READING

YouTube

The
Critical
Viewers
Guide

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· 1 ·

INTRODUCTION

> YouTube offers a rich set of provocations into larger questions regarding
> continuity and change in media.
> —WILLIAM URICCHIO

> Cultural expressions are increasingly captured in the electronic hypertext
> of the multimedia system.
> —MANUEL CASTELLS

This book began with a simple question: How does one make sense of YouTube?
There is no reliable "sample" of videos on YouTube; no easily identifiable way
to determine its dominant thematics; no way to evaluate "quality"; no bench-
marks for establishment of impact (beyond the questionable number of times
a video has been watched), no seminal literature. For all purposes, YouTube
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?

These are all important questions and may be the subject of future projects,
but this book is about a much narrower question: How does one get one's hands

around the texts of YouTube? In other words, this is a book about storytelling—focusing on the stories of YouTube and drawing sustenance from an elemental truth, that storytelling is at the heart of all media (and perhaps at the center of what it is to be human). 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).

This book emerged from a class project (entitled "Reading YouTube"), which examines storytelling and digital culture, focusing in recent years on a reading of YouTube stories and on developing a framework for organizing them (details at the end of this chapter). Drawing on genre analysis and digital media criticism, I have—with my students as equal partners—formulated *one* way to organize the myriad of stories that are the subject of this book. This is a guidebook—a critical viewer's guide—to *some* of the important videos on YouTube and is by no mean an exhaustive analysis of all the important (or cat-egorizable) videos on YouTube. Having said that, it is an important "cut" into the bewildering complexity of YouTube and is a beginning point for students to undertake extensions/development of the pedagogy offered here.

This book bears the imprint of its roots—extending the discussion begun in the classroom to a larger audience of students and scholars. The bulk of the book is made up of entries that provide a thumbnail textual analysis of a sam-ple of videos that make up each of the genres proposed here. The format of the entries is a combination of two elements. The first, like most guidebooks, pro-vides brief summaries/background on specific videos/categories of genres (such as the British Film Institute's well-known guides on various genres of film), and the second is that of an academic encyclopedia (such as the *Encyclopedia of Television*, edited by my colleague, Horace Newcomb), which offers a theoret-ically informed mapping of the key issues of an entry (a concept, scholar, or tele-vision show). Using such a hybrid format is, I believe, wholly appropriate to the task at hand—telling the story of a *popular* medium through popular *means*—the Internet.[1] It needs to be emphasized that this book does not undertake a comprehensive accounting of the important videos on YouTube (an impossi-ble task), although each video is illustrative of many other similar videos. The goal with each section was to provide a thematic for this type of video. For example, in the section "A Viral Childhood" I discuss some examples of child-focused videos (*David after Dentist*, *Ha Ha Ha*, etc.) as a stand-in for the many others I could have chosen.

While the bulk of this book is not theoretical in its scope (even as it undertakes theoretically informed readings), this chapter provides evidence of the conceptual language that has informed the Reading YouTube project. What follows is a mapping of some of the concepts developed during the course of this project, and the "big" picture within which the individual readings (in the rest of this book) can be contextualized. This review (and theorization) can be used by students of YouTube as an entry point for their own analysis of the stories of YouTube. Staying true to the project's new media roots, I pose these in the form of an FAQ.

YouTube: FAQ

Q: What is YouTube?

YouTube may be many things—a platform, an archive, a library, a laboratory, a medium (Snickars & 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 its 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 on-line 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 & Dean, 2008; Miller, 2007; Jarboe & Reider, 2009), the academic literature on the subject is just emerging (Burgess & Green, 2009; Snickars & Vonderau, 2009; Lovink & Niederer, 2008; Lange, 2007[2]). While not dealing with YouTube directly, scholarly work in the area of digital culture, participatory culture, digital labor, and virtual identity, is an important element in its analysis—and runs as an unacknowledged thread throughout the book.[3]

Q: 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 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 ask a sample of people about the videos they watch. In other words, the choice of stories (being told on YouTube) depends on whom you ask. I asked young people—and they chose (unsurprisingly) stories about young people (or those of interest to young people). In sum, the stories examined in this book by and large relate to youth culture. Even the most casual user of YouTube will recognize that many videos (especially those that are most viewed, most favorited, most responded, most discussed) reflect popular culture elements of interest to young people. In other words, "youth" in all its mediated complexity is *the* recurring element in stories on YouTube.

Two related observations about digital culture and its roots in youth culture: Firstly, I suggest we see the "work" of making videos as a form of citizenship through popular means (Mossberger, Tolbert & McNeal, 2007; Ouellette & Hay, 2008), a contradictory process that *works in the divide* between popular accounts of "generation digital" as either bold trailblazers or innocent victims (Montgomery, 2007), 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). Secondly, drawing on the idea that cultural workers are firmly placed in a *popular* practice of media education (Giroux, 1992), I suggest we see digital labor as fundamentally constituted by its *attitude*. By attitude I mean precisely what the term reflects—an attitude towards work—manifest in both the institutional rhetoric of YouTube ("broadcast yourself") and in the *practices of participation*[4] (creating, posting, critiquing, remixing). It is "an attitude, not a technology" (blogger Ian Davis, quoted in Lovink, 2007), an attitude that is reinforced by its status as media outsider or as Lovink puts it, "the creative underclass, 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 (200–213).

Q: What is a "story" on YouTube?

It depends *how* you ask the question, and I 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 doing so, I drew inspiration from previous work on the structure of digital networks and media ecology (Levinson, 1999, 2009, Lovink, 2008, Uricchio, 2008), how they are used (Hess, 2009, Burgess & 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). Over the course of the project, I realized that while conceptually it made sense to look at the entirety of this process as coherent and symbolic, for analytical purposes it was important to break it down into its component parts (Architecture, Use, Storytelling and Impact) and develop a conceptual language for each part. I now turn to a discussion of each of these separately.

Q: 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 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's (2009) analysis of YouTube as a hybrid information management system, I suggest that each of these elements has a specific function that is simultaneously textual and discursive. I briefly discuss each of these.

The first element (the primary video) is determined by "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, event, or 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 the iPhone is about the

iPhone, 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 the video. It's calling out to the viewer a specific set of rhetorical or semantic referents that the video is shot through with. The 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 the 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, fundamentally determined by use, that structures the foundational nature of this text. 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, there may be other videos about that player or about other players in that sport, other iPhone 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. In sum, for the purpose at hand in this book, I treated each video as being composed of these three interrelated parts, watching, reading and taking notes on each of these constituent elements.

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, a posting on a Facebook page, or as a topic of conversation at a party, for example. There are two such architectural properties that I 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 "15 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. Its impact takes shape over months until it becomes a thundercloud, looming 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 it should the viewer click on any of them. In sum, this interchangeable quality and structural mutability is what distinguishes YouTube from television.[5]

Q: How is YouTube used?

I would like to offer an important pedagogical point of entry around YouTube "use" (which surfaces in most class discussions): 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*. The detritus of daily life—the complex mix of the weighty (college payments) and the mundane (a hangover)—is part of understanding the role of YouTube. While some students (and viewers generally) may diligently "tune in" to YouTube daily, for the vast majority, YouTube is consumed as one element of a heavy media diet. To put this more formally, YouTube, like much of digital life, is a postmodern experience—its constitutive element being its fragmentation. Teaching large lecture classes, I regularly see students typing notes on their laptops, with one window open at the latest YouTube video their friend may have sent them, my own lecture and PowerPoint presentation being just one more "window" (and certainly, not the most interesting) in their lives.

YouTube use is characterized by what can be termed "Digital Play," which

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, playing with the menu on the right side, clicking through an infinite number of videos and dozens of "directors" as you weigh all the alternatives before you. Patience is not an option in this game—if the video is poor, the sound bad, and the context problematic, it is time to play something else. This kind of use can be termed "Catalog Culture" (I would like to thank my colleague James Biddle for coining this concept 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, with attention resting briefly on one or more items. The defining characteristic of the process 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. 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 ones bookmarked or linked through on-line communities and blogs. The key idea is again consumption of other stories, places and experiences.

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 videos, and to 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.

Q: How does one assess the impact of a YouTube video?

Mass communication scholarships 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 a 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 Sitcom had fixed commercial breaks; Dramas were an hour long; Westerns had 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 within on-line games). Subjectivity does not neatly coalesce into containers that traditional media analysis offers—those around identity politics and commercially fixed categories of reception. What is needed is less a retrofitting of older approaches, and more the imagination of a new language that draws on older approaches but tries to develop a language that captures some of the complexity around issues of impact that YouTube offers. In that spirit, I want to offer four concepts that help think through issues of impact: Digital Mobility (& Polysemy), Participatory Closure, Discursive Thread and Contextual Chaining.

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 a *Pokémon* cartoon 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, it is 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 three concepts. Digital Polysemy refers to the gargantuan

number of video stories that YouTube hosts on its site—*the sheer volume of discourse* that is produced every minute on-line. When I began teaching television criticism in the mid-90s, 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—which is 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, Digg it, del.ici.ous) an order of preferred texts emerges. 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 and politics.

The tension between endless polysemy and those that are restrictive (close-ended, discursive) can be assessed by tracking the themes that each video spawns across three interrelated sites, the content of the video (which includes references to prior videos) and the surrounding participatory culture (response videos, accompanying strip videos, comments, blogs, related websites, Wiki pages, mainstream media coverage and so forth). Such a process was undertaken for each of the videos discussed in this book, a process that I termed "thematic track analysis," whereby the primary themes and concerns across the entirety of the participatory culture were assessed around questions of impact. From this process emerged some concepts that I believe provide *one* way to assess the impact of a YouTube video: Participatory Closure, Discursive Thread and Contextual Chaining. Let me illustrate, using an example. A video about a sports figure like Tiger Woods (particularly in recent months) tends to have the discussion coalesce around a specific set of themes—superior performance and personal inadequacies. Each of these themes is what I call "discursive threads." They take his past performance (both professional and personal) and use it to provide commentary around him as a player/person. These themes often draw on related issues, or what I term "contextual chains," which in the

case of Woods revolve around sport as a phenomenon, celebrity and sport, the role of golf as a specific kind of sports discourse, and, inevitably, race and class as seen through the prism of Tiger Woods's persona as a player/person. All of these themes are mobilized across the numerous videos that feature Tiger Woods. In other words, they define the terms of the viral encounter with Tiger and inscribe a specific thematic track around his identity. Such a restrictive discursive function is what I call "participatory closure"—a process whereby there emerges a specific modality of reception around a video or person, which in effect "closes off" alternate or completely open-ended modes of interpretation.

Q: Finally, and most importantly what are the "stories" of YouTube?

The stories of YouTube, one may surmise, are limitless, but even the most casual 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. YouTube itself offers a mode of organization (such as "directors" or "most viewed" or "most favorited"), but this misses the wider point that the Reading YouTube project sought to address—which was to identify relatively stable forms of storytelling (or genres), such as those that exist in older forms of storytelling (the Sitcom on television; the Western in film). What follows is a brief account of YouTube genres that emerged from class discussion and reading of the emerging literature on new media genres.

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) signal that genres remain relatively stable—in fact it is their (relative) stability that enables 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 & Shepherd, 2009, 263).[6]

Drawing on the pioneering work of Giltrow and Stein (2009), Askehave and Nielsen (2005), Crowston and Williams (2000), Deuze (2006), Renzi

(2008), and Boler (2008), I offer the following definition of Internet genres—as they relate to YouTube—and then unpack it in the rest of this section:

> Internet genres are categories of viral affordance working through the process of high-lighting 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 Shepherd (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—to be generated.

Highlighting: Deuze (2006) offers a schema 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 them*—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 is consumed. Highlighting extends to the recording of daily life in its most funny or important moments. In other words, the "highlight video" that was synonymous with television shows like *ESPN SportsCenter* has become generalized as a wider semantic category for understanding the YouTube experience. Whether it is the touchdown run or falling down the steps, what orients the viewer is *the act of being highlighted*. This sense of understanding visual culture through tightly stripped moments may create a limited frame for issues of context, intent and, more critically, identity and culture. It assumes that the part can in some sense be substituted for the whole. We may get to a point where the whole (narrative) may never be consumed. To extend this analogy, we may once have been a culture that ate entire meals, but now we appear to be constantly snacking. This is not new of

course, it has its roots in television's sound-bite culture; the difference now is that *the sound bite has become the full story*.

Celebratory Creativity: One can make the argument that YouTube is governed by a simple principle: 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 & Shepherd, 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.[7] Certainly, the videos discussed in the Phenom chapter of this book are evidence of just such a process—where an unknown like Tay Zonday can take *Chocolate Rain* all the way to the *Jimmy Kimmel Show* and other mass media outlets. Celebratory creativity deals with viral desire (and all the work that went before and after it)—with the moment of being famous for a little (YouTube) time.

Perhaps the best example of how celebratory creativity is entrenched as part of YouTube lore is a promotional event, YouTube Live, which took place on November 22, 2008, which brought together a range of famous YouTube people. The promotional video for the event provides a virtual template for thinking through issues of celebrity creativity on YouTube. Clips of famous YouTube artists are edited together with a high-octane rock band playing in the background. The artists appearing (on the show) include, as the text puts it, "guitar virtuosos, B-Boys, Mad Scientists, underground athletes, free huggers and Internet-born stars." In each case, famous YouTube people in each of these categories are shown, followed by the date of the show. The video is an interesting attempt at assembling the chaotic texts of YouTube into some semblance of order and structure—and it bears noting that the order that was chosen was the language of celebrity.

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 resonates in a cultural realm—they work as mimetic tactics. 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 via email, blogs,

social media, forums, etc. The second is the set of discourses that stick to it, and give it agency, or what Renzi (2008) defines as a "tactic." Drawing on the work of Garcia and Lovink (1997), she uses it in the context of media of crises, criticism and opposition inclusive of a Foucauldian 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*, around a dizzying range of contexts—obesity, childhood, race relations, sexuality, presidential politics, performativity (music, dance, film)—to name just a few (they also make up the foci of many sections of this book).

Finally, to the task at hand. Using the panoply of concepts outlined above,[8] the following genres were identified: The Phenom, The Short, The Mirror, The Morph, The Witness, The Word and The Experiment. What follows is a sketch of the overall characteristics followed by individual chapters.

The Phenom

The Phenom (short for the Phenomenon) has as its defining characteristic a vast viral impact. In each case, the thematic, stylistic or narrative treatment of the subject is less important than 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 web pages, 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. Put another way, these videos become the language through which YouTube becomes YouTube. Equally importantly, 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).

The Short

The Short is simply what it suggests—a short film—with some differences. 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 fol-

low 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.

The Mirror

The Mirror is a popular and recurring video on YouTube—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. I theorize the Mirror as a genre drawing on the tradition of symbolic interactionism, especially the concept of the "looking glass self" (Charles Cooley) and Erving Goffman's notion of "the presentation of self in everyday life."

The Morph

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. The Morph is delineated from the Mirror in its undertaking of a fundamentally different rhetorical action—one of manipulation rather than a record of the self. I theorize the Morph as a postmodern rhetorical practice using the representational strategy of bricolage.

The Witness

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.

The Word

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 on-line realms (videos, blogs, forums) and eventually into the parlance

of popular culture. I theorize such expressions (such as "All you base belong to us") as an example of what Michel Foucault calls "discourse"—a process of semantic coherence that works within the realms of power and subjectivity.

The Experiment

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 become a staple of YouTube, a digital way of experiencing the combination of elements, substances, and objects arranged in a visually compelling way—where a key element is the sheer fun of experimentation—and its consumption from afar, and one's terms. I theorize the Experiment as continuous with the work of Reality Television where spectacle, citizenship and performativity combine in complex, disjunctive ways.

Q: Is there anything else?

Yes, several things relating to the methodology, the organization of the book and finally, the project on which this book is based.

Methodology

Before writing each entry in this critical viewer's guide, I followed the same protocol: I watched the video at least five times and made notes about its internal constitution (visuals, dialogue, music, narrative) and from those notes identified some of the important themes of the video. I then read/viewed all the participatory culture surrounding the video (including response videos, parodies, remixes, mashups, comments, blogs, Wikipages) and any reporting in mainstream media. Finally, I applied the conceptual language developed in this chapter (focusing especially on participatory closure, contextual chaining, and discursive threads) and came up with a brief summary description of what I felt was the overall "message" of the video as it resonated through viral space. A more extended version of this summary became the entry for that video in the critical viewer's guide. This process was not even across all the entries. For some videos (such as those discussed in the Icons section of the Phenom chapter) there was a surfeit of participatory culture, and the entry became a multiple page reading, while for other videos there was very little material and the entry was a paragraph, or just a few lines, appearing often in combination with other (similar) videos. The writing of each entry typically follows the same format: A brief

description of "what"—the video's topic and theme along with any background information (coverage in mainstream media or viral discussion)—followed by a theoretically informed reading of the video.

Organization of the Book

This book has two sections. The first section deals with a single genre (the Phenom) and the second with the remaining genres (the Word, the Experiment, the Short, the Witness, the Morph). There is an important reason for this imbalance. As I have suggested above (and will reiterate at various point throughout this book), *YouTube is grounded by the language of celebrity*—this celebrity is centrally mobilized through the process of becoming a YouTube "Phenomenon." So, while all the other genres are important to the way in which YouTube works, it is the idea/goal/practice of *becoming* a viral "Phenomenon" that is at the heart of YouTube. In the first section ("Fame"), I foreground the complex ways in which such phenomena become operationalized. In the second chapter ("The Phenom"), I briefly theorize how a YouTube phenomenon can be approached. The third chapter (the longest chapter) is entitled Icons. If YouTube is about becoming famous, then these are the people who have made YouTube famous. They constitute a sampling of the "stars" of YouTube. When I give talks on YouTube, I ask for names of YouTube celebrities that everybody has heard of—and almost always some of these names appear. They are, simply put, icons, signaling the arrival of YouTube as a new form of mediated experience. The importance of these icons in understanding YouTube is the reason for the length of the entries here (and consequently of the chapter). The subsequent chapters in this section discuss fame based on thematic areas around which YouTube celebrity culture is often organized (so for example, the chapter "Where the Domesticated Things Are" deals with animal videos, a recurring hit on YouTube, while "A Viral Childhood" deals with children that become YouTube phenomena through some action/act like playing, fighting, singing, dancing, etc.). These thematic areas are not exhaustive, but rather illustrative of the depth of YouTube as it gets used around a range of topics. In sum, this entire section, which makes up the bulk of the book, is evidence of how a single genre (the Phenom) is the most important category for understanding the role of storytelling on YouTube. Each chapter in this section provides examples (a full list of all the YouTube phenomena would be an impossible task) under each of these thematic areas.

The second section ("Other Genres") is more abbreviated, since my goals

here were to first theorize each genre and then provide illustrative examples of videos for each of these genres. Each chapter has a brief theoretical setup before individual entries—or in some chapters a number of entries combined together—are discussed. For example, I briefly discuss how the Mirror as a genre exemplifies ideas first developed in the field of Symbolic Interactionism, or how the Word may be usefully interrogated using a Foucauldian lens. This set-up can be used as a conceptual add-on to the overall framework being offered in this chapter (architecture, use, impact, etc.) and as a complement to understanding how each genre may function specifically.

This viewer's guide is written primarily for classroom use—at both the undergraduate and graduate level—for courses in digital culture, new media, and computer-mediated communication. It can also be used as a text in classes on textual analysis or qualitative methods. The goals were to write clearly while retaining depth, in addition to developing a conceptual language (presented in this chapter) for students to use as they engage with the complex, interactive texts of YouTube and digital culture more generally (see Appendix B for additional suggestions).

Project Background

The Reading YouTube project began as a class assignment in the 2006–2007 academic year when it became clear that YouTube was emerging as a major player in the digital media landscape. I teach a course on digital media criticism, and one of the goals of the class is to interrogate—from a critical, cultural and media literacy perspective—the latest New Media phenomenon. Over the years we have examined everything from the rise of the Internet to the latest iPhone to *Halo 3*. The class assignment at this point was simple—students were asked to find examples of YouTube phenomena, and we watched them in class and discussed them with an eye to interrogating their cultural impact and historical antecedents. It soon became apparent that we were dealing with a generative process that was not slowing down or going away, so I launched a more sustained and formal research and media literacy project focused on the content of the videos that were being uploaded, with the eventual goal of creating a taxonomy of storytelling on YouTube. In the fall of 2008, I began systematic data collection along with having YouTube-specific class assignments. I embarked on four interrelated tasks: (a) Students were asked to keep a YouTube diary project throughout the semester, where they kept an account of YouTube videos they had watched and those that had been forwarded to them

by others; (b) A survey of YouTube use was conducted by students in my class, using a rolling sample (each student was responsible for surveying five other students). The goal was not quantitative sampling, or finding an exhaustive list of videos, but identifying the kind of narratives that were popular amongst a small subset of viewers—primarily white students at a university in the American South; (c) I tracked YouTube video phenomena as they occurred on a weekly basis and collected all supplementary material (such as mainstream media coverage, blogs, commentaries, etc.); (d) I conducted in-class discussions (methodologically modeled on focus groups) and kept notes.

By the end of that year, I emerged with a basic template to understanding how YouTube stories worked. Firstly, the stories appeared as a self-organizing, polysemic mode of textualization. Secondly, there was an emergent pattern of discursive mobility and cultural transference. Thirdly, in many cases there appeared to be a reiteration of modernist ideologies (race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and national identity) recast in a new medium, and fourthly, a narrative style that centered play and performance as its defining characteristic.

This was all very well and good, but nevertheless unsatisfactory. As a long-time student of media genres (I have published on Television News, Film and Entertainment over the last 15 years), I turned to this tried-and-trusted category of organizing YouTube. I reminded myself that genres (on TV and Film) were not god-given categories, but emerged from the histories of those media forms—from a mix of technological constraints, institutional imperatives, individual innovation and audience choice. Class projects and in-class discussion confirmed that certain kinds of stories were being told over and over again, that certain stylistic and textual elements were being formalized and a certain fixity in narrative forms was emerging.

In the summer of 2008, I took time off from immersion in the videos and drew on my reading of genre criticism and literature to develop the taxonomy offered in this book. I had a simple methodological maxim: *Take what works and invent the rest.* I took the invention part to heart. This came at a cost. The genres offered here do not rest on a body of existing literature or institutional records (such as radio historians draw on when they study early radio history). As a colleague of mine pointed out, the "institutional records" of YouTube videos lie in the detritus of teenage bedrooms, and, she added, jokingly in their "scrambled minds."

Another colleague of mine, Elle Roushanzamir, had two other maxims that she said I must follow. Firstly, *nothing is ever really new.* YouTube may be the latest media phenomena, but it is strongly influenced by the media histories that

came before it. Much like TV drew on Radio, so, I surmised, the narratives of YouTube would draw on the histories of Television, Film and, increasingly, Gaming. Jenkins's (2009) essay was an important inspiration as well, pointing out how the histories of YouTube need to be historicized in the context of garage cinema and do-it-yourself newsrooms. Secondly, *the more complex a thing is, the more simple it is.* This was a little harder to accept—on the face of it many of the videos on YouTube are just so…*weird* (drunken squirrels, men jumping into shorts, a song about genitalia) that you have to feel that this is an entirely new kind of narrative animal…but in time order emerged, and I emerged, Moses-like, armed with a typology of YouTube genres. Starting in the fall of 2008 (and continuing every semester after that), I changed the class assignment to a simple one: Students were asked to find examples of videos that exemplify each of the genres. Each week we focused on only one genre. From these numerous videos, I chose some for a closer look—and they make up this book.

Notes

1. As Burgess and Green (2009) put it, "all contributors to content to YouTube are potential participants in a common space; one that supports a diverse range of uses and motivations but that has a coherent logic—what we refer to as the YouTubeness of YouTube" (57).

2. Strangelove's recent book (2010) is an important new entry to the literature. It discusses some of the videos chosen here—their mutual choice a confirmation that our choice of these videos (which were made much before Strangelove's book) was appropriate. It is also important to note that his analysis is largely thematic while the Reading YouTube project is focused more on a close textual reading.

3. Class readings over the years have drawn on Levinson (1999, 2009), Wellman and Haythornthwaite (2002), Hillis (1999), Ulmer, (1995), Corneliussen and Rettberg, (2008), Foster (2005), Gere (2002/2008), Howard and Jones (2004), Strate, Jacobson and Gibson (2003), Jenkins (2006), Boler (2008), Lister, Dovey, Giddings, Grant and Kelly (2003/2009), Best and Kellner (2001) and Wardrip-Fruin and Montfort (2003).

4. Having said that, the future of the Internet as a forum for deliberative (and democratic) expression is characterized by an "ambivalence of its transformative pedagogy" (Kellner & Kim, 2010, 22) and "YouTube proves that in practice the economic and cultural rearrangements that participatory culture stands for are as disruptive and uncomfortable as they might be potentially liberating" (Burgess & Green, 2009, 10).

5. 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).

6. Miller and Shepherd (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 initial 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).

7. 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://henry jenkins.org/2007/10/vernacular_cretivity_an_inter.html, accessed March 8, 2009). See also Hauser (1999) and Hess (2007).

8. To summarize, these include Architecture (foundationality, relationality, referentiality, participatory coalescing, and flow), Use (play, catalog culture), Impact (mobility, participatory closure, discursive thread and contextual chaining), and storytelling/genre analysis (affordance, highlighting, celebratory creativity and mimetic tactics).