Making Sense of Youtube

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Abstract

Drawing on the literature of digital culture and new media studies the author offers a statement of original intent: the theorization of Youtube. Using broad strokes the paper conceptualizes Youtube through a number of prisms: Architecture, Use, and Impact along with developing a Genre analysis of its stories. Extended endnotes provide examples and additional theoretical embedding.

Introduction

This essay began with a simple question: How does one make sense of Youtube? There is no reliable "sample" of videos on Youtube; no easily identifiable ways to determine it's dominant thematics; no way to evaluate "quality"; no benchmarks for establishment of impact (beyond the questionable number of times a video has been watched), no seminal literature. For all purposes, it appears to be a new kind of media animal with rules that are weekly emergent. It challenges traditional relations between consumer and creator (*Anybody* can upload a video on Youtube) and begs the evaluative question—Who does Youtube serve?

This essay emerged from a five-year project[i] and offers a theory for deconstructing the textual universe of Youtube videos and the participatory culture that surrounds each video. It draws sustenance from an elemental truth—that storytelling is at the heart of all media. As the sociologist David Silverman puts it, "all we have are stories. Some come from other people, some from us. What matters is to understand how and where the stories are produced, what sort of stories they are, and how we can put them to intelligent use in theorizing about social life" (1998: 111).

Locating Youtube

So what is Youtube? Youtube may be many things--a platform, an archive, a library, a laboratory, a medium (Snickar & Vonderau, 2009, 13). It may be a form of "complex parasitical media" (Mitchem, 2008) or "networked individualism" (Haythornthwaite & Wellman, 2002, 34) but I see it as a modern-day bard (Hartley, 2009), a storyteller for the digital age (Ryan, 2006), a provider of modern day myths (Mosco, 2005) all rolled into one. It needs to be emphasized that the stories *on* Youtube cannot be separated from the story *of* Youtube. From the mythology of its birth, to its acquisition by Google, to it being the poster child (and first destination) for consumer generated content. I suggest that we see Youtube as much more than a website it is a key element in the way we think about our online experience and (shared) digital culture. As Uricchio puts it, "Youtube stands as an important site for cultural aggregation…the site as a totality where variously sized videos, commentaries, tools, tracking devices and logics of heirarchization all combine into a dynamic seamless whole" (2009, 24) While the industry narrative on Youtube grows daily with news coverage about the latest applications, and self-help books on the subject (Lastufka and Dean, 2008; Miller, 2007; Jarboe and Reider, 2009), the

academic literature on the subject is just emerging (Burgess and Green, 2009; Snickars and Vonderau, 2009; Lovnick and Niederer, 2008;Lange, 2007, and Strangelove, 2010). Whose stories are being told on Youtube? Burgess and Green's (2009) survey of video sources on Youtube found that user generated videos made up a little more than half of all videos in their sample. Their study while an important first step does not address issues of content a question that only a content analysis of all Youtube videos can answer (or a reliable sample of these videos). In the absence of such a study, another way to approach this question is to examine a sample of the most popular videos every week and see what thematic might connect them. The author's study found that the most commonly occurring videos (especially those that are most viewed, most favorited, most responded, most discussed) could be most broadly categorized as dealing with "youth/popular culture." Even the most casual user of Youtube will recognize that many videos reflect popular culture elements of interest to young people. In other words, "youth" in all its mediated complexity is *the* recurring element of stories on Youtube. [ii]What is a "story" on Youtube? It depends on *how* you ask the question and the author asked it a number of ways focusing on the video, the comments, the participatory culture surrounding each

video—in other words, the way the entire network *behaves.* In this sense, the working of Youtube echoes previous work on the structure of digital networks and media ecology (Levinson, 1999, 2009, Lovnick, 2008, Uricchio, 2008), how they are used (Hess, 2009, Burgess and Green, 2009, Thiel, 2008), how they construct stories (Deuze, 2006; Burgess, 2008, Richard, 2008, Kinder, 2008, Sherman, 2008, Strangelove, 2010) and how such stories are received or have an impact (Lange, 2008, Rheingold, 2000).

Mapping Youtube: Architecture, Use, Impact

The Architecture of Youtube:

What is the "Architecture of Youtube?"Simply put, it is a specific kind of web text dictated by the visual experience of a Youtube page, which has three primary constituents the primary video that dominates the spatial organization of the page, the ancillary videos that appear alongside functioning like a visual sidebar and the comments that scroll beneath. Informed by Schaefer (2009) analysis of Youtube as a hybrid information management system, I suggest that each of these elements have a specific function that is simultaneously textual and discursive. I briefly discuss each of these. The first element (the primary video) is determined by what I call its "Foundationality" followed by the second element (the surrounding videos) which is determined by "Referentiality" and finally the sprawling comments by a "Participatory" function. Foundationality refers to the video's internal constitution, whether it is about a person or event or a phenomenon. Each video works within specific parameters of semantic organization. A sports clip about a certain player is about that player and that sport, a parody video about I-phone's is about I-phones, a dog barking is about just that—a dog barking. This quality—admittedly essentialist in its framing—refers to the primary or foundational relevance of this video, its calling out to the viewer a specific set of rhetorical or semantic referents that the video is shot through with. This foundational quality of the video is unwavering. It needs to be conceptually separated from thematics or style (or what I will later describe as Genre) because what is at the heart of this video is a process of singular referencing that often underpins how Youtube is used. People use it to search for a place, a person, an experience or a How-to (such as a guitar lesson). It is this process; one fundamentally determined by use that structures the foundational nature of this text. Needless to add, this signals an important point about Youtube. The categorizations offered here (architecture, use, impact) are operational points of entry into understanding Youtube. It is their ready

admixture in reality that lends them coherence. "Referentiality" refers to the discursive referents that a Youtube video calls out to, through the parallel texts that (literally) run alongside it. These are often linked semantically, through a process of reiteration. To use the example above, these may be other videos about that player or about other players in that sports or other I-phone parodies or other dogs barking or doing something similar. What is central to understanding "referentiality" is a process of "chaining" out of its foundational narrative a process that is—by and large--discursively limited to a set of referents that is determined by the semantic qualities of the original text. Finally, "participatory" elements can be narrowly engaged with by looking at the comments that accompany each video. These comments provide context, commentary and interpretation to the foundational text and as one clicks through the referential texts to those videos as well. Let me hasten to add that this is an operational definition of "participatory," rather than an empirical one. One can easily argue that *all* of Youtube is participatory culture (from original videos to parodies to comments, blogs etc). Everything is about the willing, engaged absorption in the cultural work of digital/social media. But such a position does not serve the analyst well, missing out, I suggest, on the specific trajectories of use and impact that I will

shortly discuss. There are a number of other architectural features that exist alongside this basic organizational rubric of an individual Youtube page. The first deals with the properties that allow a specific Youtube video to "go viral". This is indeed how most viewers have come to understand Youtube through a link sent by a friend or a posting on a Facebook page or as a topic of conversation at a party. There are two such architectural properties that can be termed "episodic" and "formative." I informally explain them as "Storms" (episodic) and "Clouds" (formative). The episodic video goes viral immediately, there is a viral "storm" that takes place as it quickly spreads from viewer to viewer, website to website, drowning out the daily viral chatter as it gets its "fifteen minutes of fame" (or whatever is the viral equivalent). The formative video goes viral slowly, much like a cloud gathering steam on a hot summer day, it's impact takes shape over months until it is a thundercloud, towering over other videos that pop up and then die down. The two categories are not mutually exclusive, often a video may work up a small storm but then die down, until it's reused in another context and eventually becomes a cloud. The final architectural feature that characterizes Youtube is what can be termed "Digital Flow." Much like television flow where commercials, stories and news accounts flow into/across each other, Youtube videos

share an architectural similarity they are short, readily accessible and most importantly, part of the *same* visual experience appearing alongside the main video, but exchanging places with them if the viewer was to click on any one of them. In sum, this interchangeable quality and structural mutability is what distinguishes Youtube from television.[iii]

Youtube Use: I would like to offer an important pedagogical point of entry around the use of Youtube. Watching Youtube is fundamentally different from watching television or film: *You make time to watch television or film, you watch Youtube when you have little time*. For college students, the detritus of daily life—the complex mix of the weighty (college payments) and mundane (a hangover) are part of understanding the role of Youtube. While some viewers may diligently "tune in" to Youtube daily, for the large majority, Youtube is consumed as one element of a heavy media diet. In other words, Youtube use like much of digital life is a postmodern experience—its constitutive element being its fragmentation—even as certain "structural" characteristics can be identified. I turn to a discussion of two of these (Digital Play, Produsage)

Digital Play, refers to a certain kind of narrative action, *playing* the medium, rather than watching it. While this is a defining feature of video games, I would

like to suggest that it is also central to how people use Youtube. All Youtube videos are "deep" texts bottomless in their multiple referents (links) and theoretically, one could spend one's life, clicking through every link that Youtube allows where the user "plays" with the menu on the right side, clicking through an infinite number of videos, dozens of "directors" as she weighs all the alternatives before her. Patience is not an option in this game if the video is poor, the sound off, and the context problematic, it is time to play something else. The key element in all of these acts is consumption itself the taking in of a mediated experience. Youtube is used similarly, the videos quickly viewed and paused halfway if they show little narrative promise; the interesting one's bookmarked or linked through online communities and blogs. The key idea is again consumption of other stories, places and experiences. [iv]

Produsage: Youtube "use" is not passive or one-way. Like other social media, Youtube is used to post one's own videos, take parts of other video, and recast the terms of the discussion through comments and posts and so forth. The concept of "produser" or "produsage" (Bruns, 2008) captures this perfectly, where the traditional distinction between "user" and "producer" is reworked- where individuals are simultaneously using and producing rather than in the traditional mass-mediated model of consumption,

where users and producers were kept in diacritically opposite institutional and viewing spaces.

You tube Impact

How does one assess the "impact" of a Youtube video? Mass communication scholarship dealing with issues of impact (effects research, reception analysis, media imperialism) have all had a similar point of entry the singularity of the text (TV, film, Newspaper) and its effects on an audience, constituted either monolithically (such as "German") or through its institutionally (and commercially driven) prescribed categories (women between 18 and 45; Children; Hispanic adults and so forth). Built into this relationship was certain *fixity of relationships* across three interrelated contexts: Content, interaction and subjectivity. In terms of content there was assumption about the internal constitutiveness of texts (a sit-com had fixed commercial breaks; Dramas were an hour long; Westerns has little comedy and so on). Interaction was typically arrayed along lines of heavy or little impact, drawing on a specific language developed in different traditions (such as media effects or cultural studies). Subjectivity (or agency) was typically arrayed along lines prescribed through prior/existing categories of personal constitution (race, gender, class, sexuality) and through investment in the culture of media itself (in terms/categories of

organization such as interpretative communities, fandom, and of course, "audience"). Youtube disturbs many of these relationships. The content of a text may draw on a number of points of origin or none at all; Interaction is rarely dyadic through comments, blogs and response videos, an interactive plurality is put into play a process that in some cases may be in the hundreds (such as responses to videos about online games or a clip from a master text like Star Wars). Subjectivity does not neatly coalesce into containers that traditional media analysis offers those around identity politics and commercially fixed categories of reception.

In sum, what is needed is less a retrofitting of older approaches as the imagination of a new language that draws on older approaches but tries to develop a language that captures some of the complexity that Youtube offers. In that spirit, I want to offer five concepts that help think through issues of impact: "Digital Mobility," "Digital Polysemy," "Participatory Closure," "Discursive Thread" and "Contextual Chaining." Digital Mobility: Digital Mobility refers to the use of a Youtube video by other users. Parts of a video will be stripped, recast and molded into another video, with little sense of ownership, both personal and sociological. So you may have a clip from Pokemon appearing in a satire about George Bush or a guitar solo from an

eight year old in Taiwan animating a cartoon made in Iceland. These examples can be multiplied a hundred times—a process that I am suggesting is marked by discursive mobility, without any (necessary) attention to points of cultural origin or narrative fidelity. This has important implications for thinking through issues of impact—as it calls into question issues of (singular) origin, internal coherence and prior assumption by audiences. Simply put, its difficult to assess/ assume points of entry for audiences. To do this one has to look at the comments and the participatory culture around each video (which is the basis for the other concepts outlined below). Digital Polysemy refers to the gargantuan number of video stories that Youtube hosts on its site—to *the sheer volume of discourse* that is produced every minute on-line *across* a range of empirical, thematic, textual, and contextual realms. When I began teaching television criticism in the mid-90's, I would bring in a copy of TV guide, so that students could get their arms around all that TV has to offer on any given day or time slot. From this large but still comprehensible list, a beginning point for analysis could be assumed. Emergent patterns around representations of identity and cultural politics could be mapped for each hour that the TV was on in the American home. Such a task is inconceivable for Youtube it inherently polysemic in its textuality ranging

across a mediated universe that is only haltingly captured in the categories that the site uses; no genre analysis of Youtube videos can be complete; no narrative formula captures more than a handful of its videos; no list of "directors" can fully capture the idea of authorship (let alone "auteurship) on Youtube. This semantic madness is self-organizing through the digital sorting mechanisms (like postings, lists, dig it, delicious), an order of preferred texts emerges. In sum, questions of impact return to those of use because at its heart, Youtube is a creature of how it is used which is polysemic as well. People use it to watch personal videos, TV bloopers, and news clips to name just three. People use it reflexively as open-ended texts to which they add their (video) reactions. People use it across contexts and referents the most common ones likely being those of personal publicity/expression, entertainment, fandom and the (video) flavor of the moment. Discursive Thread, Contextual Chaining and Participatory Closure:

While digital polysemy and mobility are necessarily foregrounded it is important to not equate such plentitude with endless diversity or a active public sphere. To this end, I offer the three specific concepts identified above that can provide a more nuanced understanding of the impact of Youtube. Like other Social Media, the impact of Youtube is animated by a tension

between polysemy and restrictive (close-ended, discursive) coding and reception. This tension can be assessed by tracking the themes that each video spawns across three interrelated sites—the content of the original video (which may includes references to prior "original" videos); the immediate participatory culture (which includes response videos, accompanying strip videos, and comments and the contextual participatory culture (which includes blogs, related websites, wiki pages, mainstream media coverage and so forth). The undertaking of such a thematic analysis reveals the cultural/ideological workings of Youtube videos which I have tried to describe with a formal language. "Discursive thread" refers to the themes that *narrowly* animate a specific video. Drawing on the content of the video or its *immediate* context they distribute virally a specific set of meanings or "threads" that together constitute a mini-discourse around that video. In addition to distributing this narrow set of themes the video and its surrounding participatory culture (both immediate and contextual) also "chains out" other themes that are *relationally* connected to the video (as opposed to immediate). This process is termed "Contextual Chaining" where the original video is a beginning point for a wider process of reception. The analogy that comes to mind is throwing pebble into a pond---the ensuing rings appear

disconnected but are necessarily tied to the beginning, the moment of (discursive) impact that the pebble/original video represents.

Finally, "Participatory Closure" refers to the findings of a thematic analysis of a video and its participatory culture that shows the emergence of a "preferred" reading over others. In other words, the participatory culture "closes" off (through either extended or abbreviated negotiation with the video) alternate (or vigorously polysemic) interpretation of the video. In this sense participatory closure represents a restrictive discursive role in the work of Social Media.

Youtube Stories: Genre Analysis

What are the "stories" of Youtube? The stories of Youtube one may surmise are limitless but even the most causal of viewers will begin to see patterns in the most popular videos—people acting silly, a mishap by a celebrity, inadvertent fame through inadvertent actions and so on. What I offer here is *one* typology for addressing the bewildering range of videos by drawing on a tried and trusted method of identifying stable forms of storytelling Genre Analysis.

A beginning point for a Genre analysis of Youtube is to distinguish Internet genres from those of mainstream media like Television and Films. While hybridity and new arrangements of visual/semantic elements are on occasion undertaken in more established media, the commercial

imperatives (along with audience tastes) signals that genres remain relatively stable—in fact it is their (relative) stability that allows for scholars to study them over time and context (especially around concerns of identity politics). This does not hold true for the Internet. At the heart of the problem is the question of definition: "Internet genres have been volatile, they have proliferated, they have differentiated into multiple subspecies. Our understanding of genre as a recurring, typified, reproducible, stabilized enough symbolic action requires that it resist change" (Miller & Shepard, 2009, 263). [v] Drawing on the pioneering work of Giltrow & Stein (2009), Ashkehave & Nielsen (2005), Crowston & Williams (2000), Deuze (2006), Renzi (2008), Boler (2008) I offer the following definition of Youtube Genres and then unpack it in the rest of this section: Youtube Genres are categories of viral affordance working through the process of highlighting and celebratory creativity to generate (relative stable) mimetic tactics of representation. Now to define the key terms used here—viral affordance, highlighting, celebratory creativity and mimetic tactics.

Affordance: Miller and Shepard (2009) offer the concept of "affordances" as a way to understand Internet genres. Affordances they suggest represent the relation or interaction between media texts and their environment, which online include linking, instant distribution, indexing and searching, and above all interactivity. These affordances are "directional", they make "some forms of communicative interaction possible…leading us to engage in or attempt certain kinds of rhetorical actions rather than others" (28). I see such "affordances" working across the terrain of storytelling on Youtube, allowing for certain kinds of stories—the Genres offered here—to be generated.

Highlighting: Deuze (2006) offers a schemata for understanding digital culture. He suggests that all digital texts have elements of participation, remediation and bricolage. I extend this schema by identifying a process that underlies all of these elements—what I term highlighting. One of the recurring features of Youtube is the posting of the most important parts of a TV show, a personal video, a movie—in other words a media event or text. While it is based on an editing function (the stripping out of the most important moment of a show and posting it on Youtube), it is also a key pedagogical device through which Youtube distills, recasts and formalizes how other mass media are consumed. Highlighting extends to the recording of daily life in its most funny or important moments. In other words, the "highlight video" that has become synonymous with television shows like ESPN sports center has become generalized as a wider semantic category for

understanding Youtube experience. Whether it is the touchdown run or falling down the steps, what orients the viewer is *the act of being highlighted*.

Celebratory Creativity: One can make the argument that all of Youtube is governed by a simple principal: Fame. As Losh (2008) puts it, "the information architecture of Youtube is one that foregrounds celebrity and spectacle by design, even as it deploys a rhetoric of response, comment and community" (111). It is safe to assume that it is the *idea* of celebrity, of being/becoming famous that is an important element of why people put up their videos—a process referred variously as "nichecasting," "narrowcasting" (Cook, 2008) or "egocasting" (Christine Rosen quoted in Miller & Shepard, 2009). Whatever term one chooses, what centers it is an attitude, a sense of anticipation in the posting of one's videos – the indeterminate nature of the medium can make *anyone* a star. I call this process "celebratory creativity."[vi]

   Mimetic tactics: At the end of the day, a key question around generic stability has to be asked of all youtube "stories"— what are they *mainly* about? While smacking of reductionism this is an entirely legitimate exercise—each Youtube video, I suggest, is a *mimetic tactic*. Mimetic refers to two interrelated processes—the first a technical process by which a digital file or hyperlink (with its contents in the case of

Youtube almost always a video) spreads rapidly through the Internet through email, blogs, social media, forums etc. The second is its *discursive energy*, or what Renzi (2008) calls a "tactic." Drawing on the work of Garcia and Lovnick (1997) she uses it in the context of media of crises, criticism and opposition inclusive of a reading of how such media tactics work in the "mutual relation between systems of truth and modalities of power" (Renzi, 2008,73). I extend this in the context of Youtube to the use of such videos as *tactics of representation (either original or participatory)*, around a dizzying range of contexts---obesity, childhood, race relations, sexuality, presidential politics, performativity (music, dance, film) to name just a few.

Using the panoply of concepts identified above, the following genres have been identified by the author: The Phenom, The Short, The Mirror, The Morph, The Witness, The Word and The Experiment. What follows is a thumbnail sketch of each Genre with thumnail theorization offered in the Endnotes.

The Phenom (short for the Phenomenon) has as its defining characteristic a vast viral impact.[vii] In each case, the thematic, stylistic or narrative treatment of the subject is less important as its sheer discursive import—it is watched by millions. It is returned to as part of the collective memory of Youtube,

listed in its all-time favorites, benchmarked in the most viewed, inserted into personal WebPages, and referenced in mainstream media discourse. In other words, the video becomes part of the ongoing narrative of Youtube as a new form of mediated experience. To put this differently, these videos become the language through which Youtube becomes Youtube. Equally important, these videos display discursive mutability on Youtube through a continually expansive process of imitation and remixing. Such reflexivity—a defining postmodern value—has many variants for The Phenom, which includes a directly iterative style (through exact rendition), a reflexive (interpretative) style and a critical style (through satire).[viii]

The Short is simply what it suggests—a short film—with some differences.[ix] The Short in film culture is typically defined as a short film that follows the narrative conventions and dramatic possibilities that an abbreviated narrative offers—a focus on characters rather than complex events, on the personal as opposed to the historical or sociological. Youtube teems with such narratives, including an "official" category in its annual awards. These films typically follow many of the same structural and discursive trajectories of short films in mainstream circles (notably short film festivals) but also offer new ways to organize storytelling. A popular and recurring video on Youtube is what can be called The Mirror—the posing, placement and recording of the self over time, with the central idea of keeping a public memory of personal change (and continuity) available on-line. While video diaries do some of this, it is present in its most segmented form in the way that people have kept still picture diaries of their faces. [x]

The Morph is a genre on Youtube that recasts a common editing function (available on most software) into a defining tactic of storytelling. It involves "morphing" different images—typically those of the human face or body. Properly delineated from the Mirror in its undertaking of a fundamentally different rhetorical action—one of manipulation rather than a record of the self. [xi]

The Witness refers to the intersection of mobile video technologies with concerns of reportage—commonly referred to as I-Witness News. Properly delineated from other more selective, random and often trivial recordings of daily life, I theorize the Witness as a rhetorical tactic grounded in empiricism and functioning within the discourse of "Journalism." It is an engagement with both subjectivity and reality—developing its own language but also being cast into the existing frameworks of mainstream visual journalism.[xii]The Word is a Youtube genre where there is little textual commonality across different

examples of the genre, rather the commonality comes from the singular resonance of a set of words (phrases, song titles, conversations) across different online realms (videos, blogs, forums) and eventually into the parlance of popular culture.[xiii]

The Experiment offers examples of exactly what its title suggests—an experiment using a range of contexts science, entertainment, sports, performativity and the odd. Mobilized in a dazzling array of ways, the experiment has became a staple of Youtube, a digital way of experiencing the combination of elements, substances, objects arranged in visually compelling way—where a key element is the sheer fun of experimentation—and its consumption from afar and one one's terms. [xiv]

Notes:

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[i] This paper draws on the author's recent book, *Reading Youtube: The Critical Viewers Guide* (Peter Lang, September, 2011). Some of the theoretical material presented in this essay was first developed for the book and is being reproduced by permission of Peter Lang publishers. The book is based on a student digital literacy project over five years involving collection of viral videos and their participatory culture.

[ii] I offer two related observations about digital culture and its roots in youth culture. One, I suggest we see the "work" of making videos (typically undertaken by young people) as a form

of citizenship through popular means (Mossberger, Tolbert & McNeal, 2007; Ouellette and Hay, 2008). This is often a contradictory process that *works in the divide* between popular accounts of "generation digital" as either bold trailblazers or innocent victims (Montgomery, 2007) and fundamentally informed by their identities, their attempts at self-definition through digital means (again working in the space between mainstream media narratives and viral ones) and above all their politics of location (Buckingham, 2007). Two, drawing on the idea that cultural workers are firmly placed in a *popular* practice of media education (Giroux, 1992), I suggest we see youth digital labor as fundamentally constituted by its *attitude*. By attitude I mean precisely what the term reflects— an attitude towards work—manifest in both in the institutional rhetoric of Youtube ("Broadcast Yourself") and in the *practices of participation*[ii] (creating, posting, critiquing, remixing). It is "an attitude, not a technology" (blogger Ian Davis quoted in Lovnick, 2007), an attitude that is reinforced by its status as media outsiders or as Lovnick puts it, "the creative under class, the virtual intelligentsia, the precariat, the multitude that seeks to professionalize its social position as new media workers" (Ibid). Additionally, we may surmise that the labor that produces Youtube is free in an emotional sense, it is *freely given*. More structurally, Youtube presents not just a more efficient and creative means by which individuals can connect and create but also a movement towards a change in the process of storytelling. This is a process that mirrors the wider problematic between knowledge and new media discussed by Han (2010) who sees this

process as reflexive, disjunctive and non-linear (pp. 200-213).

iii It is important to note that such flow reworks both the equation between source and receiver and the content of the message. As Manovich puts it 'we see new kinds of communication where content, opinion and conversation often cannot be clearly separated" (2008, 40). He adds that such conversation can take place through text or images for example responding to a video with a new video (ibid, 41)

iv One possible term to define this is "Catalog Culture" (I would like to thank my colleague James Biddle for coining this term and allowing me to use it). Watching Youtube is akin to scanning and sorting through a magazine catalog. When one is flipping through a magazine catalog, the stories, advertisements and images are skimmed through, attention stops briefly on one or more items. Its defining characteristic is a partial—and somewhat unfocused consumption. If something piques one's interest, the page is turned over at the corner and then returned to at a later time.

v Miller & Shepard (2009) put this in the context of blogs, "the forms and features of the blog that had initially fused around the unfolding display of personal identity were rapidly put to (numerous other uses)…with a rapidity equal to that of their intitial adoption. Blogs become not a single discursive phenomenon but a multiplicity" (263). In a similar vein Burgess and Green (2009) argue that Youtube is a "particularly unstable object of study marked by dynamic change, a diversity of content and a similar quotidian frequency or everydayness"(6).

vi "Celebratory creativity" is an extension of what Jean Burgess calls "vernacular creativity." In an interview with Henry Jenkins she offers the following definition of vernacular creativity: "I use the concept to talk about everyday creative practices like storytelling, family photographing, scrap booking, journaling and so on that pre-exist the digital age and yet are co-evolving with digital technologies and networks in really interesting ways. So the documentation of everyday life and the public sharing of that documentation, as in sharing photos on Flickr, or autobiographical blogging; these are forms of vernacular creativity, remediated in digital contexts. These are also cultural practices that perhaps we don't normally think of as creative, because we've become so used to thinking of creativity as a special property of genius-like individuals, rather than as a general human -- some would say -- evolutionary process…Vernacular creativity is ordinary. (http://henryjenkins.org/2007/10/vernacular_cretivity_an_inter.html. Accessed March 8, 2009). See also Hauser (1999) and Hess (2007).

vii If there is a word that has introduced Youtube into popular consciousness then it must be "phenomena"---as in Youtube phenomena (or what I refer to as "Phenom"). News accounts, blogs, tweets, email, forwarded links and just plain word of mouth tell us about the latest viral star, the phenom of the day or week.

The *language* of celebrity culture online shares important characteristics with fame in mainstream culture—the manufacturing of self (Adler and Adler, 1989) the emergence of a "star" system (Dyer, 1998), the manufacturing of pseudo events (Boorstein, 1962) and the centering of entertainment (Glynn, 2000).

However, there are important differences that need to be noted as we develop a language for understanding on-line celebrity.

First, online celebrities does not develop through the force of institutional authority (press agents, publicity and public relations staff) but of individual agency and effort—in other words, on-line celebrity typically has a point of origin in the development and production of an digital self. Second, celebrity culture on-line is an collective enactment—a complex set of connections across bulletin boards, fan narratives and response videos, vlogs, blogs and commentaries all have to come into play before any Youtube video an go viral—in other words become a phenomena. Three, while historically celebrity culture on-line was structurally independent of star formation in mainstream media when stars where created through the cultivation, distribution and placement of celebrity texts in institutionalized settings like talk shows and advertisements, now a convergence effect is taking place and stories/ stars circulate using twitter feeds, social media updates, bulletin boards, and of course mainstream media.

The *mechanism* of Celebrity culture online can be usefully examined by looking at "Citizen Journalism" as a form of mediated discourse. Hundreds of news stories by independent citizens are filed daily, but only a handful become Youtube phenoms. The process by which a individual video becomes "viral" is instrumental in understanding celebrity. Typically five kinds of content produsers become active in this process—the original producer (it can be through a blog, a vlog,

mobile camera video or a reworking of older content), mainstream news outlets (either independent or mainstream) who may reference and embed that video, participatory new sites that look out for precisely such stories and recirculate them (such as NowPublic, ThirdReport, OhmyNews, DigitalJournal, GroundReport), contributory media sites (slashdot, kuro5hin, newsvine) and "older" online media such as personal webpages (including broadcast sites), mailing lists, enewsletters and of course email. This is an operational principle in the making of any Youtube phenom. Beyond participation, beyond sharing and remaking, it is *the sheer commitment to the work of (viral) community* that needs to be emphasized. It is in this real sense that online celebrity culture is a collective enactment.

The *discursive range* of celebrity culture online—or who gets to be a star— remains largely unexamined. Some initial points of entry can be briefly invoked. One, celebrity culture is often centered on remediation—it takes practices, stories and plots from mainstream popular culture and reworks them--sometimes reinforcing the discursive goals of the original, sometimes reanimating them, and on occasion subverting them. Two, celebrity culture operates in a minor scale—by which I mean that it functions synedochically using individuals to paint a wider narrative around topical areas (obesity for example) or identity politics (race, gender etc) or industry contexts (such as other media). Three, there is at work a process of discursive intertextuality that is astounding in scope. For example, a celebrity online series such as *Ask a Ninja* may draw on a range of

allusions—music videos, slap stick comedy, slasher movies, Armageddon, terrorism, and ethnicity.

[viii] These "Icons" of Youtube animate a range of themes, such obesity/fandom (*Star wars kid*), webcam performance (*Numa Numa*), race/awkwardness (*Chocolate Rain*), age/obscurity (Paul Potts/Susan Boyle), travel/ineptitude (*Where the Hell is Matt?*?), friendship/music (*Free Hugs*), sexuality/hyperbole (*Leave Brittany Alone*), dance/viral fame (Soulja Boy) entertainment/terrorism (*Achmed the dead terrorist*, the dead terrorist), and geek identity/fandom (*Tron Guy*)—to name just a few Youtube phenomena. Two mainstream media texts---a Pork & Beans video and an episode of South Park features provide evidence of the arrival of these video's into popular consciousness. For a textual reading of the phenomena mentioned above, see Reading Youtube (Kavoori, 2011)

[ix] The short as a genre on Youtube is a complex mix of narrative intentions and contradictions. To begin, the Short is simply what it suggests—a short film. These films follow many of the same structural and discursive trajectories of short films (especially those produced by students and for short film festivals) but also offer new ways to organize storytelling. While short films are marked by a focus on characters rather than history, on intimacy rather than context, they are also characterized by a specific intention, they are *strategies of engagement* rather than just storytelling (Riis, 1998, 1). "Short film acts as a form of currency in an economy of exchange - an exchange of influence and support, of kudos and opportunity (Yeatman, 1998, 1).

Short films have received little or no attention by the field of Film Studies, which have been focused on the feature film (either mainstream or alternative) as the primary object of its analysis. I suggest that we locate the short film as a key text in the world of digital culture (such as Youtube), mirroring a wider transition from a modernist to a postmodernist form of storytelling. Let me briefly sketch some of the important issues involved in such a transition. The modernism/postmodernism divide in the arena of film resolves around issues of textual uniformity (the Hollywood model for making films), ideological conformity (it must appeal to the largest audience) and production values (high end versus low end) (Hill, 1998). The short film, when produced by big budget production companies (such as the celebrated Pixar short's) reiterates modernist concerns (narrative, linearity and generalized appeal) even as it may take on postmodern values of play and on occasion, critique. Youtube needs to be placed within this tension between modernist and postmodernist modes of production. There are few theoretically informed accounts of short film storytelling formats—Raskin (1998) for example, outlines five parameters for story design in short film (causality/closure; continuity/surprise; image/sound; character/object. In the spirit of invention, I suggest there are four broad narrative concerns around short film storytelling on Youtube—along with examples for each of them from Youtube.

The first is the (re) assertion of a modernist imperative. Here the short film follows the conventions of formal storytelling reflected in both feature film and television. Typically these include those of posing a narrative question and answering it following the format of complication/resolution and the establishment of a distinct narrative arc. Audiences readily grasp and understand the contexts, scope and intention of the story and its presumed message. *Black Button*, *My Name is Lisa* and *The Landlord* as examples of such a modernist imperative.

The second is the development of an intertextual language through short film. For example, the online series *Chad Vader* is focused on the life of a store clerk with illusions of living in the Star Wars universe. *The Potter Puppet Pals* series works in a similar fashion, except that it works in the world of Harry Potter (in its book and film versions). Both series exemplify interesting trajectories, they are both directly referential (to the universe that each mainstream series represents) but also interjective—reworking the terms and contexts of the original series to ask a range of questions that speak to original intent and transgressive reception. It is not enough to only see these as fan fiction—which they of course are—it is equally important to see them as the development of an alternate language around mainstream mass culture.

The third is the creation of what can be termed "generative storytelling," which reflects the development of a hybrid, postmodern language for the telling of stories. Almost bottomless in their intertextual referents these stories develop original content—the creation of a "new" story and universe of characters—and a viral inter

referentiality that assumes prior knowledge of, and watching of similar videos from both online and mainstream media. Examples include *Charlie the Unicorn* (featuring a gullible unicorn called Charlie who loses his kidney in the first adventure), and the online series *Doogtoons* and *Ask a Ninja*.

Finally, what can be termed *narrative liminality*. Here the focus of the storytelling is on working in the cracks between traditional genre conventions and reaching out through experimentation and paradigmatic recasting of what were earlier seen as cast-iron narrative categories. Examples include *Red versus Blue*, *Trapped in an elevator* and the videos of Liam Sullivan (*Shoes, Text break up*). *Red vs. Blue* is an online series made using gaming software but with entirely new storylines. It does not presume prior knowledge of the game nor does it assume thematic or stylistic convergence with the game. Rather what emerges is a new language, what is now termed "machinimas." *Trapped in an elevator* is a short film about exactly that (being trapped in an elevator) except that its based on the actual footage of a person trapped in an elevator. Like reality television, it uses (and reworks) ideas about the "real" and its manufacturing of lived experience. Finally the music videos of Liam Sullivan are explicitly transgressive of genre—they have a story arc reminiscent of traditional short films but work within the traditions of postmodern cinema. In each of these cases they represent a discursive movement, a shared liminality as to the forms and features of a short "film."

[x] Such visual diaries I suggest can be usefully interrogated using a symbolic interactionist

frame, which sees society as the sum of individual interactions *socially* mobilized. As the mission statement for the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interactionism puts it, "people's selves are social products but these selves are also purposive and creative" (http://espach.salford.ac.uk/sssi; accessed 9/15/10). In contemporary times such purpose and creativity is intimately tied to the rapidly closing gap between the real and the virtual. Herbert Blumer who first coined the term "symbolic interactionism" suggested "there is no *empirically observable* activity in a human society that does not spring from some acting unit" (Blumer, 1963 pp. 186-7, emphasis, mine. Retrieved from http://uregina.ca/gingrich/blumer.html. Accessed 9/15/10). Such empirically observable acting units, I suggest are increasingly those mobilized through contemporary modes of delivery such as computers, cell phones and other personal media. In each case, what needs to be emphasized is that this is deliberate process—a process succinctly evoked by another scholar in this tradition, Erving Goffman's whose notion of "the presentation of self in everyday life" appears to be fully realized in genres such as the Mirror on Youtube.

[xi] Theoretically, the morph is a quintessentially postmodern text (Kellner, 1989; Scott, 1992) using the representational strategy of bricolage. The Morph as a form of bricolage has four recurring features. One, it is a discourse about resemblance, taking as its starting point (and pedagogical motive), the animation and mapping of hitherto unrecognized similarities. Two, it is a strategy about representation, specifically the

nature, form and (often) critical intent of mass media images. Three, the morph is a rhetorical tactic about cultural difference and convergence. It typically uses binaries (black/white; old/young; beautiful/ugly) and then works through their contradiction, seeking to align them within the same (visually) linear space. Four, the morph is relatively restricted in its realms of (digital) operation, largely focused on celebrity culture (from TV, film and sports).

Working as/through bricolage the Morph is characterized by the free imbrication of signifiers, the plasticity of signified referents, and an inherent plurivocality. At the heart of the morph is a central postmodern tactic—*that everything is in play*, that there are no irreducible forces of social structure (race, class etc) that ground any single referent. By foregrounding such a semiotic plasticity, the morph allows for the development of a range of thematic, cultural, political and ideological positions.

In addition to bricolage (and the above defined features), I see the cultural work of the Morph as continuous with an earlier form of postmodern representation—the Collage. "Collages take ready make texts and images and reassemble the fragments into a new composition" (Banash, 2004, 1). The collage represents (like all postmodern texts) a "major cultural shift from the time-honored aesthetic of permanence to an aesthetic of transitoriness and immanence, whose central values are change and novelty" (Ibid, 9). The importance difference between the collage and the morph is of course its location. The collage was (and remains) the domain of the personal (posters, scrapbooks, family displays). It is oriented by its "private context and

sentimental application" (Ibid, 1) while the Morph while often motivated by the same highly personal motivations is by definition an open text received (and reworked) in the public space of Youtube.

xii The Witness is characterized (through its placement within a wider journalistic frame) by the recording of *public* experience. There are two intertwined concerns that distinguish it from mainstream television news, Witness videos are almost always low quality (acoustically, visually) and characterized by little or no story telling elements. Rather, they are explicitly experiential—recording the *act of news making* (a car explosion or accident). Typically recorded on cell phones (and other more complex mobile communication aids, like I-phones), such moments are then readily absorbed by television news into their prescribed modes of storytelling (voice overs, packages, stand up's). They have also become a staple of news websites with their interest in "citizen journalism" in all its contradictions and possibilities. Theoretically, the Witness can be unproblematically placed within a realist, empiricist tradition. Realism attempts to describe subjects, situations and settings using a third person objective frame. Journalism is fundamentally informed by such a normative/theoretical orientation. Hartley's sense of Journalism as a "textual system" is an important point of entry: "the most important textual feature of journalism is the fact that it counts as a true" (1996, pg. 35). This has central relevance to the Witness as a genre, which almost always is focused on ethnography immediacy through being a "witness" to a situation.

xiii I suggest we read the Word as a genre as a "discourse" in the tradition of Michel Foucault (McHoul & Grace, 1993; Howarth, 2000). For Foucault, discourse refers to the "systems of thought that systematically construct the subjects and the worlds of which they speak" (Lessa, 2006, 284). While discourse as a method has traditionally been used to study institutions (such as the hospital and the prison), I am suggesting that the concept can be used to understand the work of the Word as a genre, since these sentences take on a structural function, constructing what Foucault would call regimes of understanding—they powerfully frame a specific set of normative expectations and behaviors—all stemming from the "meanings" that each term connotes. This connotation is historically informed by its initial setting (game play, music video, TV news report) but then takes a life of its own. This makes it similar to the idea of "genealogy" in Foucault's work where "a given system of thought is the result of contingent turns of history, not the outcome of rationally inevitable trends" (Michel Foucault, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, pg. 5-6 http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/foucault. Accessed 9/22/10). I also draw sustenance for such a reading drawing on the media ecology tradition (Marshall McLuhan, Harold Innis, James Carey, Joshua Meyrowitz, Paul Levinson to name just a few people) of understanding the role of representation in a image-saturated world, where *the word becomes the world* given credence to the idea that we live in an age where words have an agency all unto themselves, fashioning the nature and intent of human action.

This appears especially true of daily life in wired societies where the link between the real and virtual is rapidly disappearing especially in a digital context.

xiv The experiment as a genre is not unlike reality television. Reality television's "overarching characteristic is its claim to the real which it underscores through its aesthetic strategies--use of cinema verite, surveillance video, low end production values or natural settings" (Murray, 2004, 1900). In addition to such aesthetic techniques, the experiment fulfills two other functions that reality television usually undertakes—it mobilizes a conversation about cultural surveillance what Oulette and Hay (2008) calls "placing television in an analytic of government" (pg. 17) and specifically as a discourse about control of the environment—a wider process where "objects of science only come to us in hybrid forms affected by power and meaning" (Friedman, 2002, 206). Oulette and Hay's book *Better Living through Reality Television* addresses the role of reality television in the work of citizenship, in a culture "where citizenship education is privatized" (2008, 16). Reality television becomes an expression of citizenship by presenting a (controlled) examination of identity through the placement of racial, sexual and gendered others in spaces of contestation and collaboration. In doing so, it shows television's ability to "link practices of self-cultivation and self-fashioning to the lessons and tests of citizenship" (ibid). In a similar vein the experiment on Youtube puts into play different objects, artifacts and concepts around daily life and abstracts from them observations

about the value (civic or entertainment) of such object. Such observations may be mobilized as fables about office life (*Sticky Note Experiment*), the built environment (The Fun Theory), industrial design (Will it Blend), media culture (*Squeeze Me*) or performativity (as in *Diet Coke and Mentos*). Miller's (2002) analysis of the Weather Channel as a reality narrative about environmental control is invaluable for understanding the experiment as a genre. He suggests that "TV weather embodies the desire of modernity to know and control" (203) and the experiment works similarly—finding (viral) ways to represent that same discursive intent – one of control and surveillance. Such a analytic—control of the human environment—mobilized through the use and placement of industrial objects in experimental situations is the dominant leit motif of the genre, and in doing so, it extends the logic and participatory intent of reality television to the Internet.

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