way YouTube might enter the discussion. Relying here on Montfort & Bogost's (2009) attempt to develop the field of "platform studies," we could say that YouTube is best conceptualized as a platform that allows for the creation of many types of content. Moreover, the relationships between conditions of the platform, the user's position, and cultural factors influence what kinds of content are produced and what the implications of that content may be. This section explores the work of Montfort & Bogost and its implications for YouTube, as well as Deleuze & Guattari's (1987a, 1987b) influential work on nomadology. Using some examples of YouTube's structure and content, I attempt to position YouTube as a platform, and address what that position means for its users.

Montfort & Bogost (2009) argue for the role of the platform, which they conceive loosely as a hardware or software space where computing can happen ("computing" being the operative term in their definition) in their discussion of the Atari Video Computing System (VCS) entitled *Racing the Beam*. They argue that a platform "in its purest form is an abstraction" which must eventually "take material form" (p. 2). Various approaches have been developed to critique

aspects of this material form, but for Montfort & Bogost all have proven flawed. They have

missed the mark on what can be gleaned from a detailed analysis of the platform. To wit:

> Studies in computer science and engineering have addressed the question of how
>
> platforms are best developed and what is best encapsulated in the platform.
>
> Studies in digital media have addressed the cultural relevance of particular
>
> software that runs on platforms. But little work has been done on how the
>
> hardware and software of platforms influences, facilitates, or constrains particular
>
> forms of computational expression. (p. 3)

It is this set of relationships, between the hardware/software, forms of expression, and the users

who navigate the space, that has gone largely ignored. It is the same set of relationships that I

believe has resonance in discussions of YouTube.

Montfort & Bogost go on to discuss the implications of the platform itself. With a

centralized structure, creation of content or code never has to begin from scratch; the platform

lays out the basics. This means, however, that content is restricted by what the platform is and is

not capable of. Creators then, must operate within a set of ground rules created by the platform

itself. In the discussion of the Atari VCS, for example, Montfort & Bogost note many points

where game developers had to work around constraints imposed by the hardware (the number of

moving on-screen objects allowed by the processor's RAM space, for example). The final

product is necessarily colored by those conditions, and understanding those underlying

constraints helps us make informed critiques of the cultural products themselves.

In a later essay that attempted to clarify the field of platform studies, Bogost & Montfort

(2009) help to define the field's position by countering a series of popular misconceptions about

it. For example, they oppose the most common critique that may come to mind – that placing the onus of cultural production on the platform is flatly deterministic:

> If we were to believe that technology manifests itself and unidirectionally influences the course of human history, we would be cutting off at least half of platform studies: The study of how our technologies, our computer platforms, embody particular cultural concepts and ideals, how they too are created in a cultural context. (p. 2)

Hence, the platform study is not deterministic, since a hard form of determinism would cut off at the head any discussion the relationships that characterize the approach.

That same paper addresses another misconception in Bogost & Montfort's eyes, that anything can be a platform. This issue has particular relevance for this project, since it appears on its face to dismiss any notion that YouTube could be conceived of within the language of platform studies (without singling the site out by name). This concern arises because the authors contend that web sites, as used, do not often provide users with computational-level input. In short (and perhaps in words that are too terse), if coding is not the dominant form of content creation, than platform studies are not the best means for conceptualizing how a space operates. In an article that Bogost and Montfort are quick to knock down, Gillespie (2010) states that "Platforms are platforms not necessarily because they allow code to be written or run, but because they afford an opportunity to communicate, interact, or sell" (qtd. in Bogost & Montfort, 2009, p. 3). This broader definition, I contend, is the most useful for platform studies as a field. Even Bogost and Montfort, despite their contentions to the contrary, appear inclined to allow their rigid definition to break down a bit:

[T]he real question should be whether a particular system is influential and important *as a platform.* Something is a platform when a developers consider it as such and use it; that activity can be more or less culturally interesting. Rather than asking "Is it a platform?" we might ask "What interesting or influential things have been developed on the system?" and "Does the system have unique or innovative features as a platform?" (p. 4)

That final question ("Does the system have unique or innovative features as a platform?") is perhaps the most crucial one. YouTube is unique and innovative in a number of ways. It has developed from a barebones space for the sharing of video content into a much more dynamic platform that allows for a multiplicity of content, a social atmosphere, and a feedback loop. I will point more to this later. To move along, it is useful to consider some theoretical underpinnings, first on how we can conceptualize newly-defined YouTube platform.

YouTube as Smooth Space?

Deleuze & Guattari explore many aspects of social life, power structures, and human agency in 1987's *A Thousand Plateaus*. Through a nuanced employment of history and theoretical language, they provide a poststructuralist social theory that is applicable across disciplines, the studies of computing and communication being no exception. When trying to categorize or classify what manner of space YouTube encompasses, it is a quick leap to the pair's essay "1440: The Smooth and the Striated" (1987b), which attempts to how spaces (both physical and metaphorical) are organized, explored through a number of different models (mathematical, musical, and technological notions supplement the physical).

The essence of the argument is that, true to the title, there are two kinds of space: smooth (nomad space) and striated (sedentary), which exist in both in opposition and in hybridized

forms. Smooth space is space that is largely uncharted, an arena of possibility, while striated

space includes imposed boundaries (striations) that limit the possibility of a given space. An

ocean is the perfect example of a smooth space, while the city is a manifestation of striated

space, organized, gridded, less open and more difficult to navigate. In more detailed terms (using

a musical metaphor):

> [T]he striated is that which intertwines fixed and variable elements, produces an
>
> order and succession of distinct forms, and organizes horizontal melodic lines and
>
> vertical harmonic planes. The smooth is the continuous variation, continuous
>
> development of form…. (p. 478)

Striated space closes itself off, limiting agency, while smooth space allows the agent to distribute

himself within it.

There is more to this than a simple binary, of course. There is no space that is purely

smooth, and none that is purely striated:

> Nothing is ever done with: smooth space allows itself to be striated, and striated
>
> space reimparts a smooth space, with potentially very different values, scope and
>
> signs. Perhaps we must say that all progress is made by and in striated space, but
>
> all becoming occurs in smooth space. (p. 486).

This last point is particularly prescient with regard to the YouTube platform, which is best

understood as a smooth space which undergoes constant striations. For the user, YouTube is a

space of becoming, a space largely open to desire and possibility. Yet, as Deleuze and Guattari

would caution, there are issues of power embedded in the negotiation of spaces (and the

transition and re-transition from one form to the next). "Never believe that a smooth space will

suffice to save us" (p. 500), they contend. Smooth spaces are decidedly not utopian ones. The

spectrum of possibility and becoming is also limited without some sense of striation. A critique of the YouTube platform in this language is particularly useful. A detailed look at the structure of YouTube is present later in this essay. Before that, we must consider the following: What does the YouTube space offer the user, and what types of production are made available in this platform?

The "Produser" and the Nomad

To conceptualize the YouTube user, it is useful to cull material from two sources, beginning with a nod to the broad set of literature that has arisen to discuss participatory culture (particularly the work of Jenkins and Bruns, whose writings will be revisited at length in Chapter 2), and returning to Deleuze and Guattari and their discussion of the nomad. When speaking of participatory culture, any discussion almost necessarily begins with Jenkins. While he does not specifically point to YouTube in *Convergence Culture* (2006), we can quite easily describe the site as a space where convergence occurs, where "consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content" (p. 3). The dispersal he is referencing is a broad change in the media landscape, where forms never truly disappear (see also Lotz, 2007), but the technologies available for users are constantly uprooted and modified. These changes exist on the levels of both production and reception. And, what is most important for Jenkins, technological changes (along with changes in media economics and systems of capital that go along with them) allow for a greater sense of participation and collectivity, whether this is the ability to easily distribute video content or to build knowledge communities that benefit all.

As such, Jenkins positions his convergence theory as a counterpoint to more pessimistic theory, and is quick to situate convergence as a movement in relation to popular culture:

Far too much media reform rhetoric rests on melodramatic discourse about

victimization and vulnerability, seduction and manipulation, "propaganda

machines" and "weapons of mass destruction." Again and again, this version of

the media reform movement has ignored the complexity of the public's

relationship to popular culture and sided with those opposed to a more diverse and

participatory culture. The politics of critical utopianism is founded on a notion of

empowerment; the politics of critical pessimism on a politics of victimization.

One focuses on **what we are doing with media**, and the other on what media is

doing to us. (p. 248, emphasis added)

Jenkins's "critical utopianism" can be bookended by fellow participatory cultural theorist Axel

Bruns (2008), who focuses on the democratization of media. Bruns envisions a new model for

usage and consumption of media content, the "produser" (producer plus user), who is birthed

into existence in accordance with technological changes. He argues:

[T]he distinctions between producers and users of content have faded into

comparative insignificance…. [U]sers are always already necessarily also

producers of the shared knowledge base, regardless of whether they are aware of

this role—they have become a new hybrid, *produser.* [emphasis in original] (p.

2)[1]

These models of participatory culture can act as a starting point for defining the YouTube user.

A more thorough appraisal of this position can be gained by revisiting the work of Deleuze &

Guattari.

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[1] Bruns and the concept of produsage are revisited in more detail in Chapter 2.

In "1227: Treatise on Nomadology – The War Machine" (1987a), Deleuze & Guattari explore several propositions that characterize a pair of opposing forces: the State and the war machine. It is between the pair, which are congruent but exterior to one another, that the nomad operates. The nomad is, to put it most plainly, an actor operating largely within smooth space. Nomads "have no history; they only have a geography" (p. 393). The nomad's relationship to space is an interesting one, and in many ways Deleuze and Guattari use the term historically, in its literal sense. We might take the following pair of characterizations, though, as deeply informative of how we might characterize the YouTube user as nomad:

> The nomad has a territory; he follows customary paths; he goes from one point to another; he is not ignorant of points…. But the question is what in nomad life is a principal and what is only a consequence. (p. 380)

This notion of consequence will become interesting in the context of the platform study. If the YouTube user is a nomad, what of his production is merely consequence of the contours of the platform? Further,

> [E]ven though the nomadic trajectory may follow trails or customary routes, it does not fulfill the function of the sedentary road, which is to *parcel out a closed space to people*, assigning each person a share and regulating communication between shares. The nomadic trajectory does the opposite: it *distributes people (or animals) in an open space*, one that is indefinite and noncommunicating. (p. 380)

We could argue that the YouTube space allows for this open distribution. Communication channels on YouTube are, as I will attempt to show later, largely emergent and undefined.

Lastly, we cannot incorporate any discussion of the nomad without discussing its operation within structures of power, as categorized by Deleuze and Guattari in its most perfect form, the State. They argue that it is essential to the State to "vanquish nomadism" (p. 385), and also to limit unfettered migrations across space. In essence, the State has a fundamental interest to striate spaces in order to limit open distribution and possibility, and to assert its control. It is worth noting here that, while the State has direct influence over YouTube in a number of ways (most notably the negotiation of intellectual property law in cases of piracy), here the central power play concerns corporate or ownership interest in the space and the ways in which it is used. Still, Deleuze and Guattari's position has resonance.

Here, I have buttressed two seemingly competing positions: the cultural utopian argument of participatory culture theorists, and the nomadic figure operating in smooth space (with power being emphatically exercised *against* both the space and the individual). Yet, these understandings of the individual are peculiarly congruent. If we take Deleuze and Guattari's highly metaphorical arguments to its necessary theoretical leaping point, both rely heavily on an understanding of possibility – for what the user can do, and for what the space (platform) can represent. This relationship between space and user can be further explained by introducing the processes of resistance and accommodation that underlie technological interaction.

Appropriation, Resistance and Accommodation

In a discussion of YouTube that relies on notions of spatial possibility (both as a platform and as smooth space), it is useful to discuss a couple of congruent ideas that play naturally into this framework: appropriation and material agency. The field of technology studies, from which these ideas are drawn, takes as its basis notions of how technologies are made, and how they are used. Much of this work hinges on discussions of professionals in scientific fields, and the way

in which their technological creations function as both act and artifact. There is an emerging field of study, however, exemplified by Eglash (2004), which conceives of technology from the perspective of the non-professional individuals who "appropriate" those technologies. This subfield examines the relationship of the layperson as technological consumer, as market, and as the holder of a particular kind of social power due to that economic role. It also cites technology for its liberal potential, even going so far as to advocate an organized praxis regarding technology. As an example:

> We need not just more cultural expertise in technical matters, but more syncretism in both directions. We need not only more scientific access for local communities, but more cultural workers – artists, writers, activists, and others – who can animate the spirit of technoscience and speak to the soul of appropriated technologies. (Eglash, 2004, p. xix).

Like platform studies, this field of technology studies deals with concerns of possibility: how the individual engages with a technology can help to determine how future users experience it, and in fact can help determine what kinds of technologies are to come.

But, as the language of technological appropriation seems tailor made for a discussion of YouTube, its situation as a space and as a platform is perhaps more complex. Pickering (1995) can aid us in thinking about YouTube by extending one of the central Deleuzian metaphors. Pickering's "mangle of practice," the term he gives to the process of creating scientific artifacts, entails:

> The dance of agency, seen asymmetrically from the human end, thus takes the form of a dialectic of *resistance and accommodation*, where resistance denotes the failure to achieve an intended capture of agency in practice, and

accommodation an active human strategy of response to resistance, which can

include revisions to goals and intentions as well as to the material form of the

machine in question and to the human frame of gestures and social relations that

surround it. (emphasis added, p. 22)

Pickering forces us to reckon with science and the products of science in terms of "material

agency," the notion that those artifacts that we produce possess within them a field of potential.

What is of particular interest to me here is the central problematic that characterizes the mangle

of practice: the dialectic of resistance and accommodation. This is the same relationship at play

in Deleuze and Guattari's discussion of smooth and striated space: one form never quite prevails,

but constantly resists and presses against the other. The mangle and the concept of material

agency helps to theoretically illuminate YouTube both within the language of the platform and of

space. It helps to explain user experience in terms of the possibility which YouTube's creators

and users have embedded in the technology, and how this affects user experience. Pickering

argued for the mangle of practice as a "theory of everything," and while that claim may fail to

hold water in the long run, its implications here are obvious.

It seems nearly impossible to consider YouTube without examining the various sets of

resistances that the space offers, as well as the potential it affords. For the casual user, YouTube

is constricted by the physical properties of its own interface, its technological capabilities, its

economic model, its legal struggles, and more. But it allows great possibilities for the production

of culture. Within the confines of the law (and of YouTube's internal policies, which some find

too repressive and some far too permissive), YouTube is a space for all manner of moving image

content, some of it high art and some of it nonsensical. It acts as a repository for video from

individuals with webcams and movie studios with million dollar budgets. To an observer, the

potential for YouTube seems absolutely limitless. It is this relationship (between resistance and accommodation) that is incredibly intriguing about YouTube, and the work of Pickering and of Deleuze and Guattari offers the language with which to speak about it. Having presented these bodies of language, I shall attempt now to use them in a discussion of YouTube as a platform, and of the relationships between user, space, and content that that notion implies.

Reading YouTube as a Platform

Back in 2005, YouTube was a fairly unassuming presence: an innocuous white-backgrounded web page containing a small black "screen" from which video played, and little more. For the early adopting user, this was a smooth space par excellence. One could navigate through various kinds of video content, each embedded in a material space not unlike any other one. Over time, much about the platform has changed. What I will attempt to explore in this section are some of the characteristics of the platform that influence user experience, and help to define the YouTube user as produser or nomad.

Viewing the YouTube platform today, one finds a main page announcing a number of things: a search box, a banner ad, recommended "channels" (collections of videos uploaded by one user) that are customized according to viewing history, recommended videos (customized according to the same matrix), and lists of the most popular videos according to category (film, sports, comedy, and a catch-all "most viewed" category). In some incarnation or another, the YouTube main page has always contained many of these features. Advertising was always part of the model, though its presence is felt much more heavily today, including a large banner advertisement added to the main page as part of a late-2012 facelift of the site. The use of view counts to organize popular videos has similarly always existed. While the space attests to a democratic nature (creating an account is free, and once registered, a user can upload video

content immediately), it has always placed a premium on its most popular content, a feature of the platform that has contributed to the drive for viral video.

Within the platform, each video is assigned its own URL. The typical page for a YouTube video has a number of specific characteristics as well, which are all worth pointing out here. Reading a web page from top to bottom, we see a search box (the emphasis on searchability from any given page is an important feature), a title and a user name (hyperlinked to take browsers to that user's channel), the video itself (which plays instantly once the page loads), and finally a set of buttons and links with which the viewer can provide feedback on the video. The video can be "liked" (by clicking a "thumbs up" icon) or "disliked" ("thumbs down"), it can be flagged as containing inappropriate content, added to a user created playlist or "favorites" list for future viewing, or shared (clicking this link provides the video's URL and code for embedding the video onto an external website, along with buttons that assist in posting the video to Facebook or a similar social networking site). Below this is a comment section, not unlike what users may come across on a blog or message board, where users can offer feedback on what they have just seen, and can engage with other viewers' opinions. To the right of the page lie an abundance of jumping off points, suggestions for other videos similar to the present one; each of these contains a screenshot from the video, along with title, the name of the uploading user, and a view count.

Four more sets of features should be explored at this point. First, we encounter how the video box itself operates. As mentioned above, the video plays immediately upon loading the URL for that video, suggesting implicit consent to view the video upon navigating to it. Once playing, the video can be interrupted for advertising in one of two ways: through a video advertisement that plays for 15 or 30 seconds before the requested video, or through a text-based

"pop-up" add that displays at the bottom of the video player, which can be minimized (and effectively eliminated) by the viewer. Other features of the viewing screen include a scroll bar that shows how much of the video remains (plus how much is already downloaded, and hence available to view), a volume control button, and two buttons which control the size of the moving image (expanding either to double size or to full screen). Additionally, a user can add text annotations to his video, pointing the viewer to other web sites or sources of information, or simply making commentary on the content of the video. When the video ends, a set of options appears in the box enabling the viewer to replay the video, share it with others, or to "like" the video. It also displays icons for similar videos, which contain hyperlinks to their own URLs.

It is also useful to look at the page design for a given user's channel. Unlike web pages for individual videos, channel pages are customizable in a number of ways. Users can add color to the page, and can even add code for background images or customized logos. The channel page enables playing of any of the given user's videos within the same space, replacing the sidebar of recommended content for the full list of videos created by the given user (as well as his own favorite videos from elsewhere on the platform). The page also contains an avatar for the user, as well as information like age and location. It lists each of the users subscribers (those who sign up to learn whenever the user adds content) and friends (a feature borrowed from more overt social networking sites such as Facebook). The "channel" orientation of YouTube plays at the site's relationship with the medium of television. As YouTube has tried in recent years to compete with television (including granting sizeable contracts to celebrities and industry figures to create professional channels), the structure of one channel for one user has remained the site's structural hallmark.

The user upload interface is also worth examining. One arrives to the upload page by clicking a hyperlink marked "Upload" that can be found at the top of any given page on the platform. Once there, a user can quickly upload video from his hard drive, or record directly through a webcam. Text lets the user know the parameters for video content: that it can be either high definition or standard definition, that it can be up to two gigabytes in size, and that it can be up to fifteen minutes in length (larger files can be uploaded but must be added via an external Java software). Users are also warned against uploading material for which they do not personally own the copyright (piracy being an ongoing concern). Finally, users can link their YouTube content with their Facebook, Twitter, or MySpace pages as part of the upload interface, and are afforded the opportunity to sign up for "Promoted Videos," a voluntary advertiser-supported service that allows the user's content to show up in YouTube promotions, such as the ones contained on the main page.

Finally, we should consider the reach of the platform, given the widespread use of embed codes. As YouTube makes sharing a key part of the interface, it is worth noting that a huge percentage of YouTube content is viewed outside the material parameters of the web site. The platform is not tethered to its own, defined space. YouTube has deeply woven itself into the fabric of everyday web use.

So what to make of the space's contours in light of the discussion above? We can clearly see the presence of both possibility and striation within the platform itself. I contend still that YouTube constitutes a form of smooth space, existing as it does both within and without its material boundaries. Note that, true to Deleuze and Guattari's position, smooth space and striated space exist dependently upon one another. Many of the striations imposed upon the YouTube platform – like advertising, channel structures, categorization – came later in the site's

development; they were not present, at least not in the current form, at the site's outset. We see

quite clearly that YouTube is the product of striations in process. But we should also account for

the inherently smooth space of possibility that the platform allows. We see the hallmarks of

Jenkins's cultural utopian position in action: voice is given to anyone with access. The large

majority of YouTube videos are ones that will be seldom seen: home movies, video blogs,

people recording the mundane features of their daily lives. In this way, individual agents disperse

themselves among the platform, finding uncharted quarters of the space and operating within it.

Additionally, the rhizomatic possibilities of the site's social networking features (channels,

favorites, friends) mark the platform decidedly as nomad space. The sense of possibility is clear,

while we see the imposition of power meant to neutralize the nomad, to contain the produser.

As an example of a direct exercise of power, in 2010 YouTube made a public display of

its new software intended to curb the spread of unauthorized copyrighted material across its

bandwidth. The software itself can match archival video provided by major media companies

against content that has been uploaded by users illegally, marking the uploaded content for

deletion, and provoking reaction against the violating users. A video demonstrating the software

was prominently featured on YouTube, showing the proxy State power that YouTube's corporate

owners are capable of enforcing. But this show of power did nothing to eliminate the nomad;

unauthorized content is still prevalent on the platform, and in fact, many major media

corporations have either used the site to host their content in an authorized fashion, or stopped

policing the use of their video altogether (using it as free publicity, in a sense).

In this cursory reading of YouTube, we can also see how it operates as a platform.

Notwithstanding piracy issues (or some issues of content, like prohibitions on nudity), cultural

products can be created within the space largely unfettered. The primary limit imposed by the

platform is its video length and bandwidth restrictions, which have been relaxed since early in

YouTube's existence, when videos could only be eight minutes in length. Moreover, this

"limitation" of the platform is all but eradicated by the Java application that allows larger files to

be created. The real limits of what can be made on the platform are almost all external: they

involve the material technologies used to create video content. And, as both Bruns and Jenkins

would contend, those technologies have been made so user friendly and accessible that this

hardly presents a limitation at all. Still, on the production end, some boundaries do in fact exist,

caused by the striations that YouTube has implemented. For example, the prevalence of

advertising has an impact, as does the premium placed on videos with high view counts (and the

"Promoted Videos" program that emphasizes this through advertising). These factors do not

directly influence the production end of the cycle, but they are manifest through the way the

cultural products are received. Other implementations, however, like video annotations, can

potentially add fresh, unique possibilities for cultural creation. The presence of feedback loops,

like YouTube comments (which have a reputation for being some of the most profane and nasty

on the entire internet), also effect production, with the potential to influence content in some

way.

Implications for This Project

What I have presented here is a brief foray into conceptualizing YouTube as a platform in

the model developed by Montfort and Bogost for computing systems, and to explain how the

platform and its users (envisioned as both produser and Deleuzian nomad) might operate. Yet

this sketch of YouTube's architecture works only as an introduction to the platform as a site of

possibility for cultural creation. As discussed above, YouTube has some very interesting

characteristics that allow us to usefully think of it as a platform, and it exists on a nomadic space

that is subject to striation at the hands of its makers. I have tried to tie together the platform, the

user, and the cultural products that can be created within the parameters of the smooth space of

the YouTube platform. The next chapter examines the literature on YouTube as a site of cultural

production, and as such acts as a clearer examination of the role of the user within the YouTube

space. That chapter also more clearly defines the object of analysis for this project, the vlogger.

But that material is only useful after first analyzing the site's operation as a space in its own

right. The next part of this dissertation examines the individuals who harness the YouTube

platform's possibility.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE: THE YOUTUBE USER AS CULTURAL PRODUCER

YouTube is an incredibly dynamic platform whose architecture presents great possibility for its users to create many different kinds of cultural products. Implicit in the discussion about this platform is the role of the user, and the literature presented in Chapter 1 only allows one facet of that role to come to light: that is, the user's activity when he or she is in direct contact with the technology, either using or creating. What the perspective of Deleuze & Guattari (1987a, 1987b) and the field of platform studies (Montfort & Bogost, 2009) do not permit is the constitution of the individual user as a subject. To that end, the literature review in this chapter more thoroughly brings into the discussion writings on participatory culture in the digital age. In it, I will also briefly examine literature on several other constructions that have relevance for YouTube: the role of participatory digital technologies on labor and industry, the underlying drive for celebrity inherent in participatory performance, and the specific role of the vlogger (the subject of analysis for this dissertation) in popular culture. These literatures act as a "user-oriented" counterpoint to the "space-oriented" theory of Deleuze & Guattari. Taken together, one can begin to conceptualize YouTube as a field of possibility for the creation of culture based on a particular form of interaction between space and user.

To construct a path toward understanding this interaction, it is important to reckon with the definitions of the related concepts of culture, cultural practice, and cultural production. In this dissertation, culture is used in the sense popularized by American cultural studies as the result of communicative rituals designed to order human experience and create meaning from it (Carey,

1989)[2]. In that vein, YouTube is seen as a site where humans negotiate these rituals in new and old ways (cultural practice), and where humans engage in the creation of new cultural artifacts (cultural production). Cultural practice and cultural production are concepts that, in an interactive, continually negotiated arena like YouTube, work hand in hand; participants (what I have metaphorically called out as produsers or nomads) practice culture by ordering the YouTube platform, and produce works that are unique to this cultural space. And the space itself is a culture embedded within other cultures, so that users are entrenched within several systems of meaning. Some significant scholarship, discussed in the next section, has tried to reckon with the importance of YouTube both within the ritual of cultural practice as well as the products these practices create.

YouTube: Fundamental Literatures and Why It Matters

YouTube is an unquestionably popular video repository and social platform. And as noted above, the site's tagline can be read almost as a mandate: "Broadcast Yourself." As the site has gone through various controversies, transformations, and changes of ownership, that tag has remained. YouTube presents itself as a site where all sources have the ability to share their creations with audiences large and small, regardless of tactics or motives. As time has progressed, this outlet has allowed user-produced amateur video (like vlogs or video diaries) to exist alongside clips from Hollywood films, music videos from major artists, news clips, and all manner of other visual creations. It promises an egalitarian landscape where every voice can be heard and, as significantly, everything can be criticized and commented upon.

While the concept of a video blog or video diary undoubtedly predates YouTube (just as home movies do), when the service launched in 2005, it provided an instantaneous and user-

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[2] This concept is dealt with briefly in Chapter 5.

friendly outlet (not to mention a readymade audience) for such productions. Of course, YouTube offers far more than a steady stream of personal, user created content. Almost overnight, the site became a contentious space for intellectual property as video content owned by television networks, film studios, and record labels became frequently uploaded. Despite legal concerns, the site was valued at $1.65 billion when it was purchased by Google, Inc. in 2006. After the sale, YouTube has continued to grow, and more and more of its content has been produced and lawfully distributed by the same large production companies, news organizations, record labels, and advertisers whose work initially was (and still often is) co-opted by the site's users (LaMonica, 2006). YouTube has even played a significant role in politics, with candidates using the service to directly address potential voters as part of their campaigns (Teinowitz, 2007). The rapid (and continual) growth of the service has prompted some to call for a scaling back and restructuring of the site's operations, in order to rein in the sheer mass of content and to more effectively deal with copyright and piracy issues (Dumenco, 2006). However, YouTube is not so easily reduced to a singular phenomenon that can be easily regulated.

YouTube is in fact a clearinghouse for video content of many types. Yet, a casual perusal of the site reveals that the heart of the service still rests in the "Broadcast Yourself" mentality. Most videos (organized into "channels" controlled by individual users) are produced and distributed by amateurs using readily available video equipment – commercial digital cameras and cell phones. Their motivations for production are not easily discerned. Haridakis & Hanson (2009) claimed that YouTube's users are socially active, with pro-social motivations both on the web and in "real life," using YouTube for social interaction (through service's social networking features) and co-viewing (watching the same content as other viewers and sharing the experience). In other words, the predisposition of users toward the social manifests itself quite

naturally on YouTube. Lange (2007) says YouTube allows for "publicly private" behavior, where individuals can use the moving image to enrich social experiences. Users make videos, watch videos, interact with other users through comment boards, and often produce their own video responses to content they have viewed. Lange demonstrated that, while many users view YouTube as a vehicle for some sort of renown, others do not even think about the real public nature of their videos: that while that content may be produced for a specific audience, the platform does not preclude anyone else with internet access from viewing it. Chen (2008) found that users often share videos with the explicit intention of presenting themselves publicly, while others find fascination in learning to use the technology. Still others view it as a creative outlet, or simply as a record-keeping tool.

Tracing users' motives for presenting details of their personal lives on YouTube, Strangelove (2010) notes that "[a]cross all mediums and genres there has been a general drift towards a more direct representation of intimate everyday life. It is as if all forms of media practice are converging on the self and the everyday" (p. 73). Further, this exhibition of everyday life manifests itself most frequently in representations of home life. Strangelove adds that most video blogs are made by reflexive, self-aware individuals who produce a very specific kind of reality for the consumption of their audiences.

While early in its existence, YouTube was frequently seen as a site for users to engage with already dominant media forms like television (Lotz, 2007, engages with YouTube as simply a form of television), recognition of the platform as a watershed cultural phenomenon has since become widespread. Strangelove (2010) envisions YouTube almost as something akin to the home movie, a form that has been present since consumer video cameras became widespread in the mid-20th century. However, he accounts for the social dimensions of the space, and the

implications of YouTube as an almost universally accessible video source in a more thorough way than others have. For Strangelove, YouTube is a site where the ordinary is king, and where sharing is paramount. Further, YouTube is emblematic of a collective desire to escape commerce in the service of entertainment, to find a new space that appears free from consumer culture (even as the commerce hides just below the surface).

Burgess & Green (2009) have embarked on a broad quantitative study that attempts to define YouTube in the language of participatory culture. They note that YouTube has many facets, including relationships among audiences and creators, relationships of power in regards to established media industries, and changes in models of production and consumption. The pair's wide-ranging study reveals YouTube as a potentially befuddling site of popular culture, where the ethos of "Broadcast Yourself" does not necessarily translate to "popular" videos in a traditional sense (measured here by YouTube-specific metrics like "most viewed," "most shared" and "most discussed"). Burgess & Green note that among the most popular YouTube videos, only a very small percentage tend to be "amateur, mundane, 'slice of life' videos" (p. 43). They suggest that there are really *two YouTubes*, one that serves as a repository for amateur home video, and another that acts more like a mass medium. Having written this in 2009, Burgess & Green may find this suggestion further validated today as YouTube and its parent company Google have moved farther toward supporting professional content and professionally-curated channels on the site (Efrati, 2011).

Burgess & Green (2009) are also quick to suggest a certain uneasiness at the heart of the professional/amateur divide on YouTube, as well as in the complex relationship between YouTube and offline media. More importantly, they view YouTube as a specific moment that highlights the potential of participatory culture, and establish the site as a landmark example of

what a video sharing service can be. They note, for example, that YouTube is far from the only

example of the form, but that nearly all other video service has borrowed its signature look and

feel, all the better to streamline user experience by borrowing from YouTube's established

precedent.

Jenkins (2009) is quick to note the significance of YouTube's cultural impact, but notes

what he sees as an important caveat:

> YouTube does not so much change the conditions of production as it alters the
>
> contexts of circulation and reception: [Amateur] works now reach a larger public
>
> via its channels of distribution; there are systems of criticism which focus
>
> attention on interesting and emerging works; there are people willing to seek out
>
> and engage with noncommercial content; and consumers are conversing with each
>
> other by producing videos. (p. 113).

That the modes of reception have been altered is of course significant for Jenkins, and though (as

Burgess & Green also note) most amateur videos are not embraced by the full user base of

YouTube, the site itself still serves the function of announcing that those productions have value.

Snickars & Vondereau (2009a) edited a significant volume that engages YouTube

through a series of essays from prominent scholars on the site as industry, cultural practice,

archive, and workplace. In their own conception of the site, they turn a critical eye on our need to

process something as big as YouTube through metaphor, opening up some of the more

provocative questions to be asked so far about the site:

> When examining YouTube by way of metaphors such as the archive, the medium
>
> or the laboratory, one is immediately confronted with a number of inherent (and
>
> not easily solvable) conflicts and problems vying for more detailed answers. How

does, for instance, the practice of open access relate to traditional archival standards, legal constraints, "old" media distribution and the entrepreneurial interests of the Google subsidiary? To what extent do clip aesthetics challenge traditional notions of, for example, textuality, episodic and serial narrative, documentary forms and also the very basic requirements of teaching and research? And what about the relationships between free-for-download video and mobile devices, between mashup software and patented hardware? How does the promise of empowering the "broadcasters of tomorrow" (YouTube) correspond to the realities of careers in broadcasting and film, to fan participation and management strategies? (Snickars & Vondereau, 2009b, p. 17)

Each of these questions speaks to YouTube's presence as a location for the making of culture, presenting issues of the resistance between YouTube and other cultural form. These questions lurk beneath the surface of any discussion of YouTube.

To the point that underlies many of these questions, that YouTube is a significant site of participatory culture, there are several useful frameworks worth examining. Hartley (2009) hints at YouTube as a contemporary manifestation of the "bardic function" of television, a landscape in which a storytelling medium can engage with an audience. On YouTube, anyone can perform the bardic function:

Instead of looking for a *social institution* or an *economic sector* like the original Celtic bardic order or the television industry, both characterized by expertise, restricted access, control, regulation, and one-way communication, it is now possible to look for an *enabling social technology*, with near ubiquitous and near-universal access, where individual agents can navigate large-scale networks for

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their own purposes, while simultaneously contributing to the growth of

knowledge and the archive of the possible. (p. 133)

Chau (2010) also posits that YouTube acts as a participatory culture, in five significant ways. First, that the site offers a low barrier for artistic expression – that a user can quite easily pick up and use the platform without formal training. He also notes that the layout of YouTube offers implicit support for sharing creative projects. It does so by allowing multiple points of access, through the search function and through recommending videos that are likely to appeal to specific audiences. Additionally, the countless instructional and tutorial videos present on YouTube mark it as a site of informal mentorship. YouTube also provides users with a belief that their contributions matter, by enabling feedback through the "like" and comment functions on each video. Finally, Chau argues that YouTube gives users a sense of connection, that collaboration and interaction between YouTube users has developed as an emergent phenomenon.

Naturally, as YouTube has proven more pervasive as the years have gone by, the popular press has also attempted to reckon with the site's cultural implications. Walker (2012) examines the role of the amateur performer on YouTube at the precise moment that the site made headlines for creating channels centered on established celebrities and media properties. He argues that the heart of YouTube lies in the individual:

But YouTube's homegrown stars tend to be self-starters. They understand the

intimacy of the platform in a way most Hollywood A-listers don't. YouTube is

not just television on a computer, and YouTubers, whether established or aspiring,

are their own breed…. an almost random group of nonfamous people with an

idiosyncratic range of talents, striving to succeed and fully conversant in the

culture of this relatively young medium. And this medium definitely has its own

culture. Any YouTuber could tell you that. (No pagination)

That culture involves performing outside the confines of established media, being involved in a

community often forming partnerships with advertisers in order to make ends meet, and,

increasingly, not seeing YouTube as a means to achieve fame offline, but, paradoxically for

these amateurs, viewing the creation of YouTube videos increasingly as a profession.

Produsage and Convergence (Participatory Culture)

Inherent in this literature on YouTube is the understanding that content is being created in

far different patterns than we have become accustomed to in the traditional media industries, and

that this landscape is colored by the very nature of user engagement. Moreover, the differences

between users of traditional media and users of digital media need to be more fully addressed in

light of the "moment of YouTube" (Burgess & Green, 2009, p. 107). In this section, I introduce

literature on participatory culture, including the concepts of produsage, convergence, and others.

As discussed briefly in Chapter 1, Bruns (2008) notes that the internet has forced us to

reckon with our assumptions of what a media user can be. Thus, as "the distinctions between

producers and users of content have faded into comparative insignificance," a figure called the

"produser" is born (Bruns, 2008, p. 2). This portmanteau points, quite naturally, to the dual

function of the user in a social medium like YouTube: he or she is able to directly engage in the

full cycle of media production and distribution, is free to create content, to make specific

decisions about media consumption from a wide variety of outlets, decide the manner of such

consumption, and offer instantaneous feedback whenever desired. YouTube offers a site for

amateurs to distribute their homemade content, whether it comes in the form of a diary, a prank,

a narrative production, or a documentation of events.

Bruns (2008) frames produsage as the embodiment of a number of factors including open participation in the creative process and generation of information, meritocratic evaluation systems that assure that the best and most useful cultural products might be most successful, and ownership systems that enable collaboration without jeopardizing copyright. He also plays at unifying his theory around a number of different conceptual areas within the study of information, from code, to news, knowledge, and creative artifacts. Within all of these perspectives, Bruns makes clear that the phenomenon of produsage emerges from the produsers themselves, and not from a given medium or technological form:

> [I]t has become very clear that produsage does not emerge out of thin air: it develops not 'from scratch' but indeed from 'scratching that itch' felt by an individual participant or group of participants who begin to develop a first, basic, and incomplete solution to their problem. (p. 388)

Bruns & Schmidt (2011) are quick to acknowledge that the future of produsage (both in terms of the spaces and artifacts where the phenomenon is present, and in the contours of the concept itself) is a moving target: "how much further this phenomenon may develop remains to be seen. We look forward to finding out" (p. 4).

As Bruns himself notes, the kinds of spaces he describes in his work on produsage are the same kinds of spaces that Jenkins (2006) would call sites of convergence, where "consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content" (p. 3). In this dispersal, media forms never truly disappear, but the technologies we use to access them constantly change. The ways in which users adapt to those changes are what is truly important. Further, these changes exist on the levels of both production and reception – from the top-down and from the bottom-up. Jenkins is reacting against a view that emphasizes

domination. Theories of domination, Jenkins would contend, have the tendency to unjustly dismiss cultural practices and cultural creations.

Combined, the work of Bruns and Jenkins (the ideas of produsage and convergence) offers a helpful framework with which to discuss usage of digital media products, and of YouTube specifically. However, their frameworks are far from the only conceptions of hybrid forms of production and consumption. For example Hartley (1999) argues that as media have evolved, so too have forms of citizenship. In response to the pervasiveness of computer technologies and corresponding social trends toward individualism, he posits the notion of "DIY" (do it yourself) citizenship. In DIY citizenship, the typical, non-professional media user has a hand in the means of production: "In a period of consumer choice, computer-aided interactivity and post-identity politics, semiotic self-determination is emerging as a right, not just a market segment over populated with early adopters, nerds and geeks, and other denizens of Californicated computer culture" (p. 181).

Even before the advent of digital media, Toffler (1980) discussed prosumerism, the notion that consumers had become both active and complicit in the creation of their own goods. In discussing YouTube as a site of participatory culture, Duncum (2011) argues:

> Toffler foresaw that with the availability of low-cost networked technology, the roles of producers and consumers would implode. Instead of merely consuming mass media, people would be able to participate in cultural exchanges as producers in an unprecedented way. (p. 26)

For his part, Bruns (2009) is unconvinced of prosumerism's applicability to digital media forms, claiming that the prosumer is simply an extension of existing forms of production, and not generative of anything new on the user end:

To put the point very succinctly:

- The *prosumer*, as a professional consumer, assists commercial producers in being better at what they do.

- The *produser*, as a productive user, becomes active in their own right in content creation, replacing producers altogether or at least working with them on an equal basis.

And that's a pretty fundamental difference. (No pagination)

Perhaps, though, it is most useful for this discussion to allow Jenkins (2006) to have the final word:

The power of participation comes not from destroying commercial culture but by writing over it, modding it, amending it, expanding it, adding greater diversity of perspective, and then recirculating it, feeding it back into the mainstream media (257).

For Jenkins, this optimistic view of cultural production is embodied by way culture is embraced and resisted, taken and re-made. YouTube presents a space that enables many of these possibilities.

The Celebrity Drive and the "Demotic Turn"

In an argument against more democratically oriented views of participatory culture (like those of Bruns and Jenkins), Turner (2006, 2010) has coined the term "demotic turn" to encapsulate newly achieved levels of personal access between individuals and the mass media, particularly the emerging role of "ordinary people" on television. Turner claims that the media, in the age of reality television, call-in radio, and the internet, serve the primary function of constructing identities.

Turner acknowledges that reactions to this phenomenon arise both to praise its

democratic qualities and to condemn the very apparatus that supports this shift in celebrity

culture. However, rather than engaging in one critique or the other, Turner asks us to reckon with

the shift on its own terms, as individual phenomena that cause changes in the production of

cultural identities. One of those phenomena, handled briefly by Turner, is YouTube and online

user-generated content more broadly. Turner critiques scholars who have claimed that the online

sphere (what he and others refer to as Web 2.0) has inherently positive qualities in terms of

access to celebrity, diversity of opinion, and timely storytelling. He argues that scholars should

ground their analyses of the way in which Web 2.0 platforms are used in a knowledge of media

history, and, further, to avoid prognostication (Turner, 2010, p. 152-153).

Despite these concerns, Turner does see democratic potential in many aspects of the

demotic turn, while stating that we have often been too quick to assume democratic outcomes for

media users. His work might be viewed as both a counterbalance to theories of convergence and

cultural optimism, and as a window into how the demotic turn has enabled a drive for celebrity

status among media users. Turner, known for his work on celebrity culture (see Turner, 2008),

claims that changes in the media cycle have engendered a need for reproducible celebrity

identities or "celetoids" (Rojek, 2001). As such, the nature of celebrity itself has changed:

> [N]o longer a magical condition, research suggests that [celebrity] is fast
>
> becoming an almost reasonable expectation for us to have in our everyday lives.
>
> The opportunity of becoming a celebrity has spread beyond the various elites and
>
> entered into the expectations of the population in general. Among the effects of
>
> this, in turn, is the proliferation of various kinds of DIY celebrity; on the internet,

in particular, 'celebrification' has become a familiar mode of cyber-self-

presentation. (Turner, 2010, p. 14)

While many YouTube users create video just to share with friends and family members, many

others have viewed YouTube as a vehicle to gain some measure of notoriety. The YouTube

phenomenon encompasses both private and public aspects of communication, as the produser has

some control over the scope of his/her own audience (Christian, 2009). While the cycle of

internet fame (such as it is) can be brief, is still carries great appeal for many. The number of

user produced "viral videos" can attest to this; some individuals will go to great lengths to make

themselves part of the public discourse.

This is notable in historical context, as the concept of celebrity has evolved over time.

Braudy (1986) notes that fame is a concept that can be traced to very early periods of human

history. The quest for celebrity was initially bundled with the desire for personal honor, and such

honor came from nationalistic or religious conquest (Braudy, 1986). Over time, this has changed.

Fame has shifted from being a product of a power identity into a personal property. As audiences

have become specialized, so has celebrity, and there are now more renowned individuals than

ever before. Even before the advent of the internet, Braudy observed:

In the last hundred years, the nature of fame changed more decisively and

more quickly than it had for the previous two thousand. Visual media

became the standard-bearers of international recognition, giving art,

religion, and politics shapes they never had before…. But the

reproducibility of the image (and the fame) both widened its appeal and

undermined its uniqueness. (p. 584)

As discussed above, many studies have attempted to explain YouTube from the perspective of user motivation, typically finding that a desire for renown is only one of a series of reasons for using the platform (Lange, 2007; Chen, 2008; Haridakis & Hanson, 2009). However, users might be unlikely to admit in an interview or survey that the desire for fame is a primary motivator, and that the cultural and industrial shifts that enable the demotic turn make this particular motivation worthy of scrutiny. Turner's (2010) position rings true in that celebrity is not only a drive, but an expectation in contemporary society, and user-generated platforms like YouTube offer the chance to make that expectation into a reality. Gritten (2002) claims that "In future, anyone will appear on television if they want it badly enough" (p. 71). When we look at YouTube, this rather cryptic claim bears itself out. For those who seek fame, appearing on YouTube may not be as good as being on television, but it may be close enough.

Online Culture

Tangential to the literature on participatory culture, there are a number of works dealing with how culture is practiced online that have a great deal of practical relevance for discussions of YouTube. Gere (2002), for example, reckons with the implications of digital computing technologies becoming fully integrated into everyday life. Moreover, the ubiquitous nature of digital culture has the paradoxical result of making itself all but invisible:

> Digital technology's ubiquity and its increasing invisibility have the effect of making it appear almost natural. The tendency to take it for granted can easily attenuate into a sense that it has evolved into its present form naturally, by way of a kind of *digital nature*. (p. 198, emphasis added)

The major problem for Gere is this unearned sense of digital nature, that the technologies have created their own necessity. This is the fundamentally misunderstood point of culture in the

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digital age; it ignores structures of power that enabled the technologies to act as they do (and consequently, have given life to particular ways of using them).

Howard (2004) makes a similar point in regards to an embedded structure of media. Howard explores the process by which interactive media have become integrated into social life. He asks a set of central questions that lead a discussion about culture, politics and capital operates online, trying to discern the difference between heavily liberal perspectives of online media (how people believe they are interacting with media) and more concrete connections between online and offline life (how the interaction actually occurs). The literature on online society is particularly useful in terms of its more critical approach to the implications of technology on culture. It acts as a counterbalance to more vigorously optimistic participatory culture perspectives, imbuing online cultural practice with a healthy dose of cynicism.

Online cultural practice as a concept often falls under the umbrella term of "cyberculture" (Silver, 2006). O'Riordan (2006), for example, uses this terminology to interrogate the way in which humans interface with online technologies and how digital spaces (she discusses video game spaces in particular) tend to present a friendly (or user-friendly) environment for human users. Phillips (2006) explores cyberculture through notions of visibility, surveillance culture, and self-presentation, and argues that this is a necessary language to use in discussing everyday online interaction. But he eschews using panopticism as a catch-all method of understanding cultural practice; both users and online spaces negotiate creative power.

Cultural Creation and Technological "Work"

Any discussion of the practice of participatory culture in a digital space would be incomplete without addressing the position and division of labor in the creation and use of technologies. Much of the literature on political economy within digital media be traced to

discussions on video games and participatory culture. Perhaps a good starting point is Deuze (2007), who provides a detailed review of labor in the media industries, convergence culture, and "liquidity" (Bauman, 2005), explicating these perspectives in studies on the advertising/public relations, film/television, journalism, and game development industries. He deals with the industry along the axes of institutions, technologies, organization, and culture to develop a sense of how each industry operates. Deuze contends that in the current media age, work is experienced in every aspect of life, and the media industries constantly use labor in unique and interesting ways. As media integrates itself further and further into everyday life, individuals perform labor by consumption, as illustrated in Eglash's (2004) discussion of technological appropriation. The key point is that a perspective rooted in the political economy of media technologies can teach us a great deal about a platform like YouTube, which very explicitly expects its viewers and content creators to be domesticated within the same body.

We can take this further by exploring some work on game studies, which are predicated on exploring the implications of interactivity that digital games enable. Postigo (2007) explores the role of "modders," those video game players who actively seek to change, expand, or enhance the in-game experience through writing new code, in the contemporary game industry. He reckons with the actual economic value of modding activity, which he claims is incredibly high, and explains the role of modders as unpaid laborers incorporated into the central means of production without compensation.

Banks & Humphreys (2008) explore some similar terrain, examining what they call "user co-creators" in the gaming industry. Running counter to Postigo, they argue that we need to get away from viewing users according to a logic of exploitation. Through a case study, they illustrate that power is negotiated along several axes. Capital is a consideration for co-creators,

but fiscal concerns are not the exclusive domain of those typically in industrial power, and such considerations operate along with social, user-oriented pressures. The article suggests that this is a much healthier approach to considering both fiscal and social interactions in gaming: a social network oriented approach that is holistic and applicable to other participatory culture sites outside of the game world.

In a multi-national exploration of the video game industry, Consalvo (2006) insists that the industry exists as a hybrid of Japanese and American forms of business, and that in light of new industrial systems like gaming, we need to deploy ideas of hybridity and heterogeneity in a way that does not automatically situate power as emanating from Western culture. Transnational popular and corporate cultures significantly problematize these kinds of power relations. There is a great deal of theoretical traction to be gained from this problematic. Like in the work of Postigo and Banks & Humphreys, we see again that video games (as technological artifacts) serve as an incredibly useful analogue to a platform like YouTube. The same concerns over the ubiquitous nature of labor exist, and must be taken in concert with social concerns, transnational issues, and relations of power between owners, users, and creators.

The Industrial Impact

While the notion of smooth space (as discussed in Chapter 1) can help us understand how YouTube's users feel the site's presence, and literature on participatory culture aids in our conceptualization of the user, a brief look at YouTube from the perspective of traditional media industry is also useful. As mentioned above, Strangelove (2010) centers his argument on YouTube around its fundamentally shifting audiences' relationship with media, claiming that the interactivity present in YouTube allows the site to supplement and augment traditional media activity. For example, Strangelove does not see YouTube (or the YouTube model) as a

replacement for television, film, or any other established medium. Much of the activity present on YouTube is decidedly non-commercial, though it can certainly be argued that YouTube constitutes a form of unpaid labor. And Deuze (2007) has claimed that contemporary media absorb individuals into structures of labor for which users of media fail to consider the full implications. An interesting way to explore these implications might be to consider YouTube as a location of cultural labor in line with Curtin's (2009) argument regarding significant media cities (like Mumbai and Los Angeles) that act as magnets for economies of culture. Conceiving of YouTube in this way might enable us to deal with broader theoretical arguments about the significance of the YouTube space. However drawn, notions about YouTube's role in the cultural economy work as important background for the site's operation as a platform.

Vlogs and Vloggers

Finally, I should discuss the specific kind of YouTube user that forms the subject of analysis for this project, the video blogger, or vlogger. "Vlogging," as a term for individuals directly addressing their online audiences through video content, actually predates YouTube. An early book about the phenomenon, containing tips for those wishing to create their own vlogs, was published in 2006 (Verdi et al., 2006). Combining the user-friendly interfaces typical of online blogging software like Blogger or Wordpress, and the availability of webcams and other kinds of readily accessible consumer video cameras, video blogging as a phenomenon was once seen as doomed to failure because if its heavy use of bandwidth and network space (Parker & Pfeiffer, 2005). Over time, though, as online technologies (and speeds) have advanced, vlogging has only become more widespread. Christian (2009) characterizes vloggers by a willingness to present themselves to the world without concern for what audience may find their videos. And Gao et al. (2010) discuss vlogs as characterized by a cycle of production, posting, and archiving,

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occurring, due to the nature of the technologies involved, quite rapidly. They also explore the potential implications and purposes for video blogs (including personal uses, journalistic uses, and marketing uses). The literature on vlogs overall is small but varied. However, two central characteristics emerge: ease and speed of production, and direct address to an audience. It is also worth noting that these characteristics comprise a significant portion of YouTube videos. Of course, as frequently noted, YouTube comprises many kinds of videos apart from vlogs, including home video, music videos, remix videos, television and film properties transferred from offline media, news coverage, and professionally commissioned videos, among many others. However, none of those forms are as specific to the YouTube culture as the phenomenon of an individual speaking to his or her camera and reaching the world. Each of the content creating individuals examined here are popular and fascinating characters that may only be able to exist with YouTube around. We may argue that they are produsers (or call them by some other theoretical name), but they would each refer to themselves as vloggers. This is true even though each of the three examples contained in this project (Shaycarl, Mr. Chi-City, and iJustine) have operated YouTube channels that display a multiplicity of forms, from speaking directly into the camera, to documenting events around them, and even to arranging comedic or dramatic performances in line with their YouTube personae. While Biel et al. (2012) discuss the traditional direct address form of video blogging as "conversational vlogging," the examples discussed in Chapters 4-6 show that, like most any online form, the vlog is fluid. These three popular personalities display its evolution.

CHAPTER 3

METHOD: POSTSTRUCTURALIST TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Following from the theoretical literature on YouTube and its users from Chapters 1 and 2, this dissertation will attempt to analyze three sets of texts created by YouTube vloggers to examine how the relationship between space and user influences cultural production. To address that issue, this project has been organized around three case studies, each of which addresses one of what I have called the component parts of cultural production: authorship, performance, and narrative. The visual texts have been paired with corresponding bodies of literature in such a way as to best interpret the role of the individual text as a product of the YouTube platform. While each set of YouTube texts comes from a popular user, the choice of a given text for use in this discussion is largely arbitrary. Further, I do not contend that the theoretical ideas contained in the following case studies are in any way the only means for understanding the making of visual culture generally, or in the realm of YouTube specifically. Quite the contrary; we might begin to understand the YouTube space through the lens of countless theoretical ideas, just as any manner of YouTube text might prove illuminating in a discussion of YouTube's role in the larger apparatus of global mass media. This is all to say that, as a work of scholarship, this dissertation is in no way generalizable. However, the goal is to interrogate YouTube (conceived here in the language of the platform) as a cultural force, and to examine how the architecture of the space and the role of YouTube users in participatory culture (manifest through those three forms) works to create cultural products. Much of this work resides in the interpretation of visual texts, and this chapter details the way I intend to read them.

The Work of Textual Analysis

The interpretation of texts has been of central importance to the fields of media studies and cultural studies for as long as those disciplines have existed. Stuart Hall (1975) has articulated the implications for a media structure that creates, rather than represents, reality:

> [R]epresentation is a very different notion from that of reflection. It implies the active work of selecting and presenting, of structuring and shaping: not merely the transmitting of an already-existing meaning, but the more active labour of *making things mean*. (Hall, 1975, p. 64)

For Hall, the significance in interpreting the purposefully embedded realities that have been placed into media texts lies in the uncovering of ideology. The "selection" of a certain brand of reality allows careful readers to discern the role of power structures that permitted that reality to be chosen. This thesis has spawned a number of methodologies for reading media texts, not least of which is Hall's (1986) own "encoding/decoding" paradigm, in which Hall codifies the way media products are produced, from beginning to end, claiming that infrastructures, existing knowledge bases, and relations of production and capital are key to understanding both how messages are created and how they are interpreted. Hall suggests that all texts have a dominant ideological reading (or a reading that is preferred by those who create the texts) and an oppositional reading that the audience may bring to the text, and that a negotiated reading occurring between the creator's and reader's perceptions of reality is likely to prevail.

That is to say, the work of textual analysis in media studies is something similar to literary analysis, but with an added layer of complexities peculiar to the moving image. The importance of this notion rears it head when we attempt to define what does and does not exist as a "text." On a practical level, we use the term to refer to products of the written word, or of

visual or audio culture. But in a slightly more abstract way, McKee (2003) explains, "A text is something that we make meaning from" (p. 4). Texts, further, are "the only empirical evidence we have of how other people make sense of the world" (p. 15). The notion of texts as material traces is a significant one; it forces us to consider the role of social actors in both the creation and reading of cultural products. This approach comes from a poststructuralist position, as McKee contends, and as such is not concerned with questions of accuracy or truth. It only seeks to gain an understanding of how meaning is made, how forms of representation take place: "how these texts tell their stories, how they represent the world, and how they make sense of it" (p. 17). Scholars who interpret texts are charged with finding reasonable interpretations of them (rather than an "anything goes" approach to analysis), and placing those interpretations into historical and cultural contexts.

Because we presume that the text is either an important repository of a particular sense-making practice, or is embedded with some power of influence (witness the prevalence of studies of media effects), the interpretation of media texts can help us learn a great deal about how culture is practiced and shared. McKee (2003) concisely summarizes an argument against effects theories, noting that media texts act as both symptom and cause of culture:

> I don't think that media texts control how people think. The media texts, like the sense-making practices of individuals, have to work within the practices that already exist, although they can try to alter those. The process is like a feedback loop: texts in the media have to draw on existing ways of making sense of the world: these are then interpreted by people, and feed back into the texts that they themselves produce (speech, writing, dress codes); and then these feed back into mediated texts… (p. 46)

We can see how the "feedback loop" fits neatly into Hall's (1986) illumination of encoding and decoding practices. As consumers, we are each constantly (and unconsciously) interpreting and negotiating media texts using our own cultural contexts. The work of textual analysis from an academic perspective lies in recognizing and externalizing this unconscious practice and harnessing it, finding what we believe to be "likely" sets of interpretations for the text, and, in a sense, domesticating the interpretive practice by employing theory. I will try to briefly unpack what I see as the two major concerns for an effective textual analysis: the notion of likely interpretation, and the incorporation of theory.

McKee (2003) points to the concept of interpretation as the central problem of textual analysis as a method, as well as the feature that offers it the most possibility for creation of knowledge. "Every description of a text is an interpretation" (p. 64). And no two interpretations, whether from the perspective of a researcher or a media consumer, are likely to be identical. This problem can be extended; the interpretation of a text from one culture to another may vary wildly. Yet, for a form of textual analysis like the poststructuralist one advocated by McKee, the problem of interpretive variation is liberating. Moreover, no interpretation is inherently wrong. This methodology frees the researcher from having to pass judgment on any given sense-making practice, allowing each one to speak for itself within its own cultural context, provided we can show that a given reading is possible, that it is reasonable given what we know about similar texts and additional accounts of the same text.

Second, regardless of any holistic views about the ways in which media texts interact with culture, and of the function of interpretation in the abstract, it is important to note how theory operates within textual analysis on a more specific level. In short, one cannot perform any form of analysis without incorporating theory, for theory works as one of the researcher's own

sense-making practices, the kinds of which, as I have tried to establish, are embedded within texts and cultures. For the purposes of my analysis, theory can and must reverberate with the texts that have been chosen for analysis. They way in which theory is most usefully incorporated into methodological practice is through the framing of questions. A good research question quite necessarily works from a theoretical perspective, allowing interpretation to flow through a body of existing knowledge. McKee (2003) argues for the research question as the essential beginning and end of the interpretive method, allowing the researcher to focus on those elements of a text that speak most directly to that question, permitting us to understand theory better through analysis, just as our analyses help us to learn more about aspects of culture.

These concerns are fairly elementary, but exploring them helps us to codify the building blocks of textual analysis as a research method, and to reckon with what interpretation might teach us. The following sections look at this method as a visual practice, the text as a form of data, and the problems associated with analyzing data when truth and vision are in doubt.

Truth and Vision

While such an interpretive practice is perhaps the best way to confront how we collectively make meaning, poststructuralist concerns over truth weigh heavily upon it. As discussed above, texts can be held to no objective truth; their meaning is embedded in cultural context (for McKee) and ideology (for Hall). Jay (1994) argues that, like truth, vision is also culturally relative. In a thorough analysis of modern French social theory on visuality, Jay concludes that the act of observation is strongly tied to language, and is thus particular to the society that is doing the observing. Further, it is counterproductive, ultimately, to privilege vision over the other senses. For a textual analyst, Jay's words serve as a caution to be particularly aware of subjectivities, and to respect the position of the reader.

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But vision, it its way, *is* worthy of a particular kind of privilege, argues Cixous (Cixous & Derrida, 2001/1998). Reflecting on the results of a corrective eye surgery, Cixous celebrates the end of her myopia, while wrestling with a complex set of emotions. Would the joy of finally seeing with the naked eye be fleeting, and what does it *mean* to have vision at all?

> Such an experience could take place only once, that's what was disturbing her. Myopia would not grow again, the foreigner would never come back to her, her myopia, so strong – a force that she had always called weakness and infirmity. But not its force, its strange force, was revealed to her, *retrospectively* at the very moment it was taken away from her. (Cixous & Derrida, 2001/1998, p. 16)

Cixous' questioning of her own vision, and the position it comes from (what it has the power to reveal just as it has the power to obscure), proves instructive for those of us who address our inquiry to the visual text. Vision is never perfect, and will certainly fail us from time to time. When reading a set of texts, we can only make reasonable inferences as to things like textual intent. We must limit our practice to the uncovering of cultural specificities, ideologies, and structures of power, and providing comparisons to other texts in the same genre (McKee, 2003). If we seek to uncover only what texts *mean*, we are betrayed not only by a false sense of objective truth, but by our own sense of vision.

Choosing and Handling Objects of Analysis

Interpretive projects like these rely quite necessarily on some set of artifacts to be scrutinized, and which are worthy of analysis. As discussed above, the sets of texts to be considered in this dissertation were chosen because they embody a certain manner of YouTube user, and because they were popular examples of the form. However, they were not chosen as a result of any kind of empirical sampling. I argue that a qualitative approach to studying each of

their characteristics, embedded structures and ideologies, and relevance to the platform of YouTube is an instructive way to learn about YouTube as a force for cultural production. I also argue that these somewhat arbitrary choices, handled through interpretive textual analysis, can help us learn as much or more about YouTube as a platform as choosing, say, the five most popular YouTube channels would have. Moreover, the focus of this dissertation is interrogating how the use of this platform affects knowledge about cultural production. This is a question that empirical data is unlikely to help us answer.

Additionally, this methodological approach arises from a concern that I have encountered with qualitative inquiry, of which textual analysis is not a part, but with which it shares many characteristics. Many forms of textual analysis rely on some manner of theme development gleaned from the reading of texts (Bernard & Ryan, 2010), or on more rigorous coding practices. A common misconstruction of textual analysis situates the method within content analysis, an empirical practice that functions both as a process of interpretation and a method of coding data. Berg (2007) discusses content analysis as having the potential to be either a *qualitative* or a *quantitative* methodology. For content analysis, the character of the data is similar to textual analysis (i.e., the written word, audio or visual material). However, the manifest and latent content of the text is probed through one of two means: either a statistically-oriented analysis of recurrent themes, or through qualitative practices of coding that regiment the data without reducing it to numbers. While one might see this as opening up content analysis to great possibility, both the qualitative and quantitative analytical methods within content analysis are bound to miss some key points. Suffice it to say that I see part of the difference between content analysis and textual analysis (at least of the poststructuralist variety that McKee advocates) arising from a yen for a faux science where none need exist. My plan for the reading of texts

involves no coding, but I believe allows us to find more interesting ways to discuss visual texts, without relying on a regimented procedure that lures the researcher down familiar paths.

I turn to Wolcott (2009) for a final note on interpretation:

> Interpretation…is not derived from rigorous, agreed-upon, carefully specified procedures, bur from our efforts at sense-making, a human activity that includes intuition, past experience, emotion – personal attributes of human researchers that can be argued endlessly but neither proved, nor disproved to the satisfaction of all. Interpretation invites the reflection, the pondering, of data in terms of what people make of them. (p. 30)

To my mind, this definition of the interpretive process defies statistical analysis as well as coding practices. We can never divorce ourselves from "intuition, past experience, emotion," and rather than aggressively sorting data into patterns, we should allow these concerns to present themselves in at least a limited way. We can and must acknowledge that which is exterior to the text in order to build knowledge from it. MacLure (2011) provides perhaps the best argument against coding, claiming that coding pigeonholes data into pre-existing sets of relationships, failing to allow the data to escape certain researcher assumptions. It also removes the researcher from the data, relying on abstract levels of analysis to speak the language of that which was already in the data, and it works to (falsely) establish the researcher as an infallible interpreter of data. Further, coding has a specific problem for poststructuralism: it overdetermines the data by renaming things that have already been culturally coded, through processes like language and ideology:

> Coding can therefore be very effective (though this is not always so in practice) in charting the circuits of power, culture and knowledge through which order will

have been produced out of difference. But it handles poorly that which exceeds

and precedes 'capture' by language, such as the bodily, asignifying, disrupting

(and connecting) intensities of affect. (p. 4)

In short, coding as a process dismisses the kinds of questions of vision raised by Cixous or Jay,

and fails to consider those things that cannot be easily encapsulated through pre-existing

categories that are external to the writer.

With that in mind, it is also worth noting Richardson & St. Pierre's (2005) argument for

the act of writing as method, which invokes a number of postmodern and poststructuralist

precepts. The act of writing opens up possibilities for generating meaning that may be impossible

within more regimented research methods. In short, writing is and always has been a research

method; we simply have failed to give credit to its capacity to allow us to think through concepts,

to find significant information embedded within our objects of analysis. Writing works to situate

meaning, to allow knowledge and ideas to emerge in a non-linear fashion. We should approach

writing as the act that gives the research process intellectual meaning, and not refer to it simply

as its end point. Too often, the act of writing is lost in the academic shuffle, so to speak.

Conclusions (Plan for Textual Analysis)

I have introduced a number of concepts here that underlie my own method of textual

analysis, including a number of points on interpretive practice and how it helps us engage with

how meaning is made, how culture can be discovered through vestiges called texts, how coding

and scientism is counterproductive to the interpretation of texts, and how the textual analyst's

task is complicated by slippery notions of vision and truth. I contend that as texts are the only

physical evidence we have of how human beings make sense of the world, and are sites of

ideological practice, they are invaluable as artifacts for interpretation.

So, what does this all mean in terms of the case studies in the following three chapters? Each of these analyses will, to some extent, exist on their own terms. The texts described are not limited to their forms of audio and visual data; they are approached with knowledge that they do not embody a form of objective truth, and that other forms of data and obstructions of vision influence how they are read. However, each text (and set of texts) is embedded with particular ideologies and come with particular social conditions that cause them to have meaning. The interpretive task is to uncover those processes by which meaning is made. My dissertation has the additional burden of two sets of theoretical lenses through which each text will speak. The embedded bodies of theory in each case study helps me to uncover both how these texts come to mean, and how this process may make us think differently about theory itself. And the lack of coding allows me, as the researcher, to stay close to both the text and the theoretical literature, in order to produce a written explication of YouTube's role in culture. This methodological approach helps us accept limitations, and avoids building more limitations into the process.

CHAPTER 4

SHAYCARL AND THE VLOGGER AS AUTHOR OF A CULTURAL PRODUCT

While the assertion that YouTube has fundamentally changed the landscape of visual media is unlikely to be contested, a far more significant theoretical challenge arises when considering the role of authorship and subjectivity in this environment. Foucault (1984/1969) noted that the "author function," a way of constituting the creator of a work as a subject, is malleable across time, and may at some point die off completely.

YouTube's appropriation of the author function may be somewhat different than that of literature or traditional broadcasting. Even in limiting the object of analysis to vloggers, the interactive, sharing, and feedback elements of the YouTube platform might alter the way authorship operates. This chapter looks at the video output of popular vlogger Shaycarl and his video blog entitled "The Shaytards," which centers on the daily exploits of Shaycarl and his family of six. This chapter addresses these visual texts with a theoretical focus from Foucault (1984/1984), who argued for the constant questioning of modes of experience and thought, into the study YouTube and vlogging. It conceptualizes the author (as subject) in light of Foucault's (1984/1969) work on authorship and its potential congruence with theories of participatory culture, particularly Bruns's (2005) work on produsage. Both Bruns and Foucault present specific conceptions of the subject (each discussed at length below) that can be married to aid in our understanding of YouTube content creation.

What is An Author (Today)?

Bruns (2005) has been very clear on the participatory nature of cultural creation in online spaces, developing the concept of produsage as a language to address the changing nature of the creation and reception of media artifacts. But it may be useful to view that perspective in terms of historical conceptions of authorship, which have often been viewed by theorists as quite complex. Barthes (1977/1967) declared the author dead four decades ago, reorienting the critical function of looking at a work:

> Once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile. To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing…. In the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be disentangled, nothing deciphered; the structure can be followed, 'run' (like the thread of a stocking) at every point and at every level, but there is nothing beneath. (p. 147)

In problematizing authorship, a notion of connection between a text and its creator that had been seldom contested, Barthes pointed out the way in which consumption and criticism serve to construct the concept of a singular author and embed that presence into a work. Liberating works from the author allows content (language) to exist independently of this imposed subjectivity.

In his essay entitled "What is an Author?" Foucault (1984/1969) addressed Barthes directly, offering a further question:

> It is not enough, however, to repeat the empty affirmation that the author has disappeared. For the same reason, it is not enough to keep repeating (after Nietzsche) that God and man have died a common death. Instead, we must locate

the space left empty by the author's disappearance, follow the distribution of gaps

and breaches, and watch for the openings that this disappearance uncovers. (p.

105)

Foucault went on to add a further set of problems to Barthes's initial one, tracing the

genealogy of what he called the "author function." He explained that the author's name is a

unique kind of proper name, whose presence (or lack thereof) completely alters a work. He

outlined the problematic use of the term "work" in absence of its author (If we dismiss the

author, then what is his work? Even if we know precisely the author, how do we know what

elements are part of the work?). Going beyond Barthes, every facet of the construction of the

author as subject is called into question. In conceptualizing this author function, Foucault

establishes a very specific kind of subject, and strongly privileges discourse at the expense of the

individual. This analysis of subjectivity goes far beyond questions about the ownership of texts.

For Foucault, discourse represented the system of relations that define the operation of

the signs within it. In *The Order of Things*, he clearly elaborated the production of these

"discursive formations" (Foucault, 1970/1966). In his discussion of the author as subject,

Foucault referred to discourse as an act of production, a "gesture fraught with risks before

becoming goods caught up in a circuit of ownership" (Foucault, 1984/1969, p. 108).

By initiating this conception, Foucault denied this subject an origin, instead "analyzing

the subject as a variable and complex function of discourse" (p. 118). The author, by contrast,

is a certain functional principle by which…one limits, excludes and chooses…. If

we are accustomed to presenting the author as a genius, as a perpetual surging of

invention, it is because, in reality, we make him function in exactly the opposite

fashion. (p. 119)

Foucault ends his essay with a series of questions (ending with the seemingly circular one, "What difference does it make who is speaking?"; p. 120) pointing to the uneasiness with which we must embark about addressing the author function. Even as this function has replaced the traditional author concept, and as the author function is conceded to constant changing (and likely extinction), Foucault still refuses any absolute vacancy of subjectivity. The author function is malleable and, were it to disappear entirely, some other discursive construction would no doubt take its place.

This reorientation of the author as a discursive function (something that is negotiated rather than extant) has resonance in discussions of YouTube, particularly in light of two other factors: the notion of produsage, and the self-reflexive style of vlog production. In terms of produsage, the "function" of authors is materially different, based on the role of collectivity, sharing, and feedback within digital spaces. And on a more specific level for vlogging, the creation of videos has led an inward shift in subject matter (elements close to the creators' lives that they feel are worth documenting) and a new set of production practices that tie into the interactive nature of the YouTube platform. Within a body of literature that is useful for discussing video blogging, documentary theorists have addressed authorship in terms of self-reflexivity, a concept that is certainly helpful in conceptualizing the practice of vloggers. Hight (2008) discusses the trends toward the personal in professional and amateur documentary film (and addresses YouTube specifically). He also considers the impact of digital technology in bringing this about, claiming that the increase in availability of easy-to-use, lightweight cameras and editing equipment forces us to confront the definition of documentary and documentary creators. Hight claims the presence of a "YouTube aesthetic":

> [A]mateur footage, edited on a desktop, intended almost as throwaway pieces of

culture, often produced as a direct response to other online material. This kind of

online environment provides for both the flowering of the work of new

documentary auteurs, and also their swamping within an ocean of more mediocre

offerings. (pp. 5-6)

New technologies, according to Hight (2008), lead to ease of production, ease of distribution

and, significantly, fundamentally alter certain subject matters – making more personal content

possible (we might consider this in light of the assertions of Strangelove (2010) regarding

YouTube users' emphasis on the self).

Nichols (2005/1988) helps to put the notion of self-reflexivity into historical context.

Addressing the conditions that led to the arrival of the self-reflexive voice in documentary

cinema (and what is a video blog, to borrow Strangelove (2010), if not self-reflexive?), Nichols

claims that documentaries in which the author inserts his or her voice in a direct fashion are far

less peculiar to viewers than other forms like cinema verite. In short, personal, self-reflexive

productions *make sense*, by allowing an audience a form of self-identification and an entry point

into the work. Ruby (2005/1988) further argues that reflexivity (the ability to transcend

autobiography and to contextualize the expression of the personal) is essential to effective

narrative.

So the example of vlogger Shaycarl that follows is meant as a means of examining how

the YouTube author operates – how the self-reflexive tendencies of this produser play out and

how this might help to illustrate how authorship works as a practice. While the specific type of

subject Foucault asserts when discussing the author function has no role as originator of any

specific work, that subject's presence still is clear, manifesting itself in discourse. The notion of

produsage does not preclude the examination of YouTube as a discourse, and its users as a very

peculiar kind of subject. While they effectively "broadcast themselves," as the tagline goes, they are contributing material to a massive online environment that is (in part, at least) outside of their control. The example of Shaycarl can help to illustrate authorship as a facet of cultural production on YouTube.

About Shaycarl and "The Shaytards"

"The Shaytards," a near-daily video blog series created by the self-named "Shaycarl" (Shay Carl Butler) provides an interesting example of the potential of the platform for produsers. Shaycarl, an overweight married man from Salt Lake City (now Los Angeles) with four children, began videotaping his everyday events and uploading them to YouTube several years ago. In 2008, he launched a new YouTube channel, entitled "Shaytards," which was announced by Shaycarl as a video diary meant to document his weight loss attempts. In "Shaytards Begin!" (Shaytards, 2008 October 2), Shaycarl introduces the viewer to the weight loss mission, but it was not long before the vlog moved on to other business regarding the lives of Shaycarl and his family. In fact, the project has more frequently than not strayed from the weight loss subject, and has developed a full cast of characters – notably Shaycarl's wife Katilette and his four children. He gives each of them creative monikers like his own: Mommytard, Princesstard, Sontard, and Babytard. Rocktard, Shaycarl's newborn, was born in a June 2010 episode of the blog (Shaytards, 2010 June 11). The family has been featured elsewhere on YouTube, in video blogs shot by other users, and on three other YouTube channels run by Shaycarl.

As the project became more popular and began to encompass more varied subject matter within the family's daily life, the change in scope became a point of pride for Shaycarl, and also something that he carefully curated. After the first year of the blog, a title sequence was

developed that accompanies all subsequent videos. A piece of animation introduces the blog's characters and a jingle announces the mission of the series:

> So…you are now watching the Shaytards' blog.
>
> Just sit back, relax, follow along
>
> to the things Shay says, to the things Shay does
>
> to his cool family, and just because
>
> he's putting his life online for you.
>
> He's done it for a year, let's hope for two.
>
> I'm ready for a video so let it be clear:
>
> hey, he's blogging here.

In addition to incorporating Shaycarl's catchphrase ("Hey, I'm blogging here!"), the sequence serves to frame Shaycarl's intent for his work, and to legitimize the production as something more than just an everyday person filming his life. Paradoxically, the textual message of Shaycarl's videos attests to his ordinariness.

In considering the Shaytards as an exemplar, it is important to put aside matters of taste. Despite its claims of universality, the Shaytards attest to a very particular kind of middle American family experience, and things like Shaycarl's frequent celebration of physically disciplining his children (not to mention his use of the "tard" suffix) are not for everyone. Still, the channel has been exceedingly popular, with over one million subscribers. Individual videos (now numbering over 1,000) typically reach hundreds of thousands of views, and total views of all videos combined exceed 500 million.

Shaycarl's Videos

SHAYTARDS BEGIN! (Shaytards, 2008 October 2)

A description that accompanies Shaycarl's first video on the Shaytards channel (he had been blogging previously at another channel) reads, "Ok this is my first weight loss vlog. I will try and do one everyday. Also I will only accept video responses that are about your weight loss." Shaycarl herein displays his intent to produce an ongoing documentary project, as well as inviting his viewers to participate by providing response videos, thereby taking advantages of the unique social networking feature of the YouTube platform. Currently, the video has been viewed over 700,000 times.

The content of this first video is exceedingly banal. Shaycarl shows the contents of his refrigerator, joking about eating an entire block of cheese, before introducing his new diet plan. He speaks directly to the camera, addressing his audience in second person (a hallmark of the video blog form). He speaks extemporaneously, even going so far as forgetting the name of the YouTube channel he has just created for this very purpose (a quick look at his laptop, positioned offscreen, confirms the name is "Shaytards"). Wearing all black with a backwards baseball cap inscribed with the name "Shaycarl," he discusses potential weight loss plans, acknowledging that at 265 pounds he must give some careful consideration to the foods he eats and his exercise regimen. He grabs whatever items are handy in his kitchen, illustrating the hypothetical diet plans he expects to receive in the blog's comment section: "Green jelly and mustard: it's the diet of the stars!"

Shaycarl attests directly to the social aspect of his video blog, noting for his audience that he wants the platform to serve as an implicit support system, and not a judgmental one. He asks his audience not to criticize other people's exercise and diet plans, but to work together in a

forum that will help everyone. He sees himself even from the first day of the vlog as a conduit for a communal YouTube experience, performing his daily life on camera but cognizant of his audience and their needs. As a character, Shaycarl is excitable, perhaps even abrasive; he is supremely self-confident, and conveys a firm belief that his ideas will be received warmly. He speaks to his viewers conversationally, assuming that filming a personal exploit like this is a totally normal function of life.

The video is shot on a consumer grade video camera and the composition of the video (primarily a single shot) is incredibly simple. Shaycarl notes in his monologue that he plans not to edit any of his videos (this will change), and he stands for the majority of the video at the center of the frame, ducking away briefly to check his laptop or reaching around the camera to grab some impromptu props. This first video is quite traditional as an example of the video blog form – a fairly clear single-character monologue directly to the camera. Shaycarl's production techniques will change as the vlog begins to alter its focus.

THE BABY IS HERE!!! (Shaycarl, 2010 June 11)

Over the next year, Shaycarl's weight loss quest morphed into a rambling exploration of his family life, and shifted more towards documenting the daily events of living with his wife and four children. When a fourth child was born, Shaycarl recorded the occasion. In that day's video, the family is seen eating ice cream at a restaurant hours before Shaycarl's wife Katilette (Mommytard) is taken to the hospital. Later we see Shaycarl driving his SUV (with the camera held precariously in front of his face as he does so) while he considers the enormity of becoming a father for the fourth time, and explaining for the audience the process of induced labor that his wife is about to go through. The video travels through the birthing process from Shaycarl's point of view, climaxing with the entire family gathered in the hospital room surrounding the newborn.

As an experience like this shows, the Shaytards developed far beyond its stated intention to encompass all facets of the everyday life of one purportedly ordinary family.

This documentation of the birth of the new baby (called Rocktard subsequently) also highlights a shift in production style as Shaycarl (the ostensible filmmaker and author of these videos) increasingly works from behind the camera, only showing his own face from the perspective of the camera in his own hand. By this time, the full opening credit sequence has been developed, complete with the theme song. This video in particular highlights some typical hallmarks of Shaycarl's style: shaky camerawork, abrupt cuts from one chronological scene to another, and lots of interaction between Shaycarl behind the camera and his family in front of it (at one point he rallies Mommytard for the process by yelling "Let's go have this baby! Yeah!"). It also features Shaycarl speaking to his audience directly and thanking them for their overwhelming support, as well as showing his disbelief that the same audience wants to watch all of his exploits.

The video captures raw moments of the newborn son crying in his mother's arms as Shaycarl's voice reveals his joy from behind the lens. Shaycarl captures the first time he holds his son (with a camera in the other hand), shows the first meeting between Rocktard and his siblings, wherein they suggest pseudonyms for the newborn (Littletard? Juniortard?). Shaycarl's documentary impulse invades these important moments in his life, and he is not shy about sharing them with the world. And this video is among the most resonant ones in Shaycarl's catalog, having been viewed over 2.5 million times.

I FLIRTED WITH A PURTTY GIRL! (Shaytards, 2010 August 25)

Since Shaycarl publishes a new video to the Shaytards channel daily, most of his produced content consists of mundane moments in his family's history. His videos often catch

small moments in the family's life, and this one provides a good example, as Shaycarl captures his daughter Babytard's brief crying fit at home, a meal at a local burger shop, and a drive to the store in the family's SUV to buy school supplies, complete with a discussion among the family in the SUV as they travel to these places. He plays with his kids, having staring contests with them (and cheating) while Mommytard films the occasion. The title of the video comes from an event in the school supply section of WalMart where Shaycarl accidentally bumps into another (female) shopper, and makes a playful confession ("I flirted with a pretty girl") to his wife. The family trip to the store is a playful endeavor in total, as Mommytard plays with toys and knocks them off the shelf. On the ride home, Shaycarl has a funny moment with Sontard, who suggests that he is embarrassed by his parents' goofy attitude. Shaycarl jokes, "You have a long life ahead of you if you think I have even begun to embarrass you."

In this video, as in many others, Shaycarl talks directly about his process, detailing how the previous day's video needed to be edited down from 27 minutes of video to a more modest 19. "I don't really shoot that much footage," Shaycarl says to the camera. He points out how much time he spends editing and how little time that actually leaves to shoot new content (and to support his handiwork he gestures at one point downscreen towards a hyperlink to another of his videos). Despite admitting that he doesn't film *everything*, Shaycarl's transparency is notable, suggesting that he is intent on removing a wall between the creator and his audience.

OFFICIALLY THE CUTEST MOMENT IN SHAYTARDS HISTORY (Shaytards, 2011 June 11)

This entry opens with an updated version of the Shaytards theme song, a rap that introduces each of the characters starting with the youngest, Rocktard, and introducing each child as well as Mommytard and Shaycarl (of whom the performer notes, "the love shines through my computer screen"). On Rocktard's first birthday, the family has made a long road

trip to Los Angeles, where they had formerly lived, and are moving into a new home in the city.

Like many other videos, the family is filmed in familiar locations: restaurants and cars. They

visit one of their favorite Los Angeles haunts, a dockside seafood restaurant. Also like many

other videos, Shaycarl talks about his process, chastising himself for framing himself in shadow,

and at one point discussing how he fixed some technical problems.

Much of the video involves some impromptu slapstick, as Shaycarl and two of his friends

move a mattress down a flight of stairs by throwing it over a balcony. Later Princesstard, while

fighting with her brother Sontard, accidentally kicks one of Shaycarl's friends (the kick is slowed

down and shown in an instant replay). It also features a lot of Shaycarl interacting with the kids

as they all explore their new home and the minor renovations they have made in their first day

since moving in. Shaycarl is fascinated by minutiae: how his new drawers open, how the light

fixtures and doors work, how they have installed a hook by the front door to store their keys.

But the video (which has over one million views) has been widespread because of what

has been called "the cutest moment in Shaytards history," when Rocktard, being held in his

mother's arms as she does laundry (and while being antagonized by her father and his camera)

kisses his mother's lips and whispers "I love you." This prompts an excited Shaycarl to proclaim

loudly into the camera how cute this moment actually was. Additionally, this video has a subtext

of overtly displaying how successful Shaycarl and his enterprise have become; the house the

family is moving into is far larger and more opulent than their old one.

TURTLE LOVE! (Shaytards, 2010 December 24)

This Christmas themed episode of the Shaytards vlog features a new introductory

sequence with a modified theme song introducing a "Shaytards Christmas." Most of the video

includes a trip to the pet store, where Shaycarl captures two turtles attempting to mate. Shaycarl

jokes around about it and becomes preoccupied with the subject, going so far as to ask a disinterested pet store employee for an explanation. The video is illustrative of the Shaytards vlog at its most scattered: Shaycarl visits the pet store, he films his children wrestling with their babysitters, documents a trip to the movies, and returning home to the kids, with quick cuts that lack much thematic consistency. At the end, Shaycarl plays with his kids on one of their beds, talking about their Christmas plans, telling them the story of Santa Claus, as (presumably) Mommytard films the interaction. Despite the significance of the occasion (which is only noted during this interaction), the video displays these scattershot tendencies. Shaycarl is engaged only in the act of capturing events but without contextualizing them. Still, he manages to reach a wide audience even in his most mundane efforts; this video has been viewed nearly one million times.

KID FIGHT IN CROWDED AIRPORT! (Shaytards, 2010 December 20)

Shaycarl and his family are about to return to their home in Salt Lake City from a trip to Los Angeles, and are preparing to head to the airport. When they finally arrive, they find that their flight has a substantial delay. When Babytard begins dancing in the airport waiting area, Sontard picks on her and they begin to fight. Despite the objections of Mommytard (who seems irritated that the kids have been watching too much WWE), Shaycarl lets the pair wrestle and films the whole thing as they chase each other around "I don't care that my kids are running around the airport. They shouldn't have delayed our flight or else we wouldn't have to be doing this." Most of the video involves some variation on this interaction as Shaycarl laughs from behind the camera and tacitly supports it. When Babytard begins mock-punching the camera lens, he commends her "fists of fury." Shaycarl remains committed to capturing all of this, and jovially supporting this behavior.

Shaycarl tells the camera about running into one of his favorite characters from TLC reality series *Little People, Big World* while waiting in the airport, underscoring how Shaycarl's ambitions for the Shaytards project might relate to the role of reality television. He also attempts to explain to his audience that the boredom of waiting for his flight has spurred his desire to film this whole day (although how that is different than a typical day is unclear). Later, after they finally board the flight, Shaycarl shows each of his children and tells the camera "They're sleeping. That's a good thing."

MAKEUP TUTORIALTARD (Shaytards, 2010 August 15)

This video opens with the family preparing to leave a Las Vegas hotel. Shaycarl and Mommytard are alone with only their infant. As they ride down the elevator with Rocktard, they discuss the prospect of having another baby. It then cuts to them eating at a restaurant, and opening up a fortune cookie that promises "an unexpected visitor," causing them to reckon with the implications of that in light of their previous conversation. As the pair go from the restaurant to a Sephora store, Shaycarl performs for the camera, trying on makeup samples in front of the store's mirror.

Again in this video, Shaycarl lays the process of creation bare, apologizing for mistakes like rubbing his hand against the microphone. And the interactivity of the medium is shown when Shaycarl and his wife are approached for a picture by two fans of the vlog. The camera cuts away without showing the picture being taken, but not before the audience is made part of the production. At another point, Shaycarl makes a direct plea to the viewers to follow his Twitter account. But perhaps the most interesting interactive point here is one that was fortuitous for Shaycarl. In an earlier video he had documented the trip to the airport to catch his flight to Las Vegas, and in a rush neither he nor Mommytard made a note of where they parked. So he

called upon his audience to search the earlier video for clues. And in "MAKEUP

TUTORIALTARD" he reveals that lots of viewers had commented to let him know where to

find his car. So we see Shaycarl and Mommytard load up their SUV after their return flight,

parked, as viewers had suggested, in section 9A.

WE'RE DEBT FREE!!!! (Shaytards, 2011 January 15)

As this video opens, Shaycarl sits in a leather desk chair with Mommytard on his lap, arm

draped around his back. They announce to the audience that due to a major event in their lives

this video will be different from all the others. Despite some reservations (both about revealing

something personal, and about fearing potential negative comments), they decide to announce to

their audience that they've recently got out of debt. They tell the story of appearing on economist

Dave Ramsey's radio program to tell their debt story, and how the whole family was able to

shout Ramsey's catch phrase "We're debt free!" The pair then cuts away to show how the

appearance took place, and to let their audience hear the story just as it was relayed to Ramsey's

program. Shaycarl notes that he overlaid the Ramsey audio.

In it, he explains to the radio host how the family was able to pay off $195,000 in debt

over four years. This story also acts as a history of Shaycarl's career, going from working for a

granite countertop business to making money as a vlogger, "social media expert" and "for lack of

a better word, a YouTuber." He explains how he gets paid through the advertising on his

YouTube channels. As Shaycarl and Mommytard huddle around the phone, their children crowd

the front of the frame, around their kitchen table, bored and fidgety. Finally, Shaycarl and family

get to shout the line they have been practicing, "We're debt free!" It concludes with audio of

Ramsey talking about the foregoing conversation with Shaycarl as the couple press their ears

against the phone and embrace.

As Shaycarl and Mommytard explained, this video is structurally different from their other videos, but it is also different in terms of emotion and transparency. The pleasure and relief felt by the family is clear, and serious as opposed to the constantly joking manner of most of their slice of life videos. And here Shaycarl's noting of the practicalities of his lifestyle (though told secondhand through a radio host) transcends his usual discussion of his filmmaking and social media processes.

BABY'S FIRST CRAWL! (Shaytards, 2011 January 20)

As he frequently does, Shaycarl teases his children on camera, this time Rocktard, who is lying face down on the floor in front of an open file full of what look like bills and receipts. Shaycarl teases him, "I told you to have the Johnson file on my desk this morning" as Rocktard flips through the paperwork. Shaycarl picks the baby up by the shirt and pulls him across the floor as the baby laughs and smiles. After an abrupt cut, Shaycarl takes the camera outside to see a fresh four inches of snow that has just fallen, explaining some mundane details about his children's school opening being delayed. That interlude interrupts the thrust of the early part video, which is about Rocktard learning to crawl and playing happily with his father. Again, Shaycarl shows that he is uninterested in providing connective tissue between his varied scenes. Throughout the episode, Shaycarl plays Candyland with his kids, visits a gym and plays with the equipment, and teases his wife after she recovers from anesthesia from a dental appointment. Finally, he takes Mommytard to a pharmacy on the way home from the dentist. As in many other videos, he encounters some fans. This time he runs into two teenage boys, one of whom says excitedly, "I saw you on the internet!" "Now *you're* on the internet," Shaycarl responds. Shaycarl always seems genuinely happy to be recognized and excited to welcome his fans and subscribers into the creative process.

SHAYTARDS! The True Story… (shaycarl, 2010 March 6)

Finally, it should be noted that Shaycarl's productions do sometimes wholly transcend the typical form, and extend the idea of the vlog into different directions[3]. "SHAYTARDS! The true story…" is a mockumentary, "behind the scenes" look at the everyday filming of the Shaytards vlog. The video displays a fictional director named Vlad Lefevre (with a beret and fake French accent) chastising "Veronica," the "actress" who plays Babytard, for forgetting her lines. In the four minute spoof, Babytard meets with the director, Shaycarl flirts unsuccessfuly with "Brittney Holmes," the "actress" who plays his wife, and a slick Hollywood agent character tries unsuccessfully to recruit Sontard and Princesstard.

As a work of parody, it is not especially funny or well acted, but it hints at Shaycarl's awareness of his ambitions (that he recognizes the performative nature of his video blog) and his audience (that he is willing to make fun of himself, even in a mild way).

Shaycarl the Author

As shown in these videos, Shaycarl uses the YouTube platform in several ways: to document the daily life of his family, to capture his own personal performance (self-reflexivity), and to share these visual artifacts in a communal space that is interactive and consists of an audience that constantly informs the production. The impact of Shaycarl's videos speaks for itself, first through the sheer volume of page views, and the social networking functions associated with YouTube (as described in Lange, 2007), which allow users like Shaycarl to create their own channels where they can host multiple videos, and to share information directly with their online friends. Though Shaycarl's videos could be found and viewed by anyone, there still exists a sense of intimacy (amplified of course by the familial subject matter), suggesting

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[3] Shaycarl's original YouTube page (Subscribe to Shaycarl, 2013) has increasingly been used for fictional sketches and other creations like this one.

vlogging may operate like one-on-one or small group interaction. For Shaycarl, the popularity

and visibility of his YouTube channel is amplified by his presence on Facebook (Shaytards –

Facebook, 2012), Twitter (shaycarl (shaycarl) on Twitter, 2013), and his official Web site

(Shaycarl: The Official Home, 2012). Each of these sites provides an off-platform site for

Shaycarl's interaction with his audience that (as noted in his own words) becomes significant to

the kinds of video productions he creates and shares.

It appears as if the The Shaytards project works as a kind of self-reflexive documentary

as noted in the frameworks of Hight (2008) and Nichols (2005/1988) himself, and this has

implications for the role of authorship in the context of YouTube vlogs. The Shaytards

transcends pure autobiography by its keen awareness of its audience, its responsiveness to

feedback, and its implicit claims of representation of a particular kind of family experience. As

Hight notes, the contemporary documentary encompasses the work of professionals and

amateurs through all manner of distribution platforms. Nichols's work on the self-reflexive

voice, similarly, points to the evidence that historical conditions (like technological changes) can

affect the nature authorship within documentary representations.

That a figure like Shaycarl can be situated as a self-reflexive author on a platform like

YouTube suggests broader implications for the nature of authorship (the author function) on

YouTube. Because of the scope of the platform, and the participatory nature of it, YouTube

places the author function into crisis. This prompts a return to Foucault (1984/1969), who notes

it is unforeseeable that "fiction [narrative or storytelling] would be put at the disposal of

everyone and would develop without passing through something like a necessary or constraining

figure" (119). However, we see in YouTube (and the social aspects of the Internet, generally)

that that constraining figure is fundamentally changed. As Foucault problematized the notion of a

work, we see it the same now, in different terms; a produser subject makes a video, but does any part of it belong to him? In the constant feedback loop, who speaks (is Shaycarl really speaking)?

The constraining figure is not an individual who is the vessel for some idea; it is the industrial apparatus that allows that individual to speak, and the same apparatus that changes the text, amplifies it, distributes it beyond the intended audience, responds to it more quickly than it can be processed. The constraining figure, if we can update Foucault, might be read as an entire collective of individuals and processes that go into creating a discourse. The produser exists, but this subject not only has no origin: its subjectivity is limited to the moments it takes to record and upload. The author function is not extinguished, but it is muddled and limited.

We return, then, to a key question Foucault has raised, read now through the lens of the Web video age. Let us ask not what replaces the author function, but what particular form the author function has taken in the YouTube age. In historicizing authorship, Foucault (1984/1969) pointed to certain events that led to a system of ownership over texts that, through (effectively) the code of law, led to the constitution of the author as subject. He realized as Barthes did before him that this subject placement was arbitrary and subject to social conditions. In the contemporary age, that system of ownership is showing signs of disrepair and dissolution (such as challenge that media owners face over piracy). On the level of what we formerly called an author, texts are produced for YouTube that are ostensibly properties of their creators.

However, they are co-opted, satirized, publicly skewered, remixed and recycled with impunity. Videos are distributed without any knowledge of how many (or how few) people may see them, and how they will be consumed or further distributed. And as in the case of a popular figure like Shaycarl, videos are inspired by viewer comments, viewer feedback, and in many cases, viewers become part of the production.

Some, like Keen (2007), mistake the problematic of authorship for that of ownership:

> In a world in which audience and author are increasingly indistinguishable, and where authenticity is almost impossible to verify, the idea of original authorship and intellectual property has been seriously compromised…. [T]he ease in which we can now cut and paste other people's work to make it appear as if it's ours, has resulted in a troubling new permissiveness about intellectual property. (23)

Equating ownership to authorship allows us to uncover part of the problem, but it misses the larger point. Though it is true that audience and author (such as they are constructed) have been blurred, any attestation of texts as properties is faulty.

Shaycarl may have created over a thousand videos, but they are far more open to response, rebuttal, and remixing as produced within YouTube than they would have been on any previous medium. Yet the breakdown of the ownership system is instructive for illuminating where the author function may head. For Foucault, the institutionalization of the author's ownership over his work was foundational for the constitution of the modern author-subject. As this subject transitions into something quite different, we can return to that place before ownership was even a thought. The discourse of YouTube is not unlike pre-modern literary discourses, when art (culture) was an action and not a commodity (Foucault, 1984/1969).

Still, placing the author function here is not quite proper, either, as the motivations for YouTube usage hinge (as noted above) not only on social utility and novelty, but on desire for fame (and its economic accoutrements) as well (Lange, 2007). To reduce YouTube to mere expression (a contemporary folk art) does a similar disservice in defining this new subjectivity. Shaycarl's videos, for instance, do not exist as pure expression. While not a household name,

exactly, The Shaytards videos are commodified in a way that is peculiar to the YouTube landscape.

In defining the author function, Foucault was careful to avoid any suggestion of how authorship may change as culture did, suggesting only that it likely would be forced to change in form, or cease to exist entirely. The YouTube environment suggests that such a change has occurred, placing the author in a new subject position, not entirely apart from what we call the produser. We are not in the final thrust of the author function, which Foucault suggests we may someday reach, wherein "we would hear hardly anything but the stirring of an indifference: What difference does it make who is speaking?" (Foucault, 1984/1969, p. 120).

The same interactivity and blurring of the line between producer and user that places notions of authorship into question is also relevant for two other components of cultural production: performance and narrative. Next, I will examine Mr. Chi-City, a prototypical YouTube performer, and discuss vlogging's implications for self-presentation.

CHAPTER 5

MR. CHI-CITY AND SELF-PRESENTATION AS A FORM OF CULTURAL PRODUCTION

As internet availability and usage have increased over the past decade, researchers in the communication field have tackled this conceptual terrain from many angles. Some have claimed the internet is an "identity laboratory," where the self is expressed, managed, and re-created (Jordan, 2005, p. 203). Within the identity laboratory, there are millions of produsers interacting with the web, creating individual identities while generating content for the growing medium. And all of this is done singularly, outside of traditional media boundaries (Bruns, 2008). Platforms like YouTube offer a readily available space for the presentation of a private self to an audience of indeterminate size. They offer the promise of self-expression and feedback. This chapter discusses a video blogger named Mr. Chi-City, a 20-something African-American man from suburban Chicago, who posts frequent videos about his own daily life, and has gained some measure of notoriety from it. His videos speak to the performative aspects of the YouTube space, and work as examples of how this facet of cultural production unfolds in web video. As such, communication technologies prompt a re-engagement with Goffman's (1973/1959) discussion of self-presentation and identity within YouTube's "identity laboratory."

Ritual, Identity and the Presentation of Self

It is certainly plausible to consider YouTube as a site of socially constructed reality, and as such, the kind of social ritual that would be well informed by considering the work of Carey (1989). For Carey, "communication is a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired and transformed" (p. 23). Reality is not inherently extant; it must be created

through communication processes. Only through communication can a community come to a sense of shared reality. If we consider YouTube as a community, its reality is produced through the symbolic practices employed by the site's users. These practices become normalized through ritual; produsers provide a worldview through the videos they create, and their conceptions of reality are either affirmed, denied, or modified, depending on the results of the feedback loop.

By nature, YouTube develops in myriad ways based on the content production and reception practices employed by its users. As such, a culture of YouTube evolves. Carey (1997) defines culture as "the ensemble of practices through which order is imposed on chaos" (p. 314). YouTube, with all its diversity, is by nature a chaotic environment. Only through the development of ritual practices on the part of its produsers can it develop any sort of coherence.

Goffman's work on dramaturgical performance is useful when considering many forms of communication behaviors. In terms of YouTube, its produsers and video creators construct identities that are tailored for the particular sphere of interaction. For Goffman (1973/1959) individuals are actors performing under different guises depending on the particulars of a situation. The performer can be conscious of his/her act ("taken in" by it), or the performance can take place without prior cognitive arrangement. To use Goffman's dramaturgical language, each individual involved in an interaction operates on a stage that is specific to that interaction (Goffman calls this a "front"). Each front has rules that are specific to it. The front includes both the physical setting of the interaction as well as external factors that inform an individual's behavior, and these factors help to shape the content and tone of the personal interaction. Goffman provides an instructive example of a wealthy man who exercises great humility when interacting with those of lower social status, but behaves in a self-aggrandizing manner when confronted with those even better off than he (Goffman, 1973/1959).

The performance of an individual is highly socialized and molded for the particular society with which the individual is interacting. As we see in the example of the wealthy man, the performance "tend[s] to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society," and works to conceal any errors that may be present (p. 35). As noted above, it is possible to view YouTube as a society or community. While this is helpful in terms of conceptualization, we must be careful not to oversimplify matters: while YouTube is a society, it is existent in cooperation with other societies and spheres. Its participants cannot be divorced from the broader societies and social groups of which they are also a part.

When looking at the presentation of a social identity on YouTube, it is helpful to also look at the concepts of face and facework, another facet to the study of social interaction that Goffman explored. Face is the value an individual assumes for himself in his social interaction; facework refers to the individual's actions incorporated to keep their social value high in the eyes of those with whom they are interacting ("saving face"; Penman, 1994). When a produser places a video of him/herself on YouTube, he/she takes a public risk. Either the video can be well received (either by the immediate social network or by some larger public) or the individual may lose face by receiving negative feedback. An individual's YouTube identity is thus not entirely in his own hands; he/she enters into a volatile society, where the cycle of production and response is swift.

Because the community aspects of YouTube cannot be fully removed from aspects of external society, it is worth briefly examining the outward social conditions of this chapter's exemplar, Mr. Chi-City, who is an African-American male. Within the mass media, the idea of "blackness" frequently becomes homogenized as a very specific type of performed identity (Jackson, 2006). For Gray (1995), black masculinity has all to often been constructed around

ideas of fear. That is, the majority tends to create representations of black men as dangerous and isolating, objects of difference that should be avoided, while representations created *by* black males tend also to play up "fear and dread" (p. 403) as a reaction against the dominant white masculine discourse. Gray argues that both notions of this performative blackness are problematic; more diverse and honest representations of black masculinity are necessary, while still avoiding sterilized, milquetoast portrayals (Gray, 1995). Further, the history of racial identity within mediated online environments is complex and ever-evolving. In the early years of the internet, cyber communication was viewed as decidedly anti-racial (Gajjala, 2007). Because the face of an individual was not present, the concept of race, it was thought, would be moot within the internet discourse. This belief, even then, was naïve, and has proven more so with the introduction of multimedia to the web landscape (Gajjala, 2007). Particular to vlogging as a cultural form, Christian (2009) conceptualizes the black vlogger as a new voice in the media landscape, able to present him/herself publicly while working singularly. His focus on black YouTube users underscores the vulnerability of unleashing the private self on the world that all produsers necessarily experience, while contextualizing it within the experience of blackness:

> Self-presentation sites like YouTube make visible the choice of blackness – those
>
> who post about it – the rejection of it – those who dissociate themselves – and the
>
> impossibility of complete denial… (p. 7)

For Christian (2009), blackness, like any other identity, is performed, chosen and tailored by the individual.

About Mr. Chi-City

Mr. Chi-City is a 28-year-old black male from the Chicago area. He first received wide recognition for a video entitled "Keeping your refrigerator stocked will get you many women"

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(MrChiCity3, 2008 August 20) which was posted on YouTube in August 2008. The video, which

consists of little more than Chi-City displaying the contents of his refrigerator, was widely

circulated through social networking sites and embedded on a number of popular blogs. The

video has been viewed over 9 million times. In each of his videos, Chi-City speaks in a

colloquial manner about whatever crosses his mind. Sometimes his topics are planned (as in the

"refrigerator" video), but often his tone is more meandering. He speaks casually, and often

profanely. His monologues are often conducted in the second person; he speaks to the audience

directly, sometimes referring to the imagined viewer as "my [n-word]." He frequently professes

verbal authenticity, telling the audience that he is "being real." He takes the camera along on

various excursions (to a baseball field, a cemetery, traffic court), acting as an observer who is

simply showing the audience the scene, while providing some commentary. He speaks quickly,

rarely pausing, and goes on at length. He is immensely concerned with his image, which

underscores the peculiarity of the fact that never once, in over thirty videos, does he show his

face. The audience sees the world from Chi-City's point of view, but never sees Chi-City

himself.

Chi-City displays a great deal of self-awareness in front of the camera, and his

recognition of his place within the YouTube culture plays out in his off-camera activity. He uses

his pseudonym (MrChiCity3) on other social networking sites, most notably Facebook,

MySpace, and Twitter, which serves to contextualize his YouTube presence. He uses these

services to promote his videos and to bring attention to himself. He also displays savvy in his

ability to play within the rules of YouTube to create his web identity. For example, he uploads

each of his videos to his YouTube channel, which acts as a forum for audience members to leave

comments for him, or to subscribe to his videos (and receive them immediately upon their posting).

The web page for Chi-City's YouTube channel (MrChiCity3 - YouTube, 2012). is personalized by the user; he changed the default color scheme (to a pale blue color), added artwork, and entered some information about himself ("Im [sic] just a regular dude...who happens to own a Digital Camera...lol"). The page even includes a link to an external site where visitors can purchase a Mr. Chi-City t-shirt. In the past few years, Chi-City has only appeared sporadically on the YouTube scene, and his home page has changed slightly; now in the text portion of the page, Chi-City refers to himself as a "Chicago stand up" and includes a link to a page selling Mr. Chi-City t-shirts. This chapter looks at a number of Chi-City's videos beginning with the one for which he is still most recognized.

Mr. Chi-City's Videos

Keeping your refrigerator stocked will get you many women (MrChiCity3, 2008 August 20)

In this video, Chi-City's most popular, he spends several minutes in second person point of view (his most common shooting style), and shows his audience the contents of his refrigerator. It is a deceptively simple technique, but Chi-City uses it to make the case for himself as a hypersexual male. As we see, Chi-City's fridge is completely full of different kinds of beverages: juices, sodas, bottled water. He is quick to explain why he has so many varieties; as he says, "different women like different things." During the eight-minute monologue, he tells his audience that suburban women like Vitamin Water, "hood girls" like Kool Aid, and he explains the importance of having an X-Box on hand, in case your sexual conquest has kids. The implication, of course, is that keeping women pleased with things like their favorite beverages is a key component of a man's sexual prowess. Within this discourse, Chi-City appeals to base

stereotypical notions about black men. While it may be impossible to discern the off-camera authenticity of a performance like this (for example, the refrigerator could have been filled in advance as a kind of set dressing for his monologue), we can note that Chi-City is not performing the kind of affirmative depiction of African-American males that Gray (1995) advocates. He engages a front of his own design, attempting to appear authentic to his audience, and to be worthy of their admiration. It is worth noting that this video contains the most negative aspects of black identity that Chi-City employs, yet it is his most watched piece by far. It appeared on many popular blogs, helping it spread to a worldwide audience, and it has been parodied many times elsewhere on YouTube.

A Brotha vs. a Bug: Mr. Chi-City Kicking Some Insect A** (MrChiCity3, 2008 December 11)

This video opens with a title card: "A Suburban insect broke into my crib. So, I had to show him how I handle intruders…." In this video, Chi-City appears perhaps at his most overtly performative, and it also hints at the kinds of facework strategies he sometimes employs to manage his performances. As Chi-City records (second person) his encounter with a large insect in his home, he is constantly aware of potential audience reactions that could call his masculinity into question. He is quite clearly afraid of the insect and, much of the video involves him talking himself into finally killing it. Throughout the video, as we see the cockroach perched on his wall, he acknowledges his fear, even going so far as to suggest that he is more scared of the bug than he would be if someone burst into his house with a gun. Feeling emasculated, he works to justify the fear, saying he can deal with a cockroach, but that "we don't have bugs like *this* in the city." He saves face by claiming his fear is based on unfamiliarity, that he wouldn't be afraid except that he hasn't seen a species of insect like this before. He implicitly suggests that in the future such a fear would be eliminated, and he appears determined to show his audience (an audience

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he is choosing by releasing this video to begin with) that he is capable of performing this ostensibly "manly" act. After all of this face-saving preamble, Chi-City caps the video off by violently killing the large bug on camera.

After smashing the insect against the wall with what appears to be the rubber end of some kind of cane or walking stick (we see very little of the implement within the frame), Chi-City screams out ("That wasn't a sissy scream. It was my war cry," a subtitle offers). He then yells at his conquest, telling the bug that's what it gets for coming into his house uninvited. After some celebration, he cleans his wall with a napkin and turns his attention to the insect corpse on the floor. As Chi-City post-mortems the situation, "Taps" plays over the scene as he concludes "Suburban life is hard."

MR. Chi-City GOES TO COURT!!!! (MrChiCity3, 2009 February 17)[4]

Occasionally, Chi-City interacts with other individuals on camera, and his performative tendencies come to the fore. In a video filmed outside a suburban traffic court, Chi-City talks with others who (like himself) were there that day to defend traffic violations. The video opens with Chi-City in his car, introducing the situation (again we see only his point of view), and telling his audience "It's court day!" He has been waiting for over two months to fight a traffic ticket, and he is clearly excited that the day has finally come; he has been awake since 2 a.m., "drinking some of that Mountain Dew" in anticipation. In introducing the situation, he converses with his own editing practices, introducing music cues (which consist of the familiar *Monday Night Football*, *Mission Impossible*, and *The Jeffersons* themes). Upon getting out of his car, he tells his audience, "we are going to get some justice today." He takes the camera into the courthouse, walks through the halls, and as the famous closing line from *The Jeffersons* theme

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[4] As of November 2012, this video had been removed from its original YouTube site. It is still available for viewing at Jest.com among other sites (Mr. Chi-City Goes to Court, 2010).

("we've finally got a piece of the pie") plays, we see a title card reading, "The Officer Pulled a NO-SHOW; CASE DISMISSED!!!!"

After he leaves the courtroom we see Chi-City walking down the sidewalk, a shadow visible of him holding a camera in his left hand. He acknowledges that he likely would have lost the case if the officer had made his appearance. But since he won, he dramatically hands over the money he would have been fined to others who were not so lucky. First, he meets a woman in the parking lot who a title card describes as a "ghetto white girl." As she complains about having to pay $30 that she doesn't have, he hands over cash to her, announcing that "Mr. Chi-City has done justice today." He meets a man who he had met in the courtroom, who owes $500 to the court, and gives him $50 towards it. He then enters a fast food restaurant and buys food for all the waiting customers. Here Chi-City is presenting himself as someone bent on restoring justice to what he sees as unjust situations. It is notable that the only interactions that he shows on camera reflect his own perceived heroism, reflected in second person through the eyes of others. This is not the only time Chi-City structures these kinds of charitable interactions.

Christmas Give-Away, Mr. Chi-City Style (MrChiCity3, 2008 December 25)

Here, Chi-City has prepared some Christmas cards (containing $20, $50, or $100 bills) that he plans on presenting to some lucky beneficiaries. The video opens with a tight shot on one of the gift envelopes, reading "Merry Christmas from Mr. Chi-City," with a crudely drawn smiley face. He is filming from inside his car, showing the Christmas cards paper clipped to his dashboard, and his cell phone, which displays the date, December 25, 2008. He drives along a snowy landscape in Chicago's South Side and pulls over next to a man in a parka holding a sign that reads in part, "Homeless. Please Help." Chi-City hands him an envelope and asks him to open it on camera. The homeless man opens the envelope to find a Christmas card and a $20 bill.

He tells Chi-City that he will use the money to buy something for his girlfriend, and the two have a brief conversation about the girlfriend and what she looks like, noting that she is "fine" but "gets ugly sometimes." They conclude with a fist bump (which Chi-City suggests may have spread Hepatitis C to his wool gloves), and Chi-City heading forth to "spread some love."

Next, Chi-City has changed technique a bit and positioned his camera on the dashboard in order to frame the front passenger seat. Soon the passenger door opens and a woman sits down; a subtitle affirms that the woman is "a real Chicago street walker." As the car begins to move, the two engage in some small talk and Chi-City says, "actually, I don't want to have sex or nothing like that." He hands her an envelope with $100 in it, and she opens it as she cries, hugs him, and takes her back to where he picked her up. When the prostitute tells Chi-City that yesterday was her sister's birthday, he gives her a second card. When they return to the spot, he picks up a second prostitute and gives her a $50 gift while the first woman sits in the back seat. In the end, they tell the camera, "Chi-City hooked me up for Christmas." When they three begin to talk about how good the women are at their profession, Chi-City jokes, "you better get out of the car before I change my mind."

Chi-City engages the same routine with another man on the side of the road, and a convenience store clerk. In both cases, he asks them to open the card and then asks them to say something into the camera. While it is unknown whether Chi-City would engage in such generous behavior without a camera rolling, the fact that he recorded the activity (and that he repeatedly asks the gift recipients to affirm their gratitude) can certainly be read as a tactic to maintain a positive public impression.

Getting to Know Mr. Chi-City; Q&A (MrChiCity3, 2009 April 6)

While operating within cultural rules that have been established within YouTube, Chi-City's promotional efforts can also be read as a stab at celebrity. It is clear that Chi-City seeks to be seen as much as possible, that he knows his audience and wishes to interact with it, and that each visit to his Facebook or MySpace pages effectively advertises his YouTube videos. While not a household name, Chi-City is known to a specific population of web users as an entertainment personality. He continually produces content that is in the same mold as his previous successes, in that his production process and general personality appears unchanged. It appears that he uses social media to find new audiences, while trying to duplicate past success, thereby holding on to the audience he already has.

In this video, Chi-City overtly acknowledges that he is very aware of the impact of his videos, and suggests that his intended purpose for filming is a sense of self-expression. Here, Chi-City appears in a mundane situation, standing over his kitchen counter preparing dinner (a "Spagel" or "Spam with a bagel"). He sets up the situation, that he wants to answer some common questions that he always receives, but notes that "I didn't know that when I opened my inbox there was gonna be 3,497 messages!" He starts by introducing all of the ingredients for his meal, in a very similar way as he introduced the beverages in his refrigerator in his breakout video. He re-establishes his singular mannerisms and ways of speaking that play up the comedic aspects of his everyday life, like pouring Kool Aid into a wine glass and calling it (with a vaguely French pronunciation) "cool*ade*." Then he launches into responses to the many questions he has received.

First, he re-affirms his hypersexualized male routine, answering a question about having ever had gay fantasies by envisioning a scenario where he has sex with two women. As the scene

shifts abruptly to Chi-City sitting on the toilet, he answers another question about sex, as to whether he has been more sexually successful because of his videos (the answer: not really, though he has had more "phone sex"). Asked how he seems to have so much money, Chi-City reveals that it is all smart savings strategy, that since his first job at age 15, his parents began saving up 75% of his wages instead of letting him spend it. His father presented him with a check on the day he moved out.

In answering some other questions, he reveals that he lost his virginity at age 19, that he is working to fix up his Chevy Caprice with a fancy audiovisual system, and that the fridge really is stocked "24/7" (and he opens the refrigerator up to prove it). Finally, sitting on his couch with a cigar, he answers the question that all of his videos beg, as to why he never shows his face. He claims that it began almost as an accident, just by nature of how he held the camera and what he wanted to show the world, but noted that he feels like, "what I say and what I do is more important that what I look like. I feel like my face isn't really relevant at this point." He says that he was once asked what he plans to do with his YouTube success, and he said he's not planning on doing anything specifically, that he just enjoys it and will keep doing what he is doing for as long as he can. He claims he will not forget about the audience that has been watching him, but notes, "I just don't want y'all to forget about *me.*"

Mr. Chi-City; Ticket Destruction (MrChiCity3, 2009 March 9)

While the "Q&A" video suggests Chi-City is quick to respond to his audience within the YouTube sphere, it is also worth noting that this kind of interaction also occurs outside of the platform. After winning the aforementioned traffic court case, he solicited ideas from audience members about the best way to destroy the now moot parking ticket. Unable to choose from among the many ideas submitted, he dedicated a video to multiple methods of destroying the

original and duplicate parking tickets that he had made himself. This kind of appeal to his audience shows an overt tendency toward managing a public persona.

He opens in his car in a parking lot facing a Taco Bell, announcing that today is the day: "Ticket destruction…today is execution day!" The Taco Bell will be the traffic ticket's "last meal." After joking with some of the counter staff, Chi-City sits down at a table and begins to read some of the audience suggestions for how to destroy the ticket (each of the suggestions have been printed out and are shown on camera). It becomes clear that instead of functioning as a selection based on audience feedback, Chi-City is going to perform as many of the audience suggestions as possible. First, the camera cuts to a shot of Chi-City beating the ticket with a popsicle. Then, he re-enacts scenes from the films *Office Space* and *Full Metal Jacket*, beating up the ticket with a pipe and a bar of soap, respectively. Finally, he reveals the "winning" suggestion: deep frying. He batters the ticket (wrapped in a boneless chicken breast) in a bag of flour and spices; as usual he reveals and discusses his ingredients one by one. As the ticket heats in a pan of hot oil, Chi-City says, "You see that? That's justice!"

YouTube is Dying (YouTube Exposed) (MrChiCity3, 2009 November 13)

Chi-City has used defined cultural practices to create an identity within the social networking apparatus. He has also occasionally stepped outside of his typical production practices in an attempt to expose some of the negative aspects of the YouTube platform. This video highlights Chi-City's "investigation" of unfair practices conducted by the site, and includes a discussion of the homogenization of personalities (not unlike himself) who he criticizes for manipulating the system to obtain increased visibility. The video is one of Chi-City's most popular, having been viewed nearly one million times. It highlights the effort to normalize distinct ritual practices into a coherent culture of YouTube.

In it, Chi-City appears in a corn field at night, completely invisible until he turns on the night vision setting on his camera. He complains about YouTube's attempt to financially capitalize on his popularity. Back inside, Chi-City reads the minutes of a recent Google shareholders' meeting (he notes that he owns some Google stock), and discusses the company's plans for monetizing YouTube. Some of the suggestions (that, it should be noted, never came to pass) involve deleting stagnant videos, or putting limits on the amount of videos a user with less than 3,000 subscribers could post each month. He discusses some suggestions YouTube has made for its users, including brevity and consistency of posting, and beseeching the audience for comments, likes, and ratings. Chi-City is quick to disagree with all of these suggestions, insisting that they take away from quality of content.

But the main thrust of this video is Chi-City's "exposing" of the fact that, as of the time this video was released, a company called Hi-Arts Entertainment was bankrolling or creating content for many of the most popular YouTube personalities. The production of videos by professional organizations is, to Chi-City, a slight against real authentic personalities like himself. He claims that Hi-Arts approached him with a contract, and he shows what he purports to be that contract on camera (in a gym locker room of all places).

Chi-City also appears preoccupied with a number of YouTube scams, including what he calls "faking the suspension," in which YouTube users will purposefully post material that violates the terms of service, and then create a narrative about being bullied by YouTube in order to get more followers. Here Chi-City is engaging a different kind of front, acting as the seasoned veteran with well-researched information that can be of great use to his peers, and positioning himself as an authentic voice in a murky environment.

Gone But Not Forgotten: Mr. Chi-City Kicks it With a Friend (MrChiCity3, 2009 January 21)

Here, Chi-City takes the camera along on a visit to the grave of a deceased friend of his (given stereotypical conditioning, and Chi-City's relatively young age, it is easy to read his friend's death as being a violent one, though this is never stated one way or the other). He places his camera on a tripod, and sits in the snow next to the grave. He begins lightly, by leaving gifts by the gravesite, speaking directly to his departed friend in a joking manner. Then he starts to break down, telling the friend how much he is missed, telling him that he set up a college fund for the daughter he left behind. It is an emotional scene that, if inauthentic, is the work of a very gifted actor. Even in such a raw moment, though, Chi-City talks to the camera to justify his behavior, indicating that the crying spell emasculated him. He apologizes to the audience for losing control, and claims that they are only seeing it because the moment was "real." Many of the comments on the video (as do ones on many other videos) praise Chi-City for his "realness." The identity is performed, confirmed, and will be performed again.

MAKE A DIFFERENCE MONDAY #1 (MrChiCity3, 2009 November 23).

In the first part of a recurring segment, Chi-City drives through the West Side of Chicago, announcing a new weekly feature on his channel called "Make a Difference Monday." He and an accomplice go into a restaurant called Edna's and prepare for what the title card refers to as "The Big Announcement." Chi-City gets the attention of the restaurant and lets all the patrons know that the morning's breakfast is his treat: "If you want extra bacon, get extra bacon…. We're trying to do good things for our hood, our community." The customers, seated in scattered booths around the half-full restaurant, applaud. Chi-City spends the remainder of the video talking to customers and taking their breakfast tickets with a stack of cash in his hands. In a rare occurrence, Chi-City can be partially seen in this video, as his friend does some of the

shooting. His face still out of frame, he can be seen wearing a Mr. Chi-City t-shirt (the same one that he advertises on his channel's home page. At the end of the video, he thanks all the customers for being part of the experience, and asks them to spread the giving forward. In the text description of the video, he announces vaguely that his t-shirt sales will go to charity: "EVERY SALE GOES TO THE LESS FORTUNATE."

This video (and several other "Make a Difference Monday" entries that follow) represents an attempt by Chi-City to institutionalize the charitable and heroic side of his persona. It is worth noting again that the very act of giving shown here is incredibly performative, as Chi-City goads his recipients into reacting, and seldom misses a chance to be thanked for his generosity.

Thank You & Call Me (MrChiCity3, 2012 January 10)

This piece speaks directly to Chi-City's engagement with and desire to maintain his audience. The description reads, "Man....I just want to say thank you for everything you guys have done for me. I hope I can talk to all of you....." And in the video, Chi-City thanks his audience repeatedly, while walking through some woods on a crisp winter day. He tells his audience how much they have changed his life. He claims he was first making videos for just he and his brother to watch, and seems overwhelmed by all the support his large audience has given him.

But there's more to this than just words. Chi-City wants to thank each of his audience members personally, so he decides to give out his phone number, subject to a few ground rules (like "If you're a dude, you cannot call me past 10 o'clock"; women, of course, are free to call any time). Most importantly, he projects his own ideas about authenticity on his audience, telling callers to be themselves, that they will not really be talking to some "personality"; they will be

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speaking with a real, normal person. To date, this video remains the most recent one that Chi-City has uploaded to YouTube.

Mr. Chi-City, Performance and Self-Presentation

It is of little use to consider the authenticity of a performer's identity from the other side of a video screen; even if the performer professes to show a "real life" persona, one can never tell what impact the camera has on the performance. To use Goffman (1973), the camera changes (or creates) the "front" where Chi-City interacts with his presumed audience. For starters, since his videos are usually arranged in second person, it may be unlikely Chi-City would speak at all were the camera not present. And it is impossible to tell how much of his performative presence would translate to a face-to-face interaction. Still, on Goffman's terms, in any interaction a performance is undertaken, regardless of whether the actor believes his own act or is purposefully constructing it. In this sense, Chi-City's authenticity is an unnecessary consideration. He performs an identity, and though he purports it to be real, it is a performance either way. In fact, it is worth pointing out that Chi-City performs several different kinds of identities depending on the context of his video: a hypersexual identity full of bravado, a candid, confessional identity that verbally attests to its own authenticity, and a heroic, exceptionally generous identity.

As self-presentation within YouTube is contingent upon the social conditions that exist outside of it, it is nearly impossible to discuss the identity performance that occurs in Chi-City's videos without discussing his gender and his race: While we never see his face, Chi-City forcefully presents himself as an African-American man. His speech pattern is not unlike African-American English Vernacular, and he identifies verbally as a black man (often using the words "brotha" or the "N-word"). His race is on display, though not always overtly. At times his

racial identity shows itself by playing it against white identity. On several occasions he imitates a "white" speaking voice in an effort to illustrate his authenticity as an African-American. However, he only verbally references any race in passing; he "chooses blackness," to borrow Christian (2009), but seldom puts race in the foreground of his presentation.

Despite this complicated racial positioning, there are several times in his videos when Chi-City performs to stereotype. More often than not, though, Chi-City performs an oppositional black identity. While he frequently notes that he comes from the inner city, at present he lives in what appears to be a nice suburban apartment, and is employed at some unspecified job. These facts are oppositional in and of themselves, as, even today, media portrayals of the African-American middle class are the exception to the rule. In fact, Chi-City himself is unsure how to display his suburban identity, as witnessed in the encounter with the "suburban bug." He has internalized his urban and suburban roles, deploying whichever of them suits a given performance.

Despite the fits of performative generosity he is prone to, Chi-City is not wealthy (or does not claim great wealth). As he explains in his "Q&A" video, his father kept most of the money from every job he held as a teenager and placed it in an account for the son to access when he reached adulthood. This narrative displays both a strong family structure and a sense of financial security that counter stereotypical depictions. To some extent, Chi-City speaks for a large segment of the African-American populace that is underrepresented in media depictions, which privilege "ghetto" portrayals or tokenism within a whitewashed world. Whether the identity that appears on-screen is "real" cannot be discerned, but Chi-City the persona stands as proxy for the unseen black middle class.

Yet Chi-City does not stand as a model for assimilation. His speech and language are deployed in opposition to whiteness. His frequent assertions of "being real" attest to his individuality and refusal to accommodate type. His performative and faceworking behaviors operate in this way. For Chi-City, ideally the audience will perceive that he is just being himself. While Gray (1995) claims that the dominant portrayals of black men (whether created by the majority or by the black men themselves) trade in fear, Chi-City's racial identity does no such thing. He appears as friendly, funny, not the type of person one would be likely to shy away from. Because of what is at least the illusion of authenticity, Chi-City is a very engaging character. In most instances, his performance does not support stereotypical notions of African-American masculinity (though the most problematic occasion happens to be the most widely viewed). Yet, as a black man, he is not sterilized. He performs an original identity wholly apart form the discourse of fear and the discourse of assimilation.

By operating within the ritualized practices of YouTube, Chi-City is able to present an identity, whether authentic or not, on its own terms. He is (mostly) unburdened by limitations of time, censorship, and ideology. If YouTube and other social media technologies are laboratories for self-expression, Chi-City uses the freedoms granted within for his own advantage. Still, within the laboratory, one must work to manage the identity, for audience impressions matter, just as impressions matter in the face-to-face interactions Goffman (1973) discusses. Even when the subject is in total control of his representation, though, negative portrayals can still occur. Though the process of self-presentation is designed to conceal errors, sometimes (as in Chi-City's hypersexualized beverage monologue) the errors still rear their heads.

It is important also to note that Chi-City's performance cannot be divorced from discussions of celebrity and participatory culture. Identity must be constructed and maintained in

consideration of an audience, and, at least in Chi-City's case, he appears to want that audience to grow. His performance of "realness" or authenticity, legitimate or imagined, is rewarded by increased view counts and increased notoriety. Once the reward is gained, the performance is duplicated to ensure further rewards.

On YouTube, there is room for anyone to engage in an identity performance within its structure, and YouTube as a valuable site to observe human self-expression. In the next chapter, I examine how vlogging on YouTube may exemplify a third component of cultural production, the way in which stories may be told.

CHAPTER 6

iJUSTINE AND YOUTUBE AS A STORYTELLING PLATFORM

This chapter examines popular "lifecaster" and YouTube personality iJustine as an interactive storyteller, and attempts to examine YouTube vlogging's potential for narrative as a component of cultural production on the platform. iJustine (Justine Ezarik) provides an instructive example because of her history of lifecasting, a practice of live streaming the events of her everyday life over the internet for the world to see (as discussed below). Lifecasting or "lifelogging" has been traced to the 1970s and 1980s, to phenomena as divergent as PBS series *An American Family* and Steve Mann, the so-called "first cyborg," who wore heavy cameras and audio equipment and various apparatuses attached to his body in an effort to record all the events of his daily life (Achilleos, 2003). While YouTube is not typically a medium designed for a continuous, surveillance oriented streaming of events, iJustine's roots within these practices are reflected in the way she uses YouTube, as a frequent (daily) repository of her life, as well as an outsized performative space in which she takes the concept of the video blog into interesting directions. Using the work of Ryan (2006) and literature on narrative constructions on digital platforms, this chapter reads iJustine as a storyteller who uses the platform of YouTube to tell the stories of Justine Ezarik and iJustine, herself and the character she has created.

Narrative on YouTube

Ryan (2006) posits that digital media have had far ranging effects on many spheres of social life, including the spheres of economy and politics. Taking these notions as given, she interrogates the so-called "new media" landscape to uncover its storytelling potential, refusing to

acquiesce to easy notions that these forms have media have undercut traditional forms of narrative. Instead, she claims, the interactive capabilities of digital texts, which remove the traditional creator-reader hierarchy present within old media, should form the loci of scrutiny. To form an "interactive narratology," one must then deeply examine both the formal elements of digital texts and the kinds of interactivity enabled by each form.

To examine these two subjects of analysis (and the relationship between them), Ryan (2006) situates interactivity according to two sets of poles: internal/external and exploratory/ontological. Internal interactivity involves individuals operating as avatars inside a virtual world, while external interactivity involves the user controlling that world from outside of it. Exploratory interactivity occurs when users are permitted only to navigate within an existing atmosphere or set of options, while the ontological form enables the user to fundamentally alter the virtual world. These two binaries, considered in turn, exist in four different combinations, each with its own implications for the production of narrative. From the perspective of a vlogger (as shown in the example of iJustine below), YouTube presents an external-exploratory environment.

Ryan (In press) also discusses interactive spaces in terms of "storyworlds," a unifying theme of digital stories that examines how various texts relate to one another. This framework notes that storyworlds have various components, like sets of laws and rules for how the space operates, "geographic features" that characterize the space, and characters that exist within it. Storyworlds also can relate to and influence texts in certain ways, including what she calls a "one world, many texts relation" in which the same stories or characters are continually reproduced within the space. While this literature is speaking more pointedly about video game spaces than about a pre-produced video platform like YouTube, it is not hard to read YouTube or a YouTube

channel as a storyworld, consisting as it does on a particular architecture and set of rules, and, in the case of a vlog, as a relation between one world and many texts.

However, this relationship between the world and the text is more complex; simply creating a space and a character is not a sufficient condition for defining a storyworld:

> What does it take for a narrative to pitch a whole world, rather than a character? This world must possess invariant features, in order to be recognized as the common frame of reference of diverse documents. (Ryan, In press)

As Ryan notes, this diversity does not mean that a storyworld must be exceedingly broad, only that there is deep well of detail in the minds of its creators that supports multiple texts.

Lindemann (2005) examines the role of journaling in the creation of narrative, which has resonance in situating vlogging as a narrative practice. Using the web site livejournal.com as a test case, he emphasizes the role of skill and competence in generating a useful narrative about the life of an individual. The narrative is more effective when the creator is technologically savvy and able to use the platform at his disposal in a way that is both impressive and user-friendly. The construction of an online narrative, it appears, is contingent on perceived ability, consistency, coherence, and diversity.

About iJustine

iJustine is a popular video blogger and "lifecaster," a term given to those who stream large sections of their personal lives in real time over the internet. The format was popularized by Justin Kan, whose web site Justin.tv has become a hub for such activity both by Kan and others (Levy, 2007). Ezarik, a 20-something woman from Pennsylvania, began broadcasting a streaming video blog on Justin.tv in 2007, the first person to vlog at that site other than Kan himself (Guynn, 2007). After achieving breakout success as a lifecaster, Ezarik has segued into

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producing video for multiple platforms, including YouTube, where she maintains a channel that boasts over one million subscriptions (iJustine's channel – YouTube, 2013). The layout of her page (complete with an update based on the late-2012 YouTube facelift), is much cleaner and better utilized than most such pages; it has a sophisticated banner graphic and contains easy to follow links to other social networking sites (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Tumblr, Google+, Pinterest), and her personal store, which sells iJustine branded merchandise like t-shirts and iPhone cases.

Like many other popular vloggers, Ezarik's YouTube site contains a mix of video styles, ranging from direct address "rants," to music video parodies, to comedy sketches. Ezarik also hosts a series of other YouTube channels, focusing on topics like video gaming and product reviews, and has a large web presence elsewhere on the web, on major social networking sites (Facebook, Twitter) and on her own website, iJustine.com (iJustine's gaming channel!, 2013; iJustine's iPhone channel!, 2013; iJustine's review channel!, 2013; iJustine's vlogging channel, 2013). She has also appeared as an actor in a multitude of web series and some popular television shows, such as *Criminal Minds* and *The Bold and the Beautiful*. (Justine Ezarik – IMDb, 2011). On YouTube, iJustine works clean (no offensive language or sexual content), and she presents herself as happy and always game for a performance, complete with what Gould (2008) calls, "bug-eyed, squealing enthusiasm." Moreover, iJustine is candid about the attention she receives, noting:

> I don't hate it…. What I like the most about everything is the community of
> people I've brought together. When I was lifecasting, I was a way for people to
> connect. It wasn't even about me. I was sitting there doing nothing, and people

were having conversations about politics and their life. And it was kind of cool to

see that. (Gould, 2008, no pagination)

The videos described below characterize a broad range of iJustine's YouTube output, which consists now of thousands of videos spread across her various channels. Each one selected comes from iJustine's primary and most popular channel, which contains the most varied content forms. While nearly all of iJustine's videos include some kind of direct engagement with the camera, she employs many different styles, and examples of each are examined here, exploring how her story is told within the YouTube platform.

iJustine's Videos

WISDOM TOOTH RIPPED OUT!!!!! (iJustine, 2009 December 23)

In this video iJustine walks out of her home into a snow-covered front yard, wearing a sweatshirt and jeans and recording herself, camera at arm's length, wearing dark-rimmed glasses (which she typically does not do). She speaks directly to the camera: "Alright, I'm going to have my wisdom tooth out, here in this winter wonderland." The video cuts to her passenger seat of a vehicle, still shooting herself as she closes the door, exclaiming "I don't want to go!" We do not see her arrive at the dentist's office, but instead cut to strait-on symmetrical master shot of iJustine sitting in the dental chair. She repeats to the unseen camera operator, "I don't want to do this." As we see a title card that notes the procedure is "all done," the man operating the camera asks her if she's "doing ok." iJustine, shot from an angle and covered in a heavy white blanket, has just come out from anesthesia. We see a YouTube caption inserted to look like a cartoon thought bubble: "I was just out of it from the drugs they gave me but I'm not in pain!" When a dazed iJustine is told that the procedure is over, she asks "where did they put it [the tooth]?" An unsteady tight closeup on her face reveals her to be incredibly disoriented and emotional. "I'm

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trying to make a blog," she cries. A series of quick (deliberate) cuts highlight, at the very least, the most incoherent parts of iJustine's post-op experience, and perhaps even the most performative ones.

As the camera stays tight on iJustine, she gets to speak with her dentist about what is to be done with the excised tooth. iJustine wants to keep it, but the doctor insists, "we have to throw it out." She asks if she can just see the tooth, and at the doctors suggestion that the tooth may have already been disposed of, she starts a crying fit, as a YouTube caption notes, "lol I have no idea why i was so sad about that!" The doctor is being a bit patronizing, giving her phone back to her and asking if that makes her feel better. At this point, the doctor is still never seen on screen. His left hand finally appears, checking the bandage on iJustine's right arm, telling her that the injection site might bruise when she gets home. Asked if there are any other questions, she asks the doctor "Do you Twitter?" The doctor does not. She offers that if the doctor ever gets Twitter, they will follow each other. When told the dentist has only Facebook, iJustine tells him "I will leave a Wall comment saying you did a good job."

It is notable that even in the face of the disorienting drugs, iJustine still cares about social media first and foremost, and identifies herself as someone who uses these media as part of her profession ("It's what she does," says her companion at one point). This video is also interesting in that iJustine is seemingly out of control of her own narrative (or at least that illusion is presented to the audience), but is of course masterminding the whole thing. And the reflections of the wildly popular David After Dentist video (wherein two parents record their young son's reaction under anesthesia) are inescapable. iJustine is lifecasting here, taking her audience into an actual life adventure and a significant personal moment, but her savvy and sense of humor elevate the situation to something more significant. She shows a constant awareness of the

camera; even when speaking with her doctor (and not the friend holding the camera) she is looking into it, checking back with it all the time. Like all of her videos that capture slices of life, this one makes clear that we are let in only at her personal behest. The avatar of iJustine is very much present, while Justine Ezarik is not. The video proved very popular, at almost 2 and a half million views (and a full, "uncut" version, it is noted, is present on one of iJustine's other YouTube channels).

IPHONE BILL (iJustine, 2007 August 13)

While the wisdom tooth video illustrates the slice of life approach that made iJustine popular as a lifecaster, this piece (at only one minute, six seconds in length) put her on the map for many people. Talking directly to camera wearing a pink tank top with lots of clamor in the background, iJustine tells the camera, "I have an iPhone. And I had to switch to AT&T. Ok, that's wonderful. Well, I got my first AT&T bill. Right here. In a box. Let's see what's inside here." While this preamble is told in direct address, the scene cuts to a shot of her desktop as she opens the AT&T box and reveals its contents. Much of the ensuing display takes place in fast motion, pages flipping by rapidly. The montage is set to soft music taken from an early iPhone commercial (simple synth, string, and guitar). At the end, pages are scattered all along the tabletop in a haphazard fashion. The actual contents of the bill are never revealed (a wise move in terms of personal privacy). In slow motion, she turns over the last page and slowly gathers up the pages. We see an AT&T logo header and the words Data Detail (Continued) on one of the pages. An eagle-eyed viewer may even be able to make out iJustine's phone number as it is partially visible on some of the pages during the slow motion part of the sequence. A soft dissolve reveals iJustine at a different interior location. She shoots the camera an incredulous

look and says, "300 pages. Of a phone bill." A title card closes the video, noting that companies should "Use e-billing. Save a forest."

This video (at over 3.3 million views) became a bit of a cause celebre. It has inspired dozens of spoofs and parodies, and iJustine is routinely asked about it in interviews. She was interviewed by WTAE-TV in Pittsburgh (her hometown) and commented on the amount of waste, explaining that the bill was not only detrimental to the environment, but cost AT&T almost $9 in unnecessary postage. "That doesn't make much sense," she told interviewer Andrew Stockey (wtaetv, 2007). She elaborates that the sends 30 to 35 thousand text messages a month (which account for the lion's share of the billing lines on those 300 pages). She claims she is upset about people trying to "beat" her 300 pages, which she expresses runs counter to the message. The news coverage marks the iPhone bill video as significant in another way, as iJustine's first time really taking her avatar into the offline world. This will happen many times in the future. It is again notable that the production technique here is very simple. Only a few camera angles, some fast/slow motion effects, and focused on something relatively banal (the banality of the lifecasting lifestyle being key to the form's narrative). iJustine again takes this to YouTube, but the subject matter this time transcends the purely visual, textual effect of what is onscreen.

Steve (iJustine, 2011 October 6)

As evidenced by the 300 page iPhone bill video, the dedicated channel for first person iPhone daily blogs, and the Apple devices that show up in many of iJustine's videos, she has an affinity for that company and for its late founder, Steve Jobs. When Jobs passed away in 2011, she made a brief video tribute, notable for three reasons: its genre difference compared to the plethora of first person/sketch/parody videos available on the main iJustine channel, its relative

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sophistication of production technique in relation to those other video types, and what it reveals about iJustine's reliance on Apple products in her production career. She effectively makes Apple into a character in the narrative of her avatar's life, and the effect of her Jobs tribute is by equal turns confusing and bizarrely sweet. As music plays, the camera pans over a recognizable picture of an older, bearded Jobs, in full Ken Burns style, and pans below to a desk with a burning votive candle, the back side of an iPhone with the Apple logo clearly visible, a distinctive white Mac keyboard, and most interestingly, a set of iJustine paperwork and stationary written in the Apple font (with bitten apple logos dotting the I's in her name). We continue to a pink iPod Shuffle, the screen of a large iMac, part of a MacBook laptop, another iPhone, the distinctive cords and cables of a mouse and charger. A small WALL-E toy (notable for Jobs' association with PIXAR), a red spiral notebook with an Apple logo, and finally, the screen of an iPad showing the company's familiar Jobs tribute from 2011, with the official company photo of Jobs's face, fingers on his chin on a clean white backdrop, with the memoriam "Steve Jobs: 1955-2011."

The actual production of this video reveals the sophisticated unsophistication of the vlogger in general: the techniques are semi-advanced but the practice of them is not refined. iJustine pans her camera too fast in some cases, too slow in others. The camerawork is shaky. The focus (autofocus) is imperfect. She positions her avatar (here not actually seen) as something of an acolyte of and ambassador for Jobs. It integrates the artifacts of production into her narrative very directly, while paying what may be a very sincere tribute to an icon she reveres. She states in the description: "There are no words or videos that I'd ever be able to create that can truly capture what Steve Jobs means to me and so many others. He's been an amazing inspiration and will be greatly missed. Thank you, Steve. xo, iJ."

The Oatmeal Project (iJustine, 2006 May 20).

This video, the first one produced for iJustine's YouTube channel. It is a simple slice of life sketch of her making instant oatmeal in a microwave and eating it with a plastic spoon. She begins in a point of view shot opening an otherwise empty kitchen drawer to retrieve a lone packet of instant oatmeal, which then cuts to a shot of her from the drawer's point of view. She then opens up an otherwise empty cabinet to retrieve another packet, in a similar editing routine of first to third person. Then we see a master shot of the kitchen, with two bowls on the counter as, iJustine empties one of the packets into one of the bowls. Then we see a shot of her face from inside the microwave, where she does not put anything inside; she simply opens and closes the door). She fills a bowl with water, finally, and places it in the microwave. Then a fast motion sequence shows her pressing the microwave buttons, removing the finished product, and eating it. Then with a sly expression, iJustine places the finished bowl back in the original drawer (from the drawer's point of view). The text description of the video suggests it was taken at iJustine's workplace: "So this was one of the first videos that I ever posted on youtube. Yes, I know.. It is weird. The story behind this is that I became slightly obsessed with oatmeal and I would eat it everyday at work. This video was how I would normally begin my day." The fast motion eating sequence clearly takes place at an office desk, as empty office bookshelves and a computer tower can be seen in the background.

This hints at a bit of inside information on what lifecasting has taught her: that a sense of banality is acceptable in constructing a personal narrative. She livens up the banality with some excess: the fast motion, the repeated acts from multiple points of view. These are production techniques that are wholly unavailable to someone just transmitting life events from a single angle and perspective. There are very clear and deliberate editing choices here, almost as if to

say, "you've seen me from one angle. Here is a sketch of my life that is at once simple, but also

multidimensional." YouTube has already allowed an advancement (at least from the perspective

of authorial control) of the iJustine narrative. The video itself is only 52 seconds long, and has

accrued 420K likes (far less than some of IJ's most popular videos, but still a significant amount,

especially for someone who at the time had no YouTube footprint. Several comments from more

recent years say things to the effect of "a legend was born."

EAT MY BURGER!!! (iJustine, 2009 June 3)

This is a promotional comedy sketch iJustine made in cooperation with the fast food

chain Carl's Jr.: "How to eat a burger, iJustine style." iJustine appears in direct point of view in

two roles, as the fast food clerk and her customer. Much of the sketch is shot using chroma key,

and many of the green screen shots are anachronistic (the counter is in the wrong place in the

shots of iJustine the customer), and clearly pulled from whatever online image she could get her

hands on. The idea of the piece is a how-to video about how to eat a hamburger, and as such is a

send up of similar instructional videos (though with some razor-thin punch lines, mostly

involving the absurdity of using ketchup in excess), but it again reveals the iJustine avatar

reveling in the banal, and attempting to transcend it. Like some other videos, the production style

hints at the kinds of convergent, user-friendly production techniques that have become more

common (and indeed have enabled) the YouTube era. But it is not perfect (the anachronistic

image is an example of this). As usual, iJustine works for her audience because of her candor,

forthrightness, and enthusiasm. While this video hints at slice of life elements (again, the subject

matter is quite simple and silly), this is clearly a comedy sketch, and not a representation of an

actual life event. Even iJustine's two characters in the piece are strikingly similar in attitude,

differentiated more by emotion and facial expression than characterization. iJustine's voiceover

in the segment where the customer character prepares and eats her burger, is bright and fun, hinting at the absurdity of it all. The sketch doesn't exactly hold water as satire, but it is an interesting exercise in silliness. The clerk is dressed ridiculously, in glasses, pig tails, and an undersized Carl's Jr. hat, while the customer is the now-established iJustine persona. The solitary angle (in many quick cuts of utensils being arranged and the burger being garnished) against a yellow background shows iJustine eating her $6 portabello mushroom burger, which had been introduced earlier in the video in a send-up of a typical fast food advertising pitch. And that pitch is not insignificant; a caption near the end of the video notes what may have been obvious by the start, that the video was sponsored by the restaurant chain. At the end, hinting at the social aspects of the YouTube space, a title appears on screen asking, "How do you eat your burger?" and calling on users to create video responses to the iJustine sketch.

YOUTUBE PRANK CALLS!!! (iJustine, 2010 May 14)

iJustine appears against a plain white background talking about an idea that was sent to her about prank calling some popular YouTube users. In a series of quick cuts on the same angle, she talks about how this is a great idea, except "us YouTubers never answer our phones." But she did get through to some, using other YouTube favorites as proxies. She asks her users to leave comments, and then cuts to a prank. She has a friend named Bradley (who adopts a stereotypical gay persona) call YouTube user Davedays and try to "sell" him a Sports Illustrated subscription. Her male proxy calls Shaycarl, posing (using an Indian accent) as a neighbor whose dog was kicked by Shaycarl's daughter, which Shaycarl mostly laughs off before offering to buy him a new dog. Someone makes a call to another YouTube personality, hiimrawn, asking for someone called the "muffin man" as hiimrawn mostly plays along. "Most of them had no idea it was me, obviously, because it didn't sound like me" with, really, no further explanation. While

this is quite necessarily an audio intensive piece, iJustine shows some savvy in creating some interesting title cards and graphics to accompany the calls, showing a humorous picture (a cartoon muffin man, for example) to illustrate what character was on the line, and using official YouTube photos of those being pranked.

Despite the bare structure, and questionable humor, the video has garnered over 1 million views. It exposes another genre of iJustine video, and provides evidence that she is capable of many production styles, even when grounding herself (and framing her narrative) through a direct face-to-face engagement with her viewers.

WATCH ME DANCE!!!!!!!!!!! (iJustine, 2010 February 23)

In this segment, iJustine addresses responses she's gotten from viewers to a GE-sponsored challenge (the "healthymagination GE Challenge") aimed at making young people more active and healthy. Against a now-familiar white background, we see a single angle with multiple cuts of iJustine directly addressing the camera. She tells her audience that she will perform three of the suggestions about how to stay active. The first suggestion is to walk around with an apple on her head, so the video cuts to a shot of her on a beach trying the feat with limited success. The second suggestion is for her to dance, and so she dances at a crowded outdoor mall in a very silly fashion accompanied by a drum circle of street performers who remain off screen. The final suggestion is to avoid caffeine for a week. It cuts to a one second shot of iJustine sitting on a kitchen floor, dejectedly throwing up her arms in defeat.

This type of video hints at iJustine's direct engagement with her audience (each audience member's comment suggestion is taken by screen shot and superimposed over iJustine's video commentary), as well as her willingness to take her narrative into other arenas, such as sponsored

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initiatives. Her narrative transcends the boundaries of even the very vast virtual space she has carved out for herself.

"I Gotta Feeling" Black Eyed Peas SPOOF (iJustine 2009 July 30)

Song parodies are a very common YouTube template, and this is one many that iJustine has created, and it has accrued around 15 million views to date. The video opens with the first instrumental bars of the Black Eyed Peas hit "I Gotta Feeling" with iJustine in a green screen version of an opulent bedroom, behind a caption that reads, "Are you or someone you know obsessed with updating their profile photos? Then this video is for you." She cuts back and forth between wide shots of herself holding up outfits, and closeups of her preening into the camera, using an oversized makeup brush. Another shot appears apparently from the point of view of a mirror with a stark green couch in the background on a green wall (all created digitally) as she brushes her hair and applies more makeup. The lyric has begun, spoofing the hook of the Black Eyed Peas song ("I've got a feeling that tonight's gonna be a good, good night") with "I've got a feeling that tonight's gonna be a profile pic" in full robotic auto-tune. The implication is that the character in the video (the iJustine persona) is exaggeratedly preparing to update her Facebook profile, and this abbreviated version of the song will fill us in on the details. She sings the lyric over and over, cycling between the established three main shots, each time juggling cosmetics, trying on necklaces, fixing her hair. Finished with the opening chorus, the video cuts to a spinning shot and a surreal faux dolly zoom of some kind of cybernetic city, as iJustine (DSLR camera in hand) prepares for the titular profile pic.

This is an example of iJustine transgressing into a few less common areas, taking those banal details that her narrative is based on, and making them larger than life, through the high-tech nature of the production, and through the venue of song parody, a comedic trope with which

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she is becoming more familiar. The lyrics point to lots inside references about Facebook and

social networking culture, jokes about tagging lots of photos, filling up a memory card (and

heading to a green screened Best Buy to get a new one). The production is dizzying but simple.

Rapid zooms disorient the viewer within the computer generated space: at one point iJustine has

a dialogue with another version of herself, while in another place her moving image is inserted

into a fake Facebook profile page. The characterization is somewhat inconsistent, as at one point

iJustine seems incredulous with the idea of making the profile pic (perhaps the implicit

commentary at the vapid nature of the social media form), while elsewhere she appears excited.

Probably knowing or expecting this video to be quite popular (and because unlike many of her

others it probably took significant time to produce), the final shots are accompanied by web links

to all of iJustine's social media profiles. The video has a lower like to dislike ratio than many of

her other videos, even as it's among her most viewed. Any sense of satire in it is kind of

toothless, as one may come to expect after viewing her catalog. But it again furthers her

popularity (and spurs interest in her narrative) by its seeming mundaneness, with which most of

her viewers can identify.

PASSION FRUIT!!! (iJustine, 2010 February 19)

This short animated piece exemplifies another one of the different forms iJustine's vlog

has taken. It superimposes iJustine's features (mouth and eyes) onto a passion fruit. The

substance of most of the short video, which is meant to promote another user's

(realannoyingorange) project, involves iJustine telling the camera about the pitfalls of being an

armless fruit creature (she mentions that to edit the video she will just "roll around" on the

trackpad) and climaxes with her talking to another character (a tomato) who makes romantic

advances at her. The video features a continuous shot (with a quick pan to the tomato) in chroma key against a fake kitchen backdrop.

This video is illustrative because it features iJustine's typical narrative style disembodied. It also highlights her usual style of humor, and her banal interaction with other characters. But the key is that it takes the vlog into yet another form – animation – and shows that the same familiar tropes and conversations can still exist in a new genre. It also highlights another manner of cross-pollination, in keeping with the prank phone calls of other YouTube users, the sponsored videos, and the tie-ins with public initiatives.

HOT ONLINE DATE! (2011, May 24)

This comedy sketch open on iJustine talking on the phone and is staged with a single camera complete with coverage and an overall professional style. This is a fairly new style for her, as even most of her sketch and parody materials typically still involve direct camera engagement. Also, she is working this time with another actor, a tall red haired man who approaches her (as part of a blind date), and sits down while iJustine is finishing her phone conversation with a friend about that very date. A pop-up caption says "click like if you think this is gonna get awkward :)." As he sits down she describes him to her friend, particularly his appearance: "Red hair…four and a half…like, I would take him home and be like, 'Mom, this is my…*friend.'"* The two share an awkward hug and awkward conversation. He has a dog (his avatar – she hasn't seen his pic before), and she's allergic. The waiter comes over and tells them the restaurant isn't open yet. iJustine has brought glasses of water and place settings from home. She has also brought lots of food: "It's like a picnic, but not a picnic." They make sandwiches at the table. They talk about how neither of them date, so they're both nervous. He cites bad dating advice from "brocode.com," and tells a tragic story about moving west, and how his whole

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family died during the long trek. She calls him out noting that he has cribbed his life details from the Oregon Trail computer game. She packs everything up and leaves as her date eats the last of his potato chips with a knife and fork.

The sketch is quite a bit funnier than most of iJustine's comedy pieces and, while it is a very simple two-character construction and execution, it marks a change in production technique. It's not clear exactly who "directs" this video, unlike many others when iJ's authorial place within her narrative is clearer.

The Narrative of iJustine

While iJustine's videos employ diversity in a number of ways, each of these videos is very much of a piece. Despite the changes in genre and style, they still flow quite naturally out of iJustine's history of lifecasting, her awareness that she was creating a narrative and a character out of her real life persona, and a savvy ability to focus on the banality of everyday life to ever so subtly fill in her story. The multiplicity of style comes from the open nature of the YouTube platform, which, along with lightweight cameras and other user-friendly equipment, has enabled this narrative formation to occur. iJustine has taken stylistic variance and married it to thematic consistency.

iJustine has become something of a multimedia superstar, but within a significantly narrowed definition of *multi*media. Her characterization unfolds subtly over time, and her channel unfolds as a relationship between one world and many texts (Ryan, In press). The world she presents is the world of the character iJustine, the online avatar of Justine Ezarik. Whether making a bowl of instant oatmeal, spoofing a popular song, pitching for an advertiser, or enacting a comedy sketch, iJustine remains a very steady character. She is played with a certain brightness, an outgoing nature, and is distinctly clear, clean, and inoffensive. She practices an

on-camera life that tells a story of an individual's success (reveling in the YouTube space, continually acknowledging the audience, and dealing with matters relating to YouTube in many of her texts), while presenting an avatar for the world to see. It is never fully clear where Justine Ezarik ends and iJustine begins.

This line is further blurred as different video forms that she deploys duplicate the character and expand the world, and her technological use becomes more and more savvy (Lindemann, 2005). She can do more kinds of "stuff" as her fan base, finances, skills, and staff (who are basically unknown and uncredited) expands. As iJustine's performances are presented as something of a one-woman show, she becomes a physical embodiment of the very idea of narrative and characterization. She is an avatar of her own design, and her history of lifelogging and lifecasting supports this. She has used YouTube is used as an apparatus to expand her own mythology, putting out far more output than most other YouTube "stars," but refraining from the kinds of continuous representation. The removal from the surveillance atmosphere of lifecasting allows her greater control of her own persona. As such, she becomes not only the avatar projected onto her video creations, but she becomes a text herself.

iJustine is, of course, subject to the rules and restrictions of the narrative space. Her YouTube channel acts as an external-exploratory space in Ryan's (2006) framework, controlled from outside the space but subject to a limited range of creative options. In addition to YouTube's terms of service, iJustine appears to have self-imposed a narrow range of potential creative behaviors. Most pointedly, she never steps out of the iJustine character. As noted in the video sponsored by Carl's Jr. (iJustine, 2009 June 3), even when playing a different kind of persona (like a fast food clerk), iJustine is still ostensibly "playing" iJustine, the character she has created to appear in all of her works. In her parody music videos and comedy sketches, she

plays a variation on the same persona, recycling familiar obsessions (gaming, social networking) and tropes. And even in unguarded moments, as when she is under anesthesia, she still displays similar preoccupations (and her commentary as shared in captions reads very much like the voice that iJustine has developed.

This dovetails with ideas of space-user interaction within an online platform. iJustine is incredibly capable of making the space work for her, and using the characteristics of YouTube to her advantage in creating cultural products. For example, the multiplexing effect of building channels around distinct (though dubious in their achieved "difference") *brands*: the vlog, the iPhone channel, the gaming channel (where she exists in split-screen with the game that she's playing), and the reviews channel. In any practical sense all of these behaviors are one in the same. But she uses nuances of technology and subject matter to convince an audience there is difference even when each form consists of a primary similarity: iJustine talking to the camera in one context or another. What is the difference between a critique, an opinion, a polished product, or an outtake in the YouTube age? It would take a pretty tight reading of the aesthetic principles involved in order to make the "lesser" forms of these dichotomies *not* function as a form of cultural production.

iJustine has become, through the narrative she has created and through her celebrity (a celetoid in the very sense of Turner's intention), a tool and an instrument of YouTube, working with Vlog University (an initiative launched by YouTube as a "how to" of web video creation) and other initiatives. Even as iJustine is an avatar, she becomes part of the space, absorbed by its changes and machinations. Here the idea of interactive narrative converges on the YouTube space. Because of the vastness of the iJustine oeuvre, a viewer is not likely to engage with every video she creates. So to the extent that a narrative is emerging on this platform, it comes about in

complex ways. That iJustine is presented as a consistent character within a diverse series of textual styles helps to establish her corner of the YouTube landscape as a viable storyspace, and it has made her incredibly successful at navigating the platform.

So as iJustine presents an example of narrative on YouTube, the two other vloggers discussed in this project (Shaycarl and Mr. Chi-City) also function within their own narrative spaces. Similarly, the issues brought up by iJustine are not unique to storytelling; the other components of cultural production, authorship and performance, are significant to her works as well. The next chapter examines what can be learned about cultural production on YouTube through this framework. In it, I will discuss this approach to studying the components of cultural production, and this framework's usefulness for examining the interactions between space and user on YouTube. I want to project what can be learned from these analyses – how this form of interaction, through the inherent set of possibilities that exist on the YouTube platform, enables cultural production.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The three foregoing case studies have discussed three popular YouTube creators in

language that addresses what I have called the component parts of cultural production:

authorship, performance, and narrative. The goal of this project has been to discuss this process

of cultural production on YouTube not only through these component parts, but also in terms of

what they represent within the mechanics of YouTube's produced output. What needs answering

is how the relationship between YouTube's user-creators (discussed by the metaphors of

produsers and nomads) and the space itself (termed as both a smooth space that is undergoing

constant striation and as a platform that establishes a template for creative production)

effectively functions. This relationship is characterized by interactivity (a term that could do with

a bit of unpacking) and, perhaps most notably, possibility. These case studies demonstrate many

of the kinds of creative possibility that YouTube engenders, and they also provide exemplars for

many of YouTube's visual forms, highlights of the kinds of works that vloggers have been able

to produce within this space.

So before dealing more specifically with the implications of interactivity and possibility,

it is worth working toward a summary of what has been assessed so far. The work of textual

analysis on the videos of Shaycarl, Mr. Chi-City, and iJustine reveals that YouTube is a site on

which complex texts are on display, works that are both self-reflexive and self-referential, and

works that reference and are influenced by interactive elements that are not always present

within the moving image itself. We see, for example, Shaycarl meeting and interacting with fans

of his work and presenting them on camera. We see Mr. Chi-City solicit feedback, answer

questions, and take suggestions for future videos from his audience. And we see iJustine take an

instructional and collaborative role with other YouTube users.

These sets of texts also support and bolster the framework of authorship, performance,

and narrative. Shaycarl's videos show how the author function works on the YouTube space, and

paint Shaycarl as something of a documentarian who is aware of his audience and has expanded

his creation to multiple platforms. Moreover, the relentless nature of feedback, the pressure of

daily creation, and the haphazard attention paid to both the substance of what is filmed and how

it is edited renders him as something different the conventional idea of an author; the landscape

of YouTube on which Shaycarl operates does not serve to display an absolute sense of mastery

over the produced work. The textual examples of Mr. Chi-City, though, show the dynamism of

YouTube as a performance space, readily available for the production and display of a carefully

constructed identity. In Chi-City's productions, he wears a specific identity on his sleeve. He is

camera-ready, enthusiastic, preachy, and bounces between representations of African-American

masculinity that by turns reinforces and counters stereotypes. iJustine, for her part, clearly

harnesses the narrative potential of YouTube, creating a world and a character (a heightened

version of her offline self) that is malleable across various visual forms, and responsive to both

the corporate and interactive (user-oriented) infrastructures of YouTube.

This chapter means to expand upon and reckon with these findings. In the sections that

follow, I will address the ways in which the individual components of cultural production are at

once distinctive and inseparable from one another. I will look at how the concepts of produsage

and nomadology operate within this framework of cultural production (and within these

individual cases). I will address, to the extent that textual analysis allows, the motivations for

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production and produsage. I will attempt to unpack and define the nature of interactivity present in these cases, as well as the contours of YouTube's space-user interaction. And I will discuss some of the limitations of this project. I begin, though, with a significant note about what we can learn about vlogging as a cultural form that is significant to the YouTube space.

The Many Shades of Vlogging

I have been discussing the works of Shaycarl, iJustine, and Mr. Chi-City (as they are represented on their personal YouTube channels as video blogs (vlogs), but it is of course evident that many of the videos under analysis are not bound to a particular genre or form. In discussing vlogging, authors (like Gao et al., 2010) have tried to characterize the concept in terms of production cycle (frequent and semi-regular) and visual representation (individual point of view and vocal engagement with the camera). However, it is evident from these three cases that vlogging is not a form that is beholden to such a rigid set of standards. And it may be more useful to allow the individuals under consideration some sense of ownership over vlogging as a concept, while bowing to a somewhat more standardized definition.

Each of the three vloggers examined here self-identifies as such. Shaycarl goes so far as to make something of a catch phrase out of it ("Hey…I'm vlogging here"), while both Chi-City and iJustine use the terms "vlog," "vlogger," or "vlogging" to characterize who they are and what they do (iJustine sometimes also uses the more generic term "YouTuber"). Yet these three personalities produce works that are far different from one another, and diverse in form. iJustine's videos often involve simple forms of direct address that are tied to a specific topic, but she has also dabbled in more sophisticated productions like music parody videos and comedy sketches. Also, she has also incorporated others into her productions, both in front of and behind the camera, as her works have become more complex. Shaycarl has, almost from the beginning

of his work, incorporated his family into an ongoing documentary of domestic life. However, the form of this presentation has been mostly consistent, with new videos added to his channel on a regular basis. But even Shaycarl's output has seen some multiplicity, incorporating high-concept introductory sequences, and increasingly utilizing staged works like a fake Shaytards "behind the scenes" set of parodies. Chi-City provides a complex case for video blogging due to his peculiar engagement with the camera, wherein we see his actions and his point of view but never his face. Chi-City has also frequently broken from that form of second person address, incorporating staged charitable missions that involve unsuspecting participants in addition to other works that remove focus from his daily life in order to offer caution and instruction to other YouTube users.

So while each of these individuals identify as vloggers, they each have a broad definition of what vlogging behavior is. Moreover, they illustrate that vlogging is a form that is perhaps most notable for its malleability. In assessing these three users along with the small literature on vlogging, the only criteria that seem of particular importance for the video blog appear to be a strong central personality whose voice is most clear to the audience, and an output of videos over time where this personality is on display (for YouTube, this is most typically manifest as a user's channel). This means that vlogging is a form that is largely open to self-definition, and removes the form from a genre ghetto comprised only of individuals speaking directly into a camera. While Shaycarl, Chi-City, and iJustine engage the camera quite frequently, they do not always feel a need to do so.

Opening up the definition of vlogging also means that a large portion of non-professional YouTube content falls under its umbrella, which makes discussion of vlogging as a cultural form particularly significant. In addition, centralizing the discussion of cultural production on YouTube around three significant vlogging personalities makes clear the significance of a

framework that addresses authorship, performance, and narrative. In explicating how these vlogs are constructed, it is important to note the significance of these three components, their individual implications, and their relationship to one another.

Authorship, Performance, and Narrative

In this project, I have looked at three sets of YouTube texts and aligned each of them with a component concept within cultural production that speaks to the nature and the import of those texts. Shaycarl was used to address authorship because his tendencies and personal vision of himself as documentarian of his "cool family" come across as particularly curatorial, as an attempt to orchestrate a specific vision of family life, and also works as a novel take on how cultural artifacts are created within YouTube. iJustine was chosen as an exemplar for narrative because of the tenuous relationship between the real life Justine Ezarik and her character, who is consistently constructed across many genres that encompass a kind of "storyworld" (Ryan, In press). And Chi-City, who engages an a series of staged performative acts within his videos, is a useful example for how an individual might both perform and produce an identity within a vlogging space.

These three components give us a useful language with which to discuss the implications of visual texts on YouTube without having to refer to cultural production at its most broad and abstract. These three ideas address different aspects of the experiences of these user-creators – production, representation, and storytelling – and make the discussion of this kind of user experience into a manageable one. However, it is clear from a close reading of each of these sets of texts that these concepts, these components, are certainly not exclusive of one another; they work together.

Authorship on YouTube, as seen in the example of Shaycarl, is highlighted by its complexity. What appears to be a production orchestrated by a specific individual is (especially in this case because of its daily production schedule) unusually beholden to a feedback loop, where discussions of comments on previous videos are often present within the dialogue of new ones, where the details and specificities of production often weave their way into the subject matter, and where the particularities of the assembled work are beholden to randomness and the whims of whenever the camera might be turned on. YouTube supports the notion from Foucault (1984/1969) of author as a function: Shaycarl speaks, but he is not an infallible or even reliable speaker. The author function is part of a discourse of vlogging that determines production styles (malleable as they are), distribution patterns, and feedback.

In vlogging, performance is complex and part of an interactive sphere. The way that Mr. Chi-City presents himself is, aligned with Goffman (1973), specifically tailored for a responsive and flexible YouTube audience. Chi-City never shows his face, so contextual clues as to his speaking manner are hard to discern, but he vocally professes themes related to his African-American experience, his relationship to the landscape of YouTube and his followers, and, especially, his authenticity. He establishes his persona as part of a ritual of YouTube creation and reception, and his performance situates him as a reliable source on a number of issues (romance, YouTube's corporate structure) as well as a charitable individual who has learned many life lessons that he will pay forward to strangers and fans alike. Here we see performance as an clear part of producing a cultural product; the dynamic and engaging performance of someone like Chi-City is key to building an audience, and key to producing resonant works. Performance is significant method for situating a given cultural production within the broader landscape of YouTube.

Narrative within video blogging is also peculiar because a video blog almost never tells a single, coherent story in the same way that other serialized media like television might. iJustine is a useful exemplar because she tells the story of her character, her avatar, through a series of semi-related addresses, musical and comedy performances, advertisements, and cross-promotions with other YouTube users. Justine Ezarik, whose lifecasting prowess made the character iJustine into a recognizable figure, has established a "storyworld" within the interactive landscape of YouTube, wherein the character, and the consistency of the character across forms, becomes the most significant part of the texts she appears in. Through engagement with iJustine across all of the vlog's narrative forms, we get a clear sense of who iJustine is and what she has to offer an audience. Narrative within the vlogging culture is networked, non-linear, and cumulative based on audience commitment.

While each of these three components have specific contours, they also have a great deal of overlap. One inherent hallmark of the vlog as a form is its reliance on a central voice, a central figure. As such, the vlogger most often operates as both author and performer. She is not simply directing action from offscreen; she is curating content within the boundaries of the YouTube space and, while in front of the camera, reacting to circumstances both anticipated and unforeseen, projecting a persona and constructing an identity to offer the audience. We can also note the overlap between the spheres of authorship and narrative. The curatorial function of authoring a cultural product, and the editing and responsiveness to feedback that are specific to this particular cultural form lead to the building of storyworlds, where audiences have a narrative anchor with which to make sense of each text in the series. Similarly, performance and narrative are intertwined in many ways, as the case of iJustine herself attests. The part of the narrative universe wherein audiences establish a connection with the central character is contingent on the

consistency of characterization. This is notable in many of iJustine's comedy sketches, where a character is portrayed (like the fast food clerk, or the woman on a date) that never strays from the boundaries of how iJustine is portrayed throughout all of the other texts. She is always iJustine, and this is due to the influence of narrative and performance upon one another.

Cross-Examination

Because of the uncertain boundaries between the concepts of authorship, performance, and narrative, it is work taking at least a cursory look at a few ways in which each of these ideas manifest themselves in relation to the opposing case studies. We can make some notable observations, for example, about Shaycarl's relationship to narrative and performance. Shaycarl's work relies not only on his personal performance, but that of his wife and children, who accompany him as supporting players in the ongoing series. As Shaycarl has frequently noted that the actual filming of his videos only comprises a few minutes a day, we can presume that each family member is somewhat ready for the camera to be turned on, and ready to perform. Nearly every Shaytards video has a certain heightened energy; Shaycarl is always earnest, playful, and excited, and almost never takes himself or his family experience seriously (except in a rare case like the "We are debt free" radio appearance). His children have become used to the camera's presence, often speaking directly to it, and sometimes even expressing embarrassment. And his wife performs by equal measures as his co-conspirator and his foil. The story of Shaycarl and his family is, like in the case of iJustine, cumulative as each vignette of the family's life is often presented without much connective tissue. Yet here narrative plays out in at least a somewhat serial fashion, as exemplified by the timeliness and frequency of video posting; we may see the Shaytards doing two unrelated activities on two consecutive days, but the regularity helps to situate the viewer within the world that Shaycarl has built.

Mr. Chi-City is easily characterized by his oversized performance, but he is also quite clearly shown as the author of his presentations. In many ways, Chi-City's work is more writerly than other examples of the form. While it is notable that the responsiveness and interactivity of YouTube has had a great influence on Chi-City's identity performance, it can also be said that this same interactivity presents as a manifestation of an author function within his videos. Chi-City is influenced by comments and feedback (and he is quick to reference especially positive forms of feedback when he speaks to the camera), while his performance is often reliant on very specifically staged elements. The performative generosity that Chi-City is prone to displaying is directly related to his function as an author; these are acts that are premeditated as well as performed, and operate at relatively high levels of sophistication, relying not only on performance for performance's sake. He also presents a clear (non-linear, non-serial) narrative related to character consistency; his performative protestations of authenticity and "realness" make him an instantly recognizable character within the storyworld he has developed.

While iJustine is perhaps the most complex and useful narrative example of the three, her narrative is bolstered by the way she functions as author and performer within the YouTube space (and on Justin.tv before that). More than the other two examples, iJustine has become a semi-professional actress with a skill set to match. She performs her character flawlessly, due largely to the experience of around the clock surveillance in which she honed her craft. She is so adept at performing the bubbly, friendly, tech-savvy, and milquetoast character of iJustine that in many of her sketches and parodies she is unable or unwilling to step into a different character. iJustine is also exemplary of the complexity of authorship on YouTube; as her productions become more sophisticated, it is evident that her work is no longer (if it in fact ever was) a one-woman operation, yet credit to other parties becomes sparse. For the viewer, the work that

iJustine produces appears to be exclusively her own. Additionally, iJustine as a creator uses the YouTube landscape to significant advantage, relying on other notable YouTube personalities to appear in her videos, and producing content in accordance with fan suggestions.

Cultural Production and Interactivity

Conceptualizing cultural production on YouTube as a set of three components serves to cover as many bases as possible in terms of what is at play when a product is made and distributed on the platform. This framework is useful in large part because each component has its own set of parameters but bears influence on the other two. It is useful in an application to a form like vlogging because the interactive nature of the form mirrors the interactivity present in each part of the framework.

Here the notion of interactivity is at issue; what appears clear is that on the platform of YouTube, the relationships between users and other users, and between users and the space itself, underscore the fundamental elements of authorship, performance, and narrative. Interactivity is present in authorship as part of a cultural feedback loop in which the user-creator is engaged with his audience in material ways: through soliciting information that will influence future productions, through gathering responses from other online and offline platforms (Facebook, Twitter, the YouTube comment section), and even, as Shaycarl sees on many occasions, getting feedback in person while the production is actually occurring. Performances are beholden to the interactive nature of YouTube in similar ways, as the kinds of identities produced are contingent on many of these same forms of feedback, with the performance molded into a form that is acceptable both to the performer, to the audience, and to the situation. And narrative is reliant on interactivity in a slightly different way, and one that relates both to feedback and to patterns of consumption. That is, because different users may have different

entry points to the world and to the character, the world that is built must be consistent while still being open to feedback, and must be able to overcome its non-linearity.

These three concepts can be laid upon each other, as well as discussed independently of one another, largely because of the specific contours of the YouTube platform, which are notable for their interactivity and the multiplicity of user experience that is present with it. These specific contours help to place the producing individual (whether termed as a character, produser, or nomad) at the center of the cycle of cultural production. Fully conceptualizing that individual, as well as his interaction with the platform, will help to further understand how these processes of cultural production truly work.

Produsage and Nomadology

From this framework it is not difficult to leap to the way in which vlogging might be discussed in a broader conversation about participatory culture. In Chapter 1 and Chapter 2, I discussed several notions from the literature on participatory culture, including optimistic perspectives about the potential of emerging technologies for the growth and accessibility of knowledge and culture. In terms of the role of the individual within digital culture, I pointed to the work of Bruns (2008) on produsage and of Deleuze & Guattari (1987a, 1987b) on nomadology. Both of these individual roles, the produser who is simultaneously creating and consuming information, and the nomad who operates within a free, open, smooth space, are metaphors for actors who negotiate fields of possibility. While Bruns's idea of the produser is specific to the navigation of digital culture, Deleuze & Guattari are discussing a far more theoretically abstract principle. Yet these two conceptualizations are very congruent when extrapolated to a discussion of cultural production; each is defined by what it is able to accomplish within a given set of constraints. The produser and the nomad are each charged with

navigating the smooth space of YouTube, which is constantly undergoing new striations and changes. Each of the three individuals under examination here have availed themselves of YouTube's possibilities in various ways; they have each displayed the characteristics of produsage and nomadism within their cultural productions.

That these conceptualizations of the individual are useful here is a testament again to the interactive nature of the YouTube space. Mr. Chi-City, for example, is quite clearly negotiating the smoothness of YouTube. His lack of adherence to any specific subject matters, his use of vulgar language, his un-serious nature, and his focus on the trivial aspects of daily life show that he is taking clear advantage of the space's lack of a filter. Visually, the channel web page that houses his videos is a predominantly blank canvas; Chi-City has inscribed his personality, his performance, largely into the YouTube space at its smoothest. As discussed above in relation to YouTube's interactivity, Chi-City is a clear produser. His actions as a creator have ramifications across the platform, as he creates videos that are frequently responded to, shared, and discussed. He uses the audience to his advantage, to help him create content (as is the case when he mutilates and deep fries his dismissed parking ticket). At the same time, he is continually responsive to the work of others on YouTube, acting as a self-appointed ambassador for vloggers, and attempting to show how YouTube "really" works. Like Shaycarl and iJustine, Chi-City is embedded into YouTube's participatory culture through his performance, authorship and personal narrative.

iJustine has similarly used the nomad space of YouTube to her advantage, working from scratch to create a mini-empire of YouTube channels dedicated to various subject matters (gaming, reviews) and production styles (iPhone). She has also expanded her brand into web sites, social networking services, and the YouTube channels of other popular personalities,

showing the permeability of the landscape. Her visual presentation is slick and professional, capitalizing on YouTube's increasing customizability. The collaboration between iJustine and other YouTube vloggers within her sphere of influence is significant to an understanding of a participatory culture in the model of Jenkins (2006) or Bruns (2008). It also highlights YouTube as an increasingly cooperative atmosphere even in an age where there is quite a bit of profit to be made (as discussed below). She has parlayed her YouTube fame into an influential role in online and offline culture, using tools at her disposal that become more sophisticated as time goes by: advanced visual effects, slicker editing, and a more eye-catching presentation.

Shaycarl's relation to participatory culture is similar to iJustine's: a constant sense of collaboration and an embrace of the possibility offered by the platform. Shaycarl has similarly expanded into multiple channels and multiple online and offline spaces. In his videos, he often encounters other YouTube personalities and effectively promotes their work. To a small contingent of followers (like the ones who he sometimes encounters during filming), he serves as an aspirational figure, displaying the kinds of works that can be created with little capital, little equipment, and little technological know how. And, notably, the amount of capital, sophistication of equipment, and production knowledge has increased over time. Shaycarl's work embraces the possibility of smooth space, often taking an oppositional or uncompromising stance toward societal mores (violence against children, for example), while also taking the chance to reinforce a particular set of values (Shaycarl's regularly notes his love for his wife and his belief in the importance of family). Also highlighting the spirit of the nomad, Shaycarl's videos are often an exercise in contradiction, as a very professional opening sequence typically gives way to shots with poor construction, poor lighting, and choppy editing. That such an imbalance exists is a testament to the freedom and openness of the YouTube platform.

In their own ways, each of these cases display flaws in media conversations that rely solely on the language of production. Bruns (2008) addresses this in a direct fashion, noting that the capacity to create and to consume is inscribed within the same individual, who uses the technologies at his disposal to create but also to collaborate, and to be mindful of the work and significance of other creators. These analyses bear out the thrust of this thesis. Each of these individuals is charged in some fashion with creating new and original content, but the interactivity associated with the spheres of performance, authorship, and narrative assure that this creation does not occur in a vacuum. Moreover, the emphasis within all three of these spheres that creators place on feedback (soliciting likes, comments, responses, and acting on them) attests to their individual roles as savvy media users. iJustine frequently displays her love of social media, technology (particularly Apple products), and gaming, effectively wearing her media consumption on her sleeve. Shaycarl similarly displays his role in the consumption cycle every time he interacts with another popular YouTube personality in one of his videos. Within vlogging, at least, YouTube shows all the hallmarks of a blurred line between usage and production. Moreover, they all embody the characteristics of freedom and possibility similar to actors operating within smooth space.

Motivation and Striation

Still, what incentive do these individuals have to create and distribute their videos? This is a difficult point to address through textual analysis, but there are certainly a few pieces of evidence that may hint toward an answer. The first point worth noting is an inherent drive for celebrity. The platform of YouTube is like many other sources within participatory culture in its demotic potential (Turner, 2010). For Shaycarl, iJustine, and Mr. Chi-City, a good deal of renown has been gained and, to varying degrees, courted. While all three interact with their

audiences in very direct ways, it is clear that they view a large part of those audiences as followers and as fans. All three of these individuals started out as ordinary people with video equipment, and thanks to the potential of the YouTube platform, have risen to some form of elite status. iJustine and Shaycarl, for example, have been able to secure appearances on television and in film. Even if fame was not the primary motivator for each of these actors, the notoriety they received from their work has likely encouraged them to create more, similar work, and to court ever larger followings.

This question also points to the chief example of striation within this YouTube vlogging landscape: the increasing prevalence of advertising and monetary incentives for YouTube performances. In one of Chi-City's videos, he discusses YouTube "partnerships," wherein certain YouTube performers are supported economically by the site's corporate apparatus in proportion to how many hits those performers can deliver for advertisers. In the same video, Chi-City welcomes the practice but also derides the fact that a large portion of YouTube's highest earners are being buoyed by professional production companies, compromising the amateur authenticity of the platform. When Shaycarl and his family appear on the Dave Ramsey radio show to discuss their escape from debt, it is revealed that Shaycarl is a participant in the ad sharing practice and now makes hundreds of thousands of dollars per year from it. While iJustine shares in the same revenue stream, she also transcends the practice by brokering more traditional advertising agreements, as evidenced by her promotional comedy video for Carl's Jr. restaurants. The rise of advertising and revenue potential for "everyday" YouTube personalities reveals a potential key to both user motivation, and to the changing contours of the space itself. If YouTube is to be conceptualized as a smooth space that is undergoing constant striation, surely the clearest striation is the rise of this economy: It most explicitly takes the nomad space of

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YouTube from a venue of pure expression to a site based on contested amounts of money and power.

Space-User Interaction

The case studies of Shaycarl, Mr. Chi-City, and iJustine support the idea of YouTube as a platform in the vein of Montfort & Bogost (2009). These texts show that, while YouTube is not open to being recoded by individual users, it presents a customizable sphere and a working template for many kinds of cultural productions. This, again, is highlighted by the remarkable interactivity inherent in producing content for the space. All three users described here have developed savvy ways to engage the platform, through organizing their channels, working within the conventions of web video as YouTube has implicitly quantified (the inherent brevity of each video as well as production conventions like second person monologues). iJustine has customized her channels, for example, to highlight the vast expanse of her online work, using the contours of the platform to multiplex a series of channels that tell the story of the character and the world she has created in her videos. A cursory glance at her primary channel's homepage reveals the vast web of iJustine related content that is available both within YouTube and on other corners of the internet, just a click away. Moreover, her homepage has changed and expanded to accommodate the various redesigns of YouTube's channel templates, showing that she is consistently engaged with the platform and its possibilities for housing her various creations.

It is also notable that, with all the possibility that the platform affords, these three users have created spaces for themselves that emphasize consistency. Shaycarl created his Shaytards channel for a specific purpose: to document his weight loss. As that purpose changed to a broader emphasis on Shaycarl as an individual and the daily life of his family, a consistent set of

conventions emerged as well as a renewed dedication to his project's singular goal. While

Shaycarl also produces work that exists outside those parameters, those videos (like the mock

"behind the scenes" series) are housed on a separate channel. The same could be noted about

iJustine, who has created satellite channels dedicated to ever more specific interests. So even

though YouTube's existence as a platform opens up a vast set of possibilities within a

participatory culture, each of these individuals take it upon themselves to organize the (smooth)

space in their own ways.

Just as the user can be constituted in terms of the metaphors of produsage and

nomadology, it is important that a language be elucidated to describe not how the space, or

platform, itself is organized, but also how it actually works. We see this in the way each of these

users have engaged with the space, but is notable what a reading of the space itself reveals in this

context. Drawing from Pickering (1995), technological artifacts are embedded with material

agency, and in YouTube we see how the agency of the space and the user interplay with one

another. The platform itself is continually *working*; changes within the space have direct,

material consequences on the creative works of these users. These changes comprise what we

might also call striations. As advertising has become more integrated into the platform, for

example, each of these users has had reckon with its implications. Mr. Chi-City has described his

discomfort with the way in which financial motivations have impacted YouTube's authenticity,

while a user like iJustine has no such compunctions – she has been motivated by YouTube's

machinations to embed advertising into her work (both for corporate entities and for various

YouTube-related initiatives) in ever more expansive ways.

We also see the platform act upon its users in other ways. As YouTube has introduced

more modes of feedback (liking, sharing, commenting, responding), user-creators have shown an

increased tendency to explicitly solicit this kind of feedback, while also employing those pleas in ways that are specific to the platform. Users ask for feedback through text on their channel's homepage, through direct address within a video itself, or through pop-up annotations and links that appear on screen while the audience watches a given video. Whenever YouTube introduces a new phenomenon (like those annotations), users are quick to employ it for their own promotional purposes. As these users adapt to the changes in the architecture of YouTube, there are material consequences that manifest themselves in the cultural productions: Chi-City answering viewer questions that appear in the comments section, iJustine's frequent "Ask iJustine" videos, Shaycarl's constant references to the support of his fans. The set of possibilities that the platform enables directly impact the substance of creative works, and as those possibilities change, the topics addressed by vloggers are similarly altered.

So much of this relationship between space and user, the processes of accommodation and resistance, is easily tied to the notion of YouTube as a site of participatory culture. More pointedly, the constant interplay between the platform and the produsers that engage with it is displayed within the spheres of authorship, performance, and narrative. The platform itself enables all three. It acts as a locus for the operation of an author function, where users like iJustine, Shaycarl, and Mr. Chi-City can negotiate the platform to create works that conform to the contours and possibilities of the space. It allows for a dynamic set of performances that are tailored to the space and to the kinds of audiences who are free to offer a consistent feedback loop, and it permits the vlog to expand and adapt as a moving image form. It also allows users to customize creative and non-linear narratives, inscribed through the functions of a central character, that emerge through a multiplicity of forms.

Yet for all that the platform enables, the cultural production of its users is not limited to the platform itself. As we see in these cases, users do not limit their creative acts to YouTube, whether that means iJustine's work as lifecaster coloring her YouTube experience, or the actions of all three in terms of engaging with fans and followers on social networks like Twitter and Facebook. Moreover, the platform is still at work even when the users are not directly working with it. Mr. Chi-City, for example, has been largely absent from YouTube over the course of the past two years. Yet he leaves behind material traces that continue as dynamic and malleable cultural products. The visual representation of his YouTube channel may change without his direct action, even as the videos he has produced remain just as he left them. And more viewers find his videos all the time, drawn in from old content embedded throughout the web, or by a renewed sense of nostalgia for the time when Chi-City was a vital (and viral) figure on the platform. The space, imbued with its own sense of agency, is working even when human agents are not directly using it.

Limitations and Future Study

As noted in the introduction, this project is based on a specific, though influential, aspect of the YouTube experience. It does not address other YouTube or web video forms that exist outside the realm of vlogging (even as it is broadly defined here), such as cultural remixing, music video, home video, citizen journalism, or professionally produced content like feature films and web series. It also does not deal, except in the narrow parameters of the way interactivity manifests itself within cultural productions, with the social networking apparatus of the YouTube space. Additionally, the case studies that have been chosen all involve popular YouTube personalities, so the object of study here is centered away from a large portion of the platform's content, which consists of videos that are seldom seen.

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Because of the narrow focus, this analysis is also ill equipped to comment much on YouTube's relationship with outside media industries, except as far as financial motivations through partnerships and ad sharing relate to the experience of popular vloggers. This means that ideas about YouTube's influence on the industries of film and television, its impact on intellectual property, and its relationship with other web video platforms fall outside the scope of this project.

A larger issue in relation to this project's methodology arises from the choice of these three sets of texts from these three personalities. As discussed at the outset, I have chosen these personalities, and these texts, to act as exemplars for cultural production within the apparatus of vlogging on YouTube. As such, this is not a generalizable work, and other case studies to this effect are encouraged in order to further test the benefits of this framework in discussing how cultural production operates on the space. Further, the method of textual analysis employed here is most ill equipped to address issues of motivation and the specificities of user-level interaction with the platform. Future study should pair textual readings with a more ethnographic approach, reading interviews with user-creators against the elements that are present in the text. A set of questions posed to popular YouTube personalities that address issues of motivation and response in relation to the key components of authorship, narrative, and performance would be incredibly useful in generating a nuanced perspective on how these produsers interact with the space (and vice versa).

Implications

If there is one dominant concept that emerges from this analysis of YouTube vlog personalities, it is an overwhelming sense of cultural possibility. The nature of the interaction between vloggers and the YouTube space supports an optimistic position on the cultural role of

the technology itself. Even within the narrow scope of the vlogging community, we can see that YouTube presents a useful space that has altered narrative and productive form. And, more than that, the pace is ever changing; it continues to present new modes of interactivity even as it continues to establish deeper ties to the various realms of professional media.

We can also see that a textual analysis of various YouTube presentations and visual texts can enhance our understanding of the relationship between the space and its users. There are clear sites of intersection wherein the contours of the platform influence on-screen content. Yet through this YouTube emerges as a cultural force, embedded with its own sense of material agency. The three case studies in this project show how users are able to navigate the space for their own purposes while adapting to frequent and continual changes to the space itself. While close readings alone are not totally sufficient in terms of discerning the full scope of the individual agents' experience with YouTube, they are useful for conceptualizing the significance of these intersections.

What we can say about cultural production on YouTube from these analyses is that working as a popular personality on the space (the act of vlogging) is both a *productive* act and a *produsage* act. The navigation of a space on which form is not explicitly constricted, and on which feedback is immediate and articulated in multiple online and offline ways, is inseparable from the work of participatory culture. These individuals are constantly aware of not only what the space is doing, but of what other users are doing, tailoring their works and performances to suit the concerns of both. As exemplified by these vloggers, the current crop of YouTube users are creating the cultural script by which the platform may be used to define processes of authorship, narrative, and performance within web video. Shaycarl, iJustine, and Mr. Chi-City operate in a heavily participatory realm that is a product of YouTube's "broadcast yourself"

mentality. They use the platform to produce versions of themselves that are increasingly sophisticated, consistent, and customizable. They reveal YouTube as a valuable site for cultural practice, which should continue to be both accessible and open to creative possibility for some time to come.

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