

VOLUME I

THE INTERNATIONAL ENCYCLOPEDIA OF MEDIA STUDIES

Media Production

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 **WILEY-BLACKWELL**

A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Publication

This edition first published 2013

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Blackwell Publishing was acquired by John Wiley & Sons in February 2007. Blackwell's publishing program has been merged with Wiley's global Scientific, Technical, and Medical business to form Wiley-Blackwell.

Registered Office

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The international encyclopedia of media studies / general editor, Angharad N. Valdivia.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4051-9356-6 (hardback: alk. paper) 1. Mass media—Encyclopedias. I. Valdivia, Angharad N.

P87.5.I585 2013

302.23'03—dc23

2012023058

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Cover images: Students working in computer lab © Hill Street Studios / Blend Images / Corbis; News reporter © Ocean / Corbis; Photo shoot © Monalyn Gracia / Corbis; DJ at radio station © Inti St. Clair / Blend Images / Corbis

Cover design by Simon Levy

Set in 11 on 13 pt Dante by Toppan Best-set Premedia Limited

Printed and bound in Singapore by Markono Print Media Pte Ltd

YouTube Stylo

Writing and Teaching with Digital Video

Alexandra Juhasz

ABSTRACT

The impact of YouTube on media production and distribution has been break-neck, immense, and seemingly irreversible. In this chapter I argue that media production professors need to embrace, and not to avoid YouTube, as if it was what the French call a *stylo*: a pen. To do so, we need to better understand YouTube and YouTube videos. I impart here some of the lessons I have learned from teaching an experimental course, *Learning from YouTube*, in which all the course work has been *about*, but also *on*, the site. These lessons illustrate the genres, contents, and styles of "video writing" that my students have developed to expand the reach of YouTube's more standard and banal content. The lessons also address how knowledge of the technologies, ownership, architecture, and customs of the site can allow for careful, considered, and self-referential student work to become a critical part of this unruly archive.

Dreams of YouTube Writing

This, right here, is writing with words on paper about video on YouTube. This variety of YouTube writing uses words to call up digital sounds and images, in a scholarly prose common to the field of media studies. It is to be read on paper, in a chapter of

The International Encyclopedia of Media Studies, First Edition.

General Editor Angharad N. Valdivia.

Volume II: *Media Production*. Edited by Vicki Mayer.

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this book. However, the YouTube writing that is the focus of this chapter is a new kind of academic text (and cultural object), enabled by digital technologies that allow for video to become something akin to a pen ideally suited for expressing critical thinking about a medium within that very medium. In the second section of this chapter, I will introduce 10 writing styles displayed in YouTube videos made by my students for the course *Learning from YouTube*, which was held on and about YouTube in the Fall of 2007, 2008, and 2010. In the course, my students' videos (their sole academic assignments) examined YouTube critically by speaking through its own forms. In the process their videos, and this chapter about them, also trace the shape of the culmination of a dream: what communication might look like when it is freed from the constraints of word and page; what students might say when they are liberated by technology and enabled to speak about media, while being aided along the way by an education in video history and production as well as by critical media literacy (and also aiding them). The first section of the chapter sets the historical, pedagogic, and personal dimension of this dream of writing; the second will investigate what was realized in the student work – or in the YouTube writing – that was actually produced.

I came to teach on and about YouTube in 2007; I was both hopeful and critical. This corporately owned platform makes the most of several digital technologies in order to facilitate video production, distribution, and storage for increasingly large numbers of users who have access to a computer. While YouTube is essentially a platform for exhibition, it has taken on many other functions as well: people make, comment on, store, view, and move videos off it. YouTube holds videos and advertisements made by people and by corporations, as well as serving as host for personal, corporate, and non-profit "channels" that curate video for other users from its huge "archive" of moving images. YouTube's architecture and corporate imperatives set the standard for the conventions of socially networked video. Thus, when I say "YouTube" across this chapter, I refer to these many things, all under the umbrella of this brand. However, in what follows I am most eager to talk about less common uses of the platform, namely about YouTube as a form and forum of academic writing and education. Of course, while we were using it in this anomalous way, YouTube always also remained a larger cultural and corporate form of entertainment, revenue, and expression, and we spent a good deal of our energy trying to understand these facts by generating user-generated video about them.

Like many others (in and out of academia), I believe in the best for people-made culture, and I am certain that media literacy plays an important function in this project. Educating students as well as activist community members about making media and thinking critically about them has always been central to my work. My dream has been to participate in the production of committed media – media that rely upon, reference, and produce historical, artistic, and theoretical knowledge, committed to an articulated project of world- or self-changing. My goals for the course were similar to those of earlier projects that had focused upon writing and teaching about, and making, the committed media of AIDS activists, feminists, antiwar activists, and queers. For my class *Learning From YouTube*, our efforts

would be to understand the uses, structures, vernaculars, limits, and possibilities of a new media phenomenon and to work together to push this platform toward loftier goals than entertainment: that is, toward education, community-building, self-expression, history-making, and activism. Thus, together, we would produce contemporary media criticism using YouTube as our subject and pen (there was very little written about YouTube by scholars in 2007). Ours was a hopeful and productive use of the site, one that enabled community, critique, and control in an otherwise often resistant online environment (corporately controlled, entertainment-driven). Of course, while the technology was new, the underlying commitment to this pedagogical (and penmanship) project – to integrate media production, theory, literacy, history, and activism – has a long history in and out of the media production college class.

Thus, before I turn to what my students and I learned about using YouTube as a pen, about critically writing about a medium within that medium, I will look at the history of this older vision about media writing: “It is always interesting to review old utopian visions, as they remind us of our part in fulfilling the expectations of earlier generations,” writes Bjorn Sørenssen (2008, p. 48). He continues: “By developing new media technology there is also created a new and changed pattern of production and distribution and, subsequently, a new aesthetics” (ibid.). The 10 YouTube writing forms that follow – our new “YouTube aesthetics” – are the culmination of a century’s efforts to maximize the ease and accessibility of learning about, making, and watching moving images. Every generation, it seems, attests to the fact that *theirs* is the era in which this wistful reverie is at last realized. “A Descartes of today would already have shut himself up in his bedrooms with a 16 mm camera and some film, and would be writing his philosophy on film,” proclaims Astruc (1968, p. 19) in his often revisited “Birth of a New Avant-Garde: The *Caméra-Stylo*.”

As a teacher using YouTube and related digital technologies, I join with those before me like Raymond Bellour (as well as my colleagues working today on related new media investigations), who have hoped to link technology, avant-garde production, and media literacy in the name of freedom of expression: “Everything attests to the fact that video is more deeply rooted in writing than is cinema, that it gives real life to Alexandre Astruc’s prophecy hailing after the war the birth of an avant-garde he defined as the age of the pen-camera” (*caméra-stylo*; Bellour, 1990, p. 421).

Many of the wistful, political, populist, or creative among us have yearned to teach media production like it is in writing: cheap, accessible, common, expressive, intelligent, analytic, aesthetic – our modernist *lingua franca*. On YouTube, users can write about video with video if they are so directed. Students think about the meanings of images with pictures; they contemplate the reach of sounds with noises of their own; and they engage with the power of text by using typography. Just this sort of *stylo* dream has been fueled by multiple politics of voice: varied hopes for democratization, radicalization, or diversification of media expression allowed by the ever expanding availability of technological tools. Conjuring his related prophecy, Bellour asserts something achingly similar for the video tools of his time: “the image is

‘written,’ in varying degrees, when its preexisting matter is modulated with the aid of various machines, as well as when it is even more deliberately conceived with the aid of a graphic palette or a computer” (ibid.).

But such visions were not solely the preoccupation of 1940s French cinéastes and 1990s poststructuralist film theorists. Several authors in Grieveson and Wasson (2008) attest that, since its earliest days, academic media pedagogy has also aspired to this same stylo – a technology, a method, and an impulse that integrate making and thinking about, or with, moving images toward critical expression or toward self-expression. According to Dana Polan (2008, p. 96), from the outset, teachers of cinema knew that

film represents the synthesis of the impulses and ideas that ran through the great humanistic tradition. If the great books moved knowledge into the realm of the spirit, the fact that cinema was art requiring very practical labor – all the techniques and chores of filmmaking – meant that it causes abstract notions to be regrounded in worldly activity.

Polan introduces the 1937 project of Scott Buchanan, who invented a liberal arts curriculum for the innovative St. John’s College that would culminate with instruction in both filmmaking *and* film aesthetics. “Simultaneously an art and a set of practical techniques, cinema represented a mediation of the mental and the manual fully appropriate to the contemporary world” (ibid., p. 115). In the same anthology, Michael Zryd (2008) convincingly argues the same idealistic project for the *next* generation of media educators. He explains how experimental filmmaking of the 1960s was housed, cultivated, and encouraged via an academic film study committed to personal and sometimes radical expression. Quoting from a 1960s report on film education by O. W. Reigel, Zryd paints the film school of that era as organized for “the individualist young man, usually with a ‘literary’ (verbal) orientation, who has an urge to express his personality and ideas. In the absence of the film medium, he would probably be writing stories, novellas and poems” (ibid., p. 194).

But, these exemplary early efforts aside, I’ll suggest that, before YouTube (and related web 2.0 video technologies), there were only (or mostly) stylo dreams deferred. For reasons pragmatic, institutional, economic, and professional, to integrate the hands and the head in one media studies classroom or project proved to be the exceptional, if always glaringly obvious pedagogic project. In the mid-1980s I slunk up the elevator, renamed course credits, and lied to administrators to access the *verboden* realm of video cameras and their teachers on the 9th Floor of New York University’s Production Department – while I was earning my PhD from the scholars of Cinema Studies housed on the 6th. As continues to be true to this day for those who wish to integrate media theory and production (and perhaps activism, too), I had to write a full-length doctoral dissertation on AIDS activist video even after I had completed, in 1990, an award-winning documentary about women and AIDS, funded by the New York State Humanities Grant and widely distributed – *We Care: A Video*

for *Care Providers of People Affected by AIDS*, 1990, about which I wrote my first scholarly book, in 1995 (*AIDS TV: Identity, Community and Alternative Video*, 1995).

"The divide between 'theory' and 'practice' has often been a sharp one," writes Gill Branston (2000, p. 24). His article is one of several attempts to answer this puzzling question about our bifurcated field, in the first section in *Reinventing Film Studies* – an anthology with a title noticeably similar to the that of the book about the history of academic film studies previously mentioned. Branston continues: "Theory, in the most distasteful extremes, [is] the haughty downlooker on practice, history, the everyday, secure in its self-proclaimed possession of totalizing accounts . . . Without such objective knowledge, it was implied, practice was benighted and ignorant" (p. 24). In the 2000 account of the discipline's invention our pen dream is thwarted, because it is too closely related to ideological visions – visions of Russian constructivists, feminists, people of color, and Marxist politicians bent upon making things that could actually be used for social change – to be associated with a new academic field in search of institutional sanction. My own doctoral AIDS project raised just the fears that Branston suggested when I sought to bring both safer sex politics and community video-making to traditional cinema studies. Such ideological commitments to community and identity building within a social justice framework evidenced in my work are often, although not always, behind similar pedagogic projects that link media literacy and production.

So, again, outside one-offs like my own 1980s camcorder AIDS work within academic cinema studies, our techno dream awaited its moment, its machine, its real home: YouTube, the Internet, the digital – at least according to a special section of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies' *Cinema Journal* – a section devoted to "Digital Scholarship and Pedagogy" (McPherson, 2009). Here several authors, including myself, make the now familiar case that *ours* is, at last, the moment for a radical, integrated media pedagogy; that this is the time, at long last, for *video writing*. John Hartley (2009, p. 140) begins by explaining why "knowing and doing" have been split, why our stylo has been continually deferred until now:

The tradition of modern scholarship – now some centuries old – has tended to favor the abstraction of knowledge from action in order to develop explicit rather than tacit knowledge [. . .] In the Industrial Revolution, for instance, "workers by brain" were abstracted from "workers by hand," white collar from blue, art from artisans, design from fabrication, knowing from doing.

He ends by announcing that our age transforms media pedagogy "from representation to productivity," where "the most important change is that the structural asymmetry between producers and consumers, experts and amateurs, writers and readers, has begun to rebalance. In principle (if not yet in practice), everyone can publish as well as 'read' mass media" (p. 143). While past dreamers were certain that *their* newest technology – 16 mm camera, VHS camcorder, digital Hi8 – was at last small enough, cheap enough, and user friendly enough to finally become the pen,

we attempt yet again to assert that it is our generation's *home computer* – an even cheaper machine that houses words, as well as images and sounds, cameras and microphones – that is the most real deal. In her contribution to *Cinema Journal*, Anne Friedberg (2009, p. 150) agrees, but she ends with an important challenge:

We are now able to write with the very images and sounds that we have been analyzing. But even if we have the technical ability to quote and cite and embed moving images/texts/archival documents, will every media scholar want to follow the Godardian imperative and “write” with images and sounds?¹

Well, now that you ask . . . no. Interesting: Friedberg is right! Not every media scholar is writing (or teaching) with images and sounds (while, of course, many are engaging in their own pedagogic projects, which “write with images and sounds.”) So why do some take this on, and others not? Currently, most scholars of media are trained in words about images and are taught that they need distance from the object we study. But, ready or trained or not, we’ve been awarded the pen, and the question is, what will we do with it? How will we teach with it? Will we write with it? And won’t our students so compose, whether we teach video writing or not? Educators have certainly begun to incorporate YouTube into their classrooms (and, since my 2007 YouTube pedagogic project, many more professors and students have experimented in migrating their studies, writing, and pedagogy to the web). However, most of contemporary YouTube pedagogy employs the site as an easily accessible archive of illustrative clips (a good use, to be sure, but a limited one). A slide show, not a pen. Interestingly, media production education has also been slow to embrace YouTube, perhaps because the vast majority of what can be found there is almost diametrically opposed to the specialized standards of form and quality that have been developed across the discipline’s history. So we still teach the tried and true way – write on paper, cherish the ink pen, make high-quality PBS documentaries, fetishize our professional quality machines – while the world outside our classrooms, including our students, flocks to amateur user-generated content.

Our students were raised within the digital, and they come to class with a digital stylo in hand: making and watching media about media every day. This they’ve learned at home through how-to videos, digital versatile disc (DVD) extras, mainstream media that mocks but also uses amateur efforts, and scores of repeatable “fan vids” (that is, fans’ name for their voluminous online practice) networked on YouTube, Facebook, and MySpace. “In this respect, the computer fulfills the promise of cinema as a visual Esperanto – a goal that pre-occupied many film artists and critics in the 1920s,” writes Lev Manovich (2001, p. 79). “Indeed, today millions of computer users communicate with each other through the same computer interface. And in contrast to cinema, where most ‘users’ are able to ‘understand’ cinematic language but not ‘speak’ it (i.e., make films), all computer users can ‘speak’ the language of the interface.” Until recently, media literacy has primarily focused on understanding the ideological underpinnings of media (how to read

it) over the practical, formal, and political concerns about how to make it, given how hard that has been.

This is why my students' efforts to understand YouTube within YouTube are so useful for proponents of a critical media literacy. Their writing on, about, and with YouTube – their banal and daily acts of “speaking the language of the interface” – can teach us how to think about instruction within and about video 2.0: an accessible tool for inscribing personal, artistic, and intellectual reflections. I will suggest that media production professors (as well as media scholars) need to embrace, not avoid, YouTube and that, in so doing, we can also work to improve it by helping to contribute to its sea of mostly mediocre and uncritical products a new stream of smart and critical student work. By expanding our teaching methods to account for this new forum as well as for the forms it supports, we can also contribute our “expert” knowledge about teaching media production in addition to the vast multitude of discourses available on the site and across the Internet. Furthermore, by encouraging our students to produce “quality” work that can also succeed under the specific parameters of the site (which are quite different from those that organize the other places where student work has typically circulated), we can affect YouTube itself, as a source of media education as well as of distribution. School-learned knowledge of the technologies, ownership, architecture, forms, and customs of the site can allow for careful, considered, and self-referential student work to become a critical part of this unruly archive.

As more and more media are produced, viewed, and distributed in the format of short, intense videos on YouTube, I will conclude that it is imperative that our students become digitally literate as readers, critics, and writers of this contemporary – and perhaps dominating – trend in new media, and that we are most qualified to teach them to write with the digital stylo, even as we must remain equipped to learn. In a world – and in a medium – where the differences between amateur and expert blur, I will hold on to my knowledge and experience as a video production professor and media scholar, even as I understand that I have much to learn from the “digital natives” of today's media, writing as they will, at last (and hopefully with the teachers' help and participation), with a YouTube stylo.

Forms of YouTube Writing

In my integrated media studies and media production course *Learning from YouTube*, I have been interested in participating with my students in primary research about online video.² We study (while participating in them) the forms and functions of this particular poster-child for web 2.0 by investigating digital video with video. Engaging the site together against YouTube's primary aims of entertainment, we write online, on YouTube, about the limits of its corporate architecture, as we also examine our own needs as new media makers, users, and learners. For the class, students are

required to do all their course work as either YouTube videos or comments. In the process, we rework academic writing (video serves as the only permitted format for traditional "papers") for the digital classroom. In this section I will introduce the 10 new forms of academic video writing that my students invented or assumed in their work during the 2007 and 2008 classes: public writing, isolated writing, amateur, entertainment, reflexive and convergence writing, visual, chaotic, control, and censored writing. I will offer examples of each form from my students' huge output of work for the course. Needless to say, describing their work on paper pales against seeing their critique of YouTube on YouTube. For this reason I have included the URLs in notes.

I developed these 10 categories while trying to systematize my students' work, and their work came from trying to systematize YouTube. Thus my categories often point, simultaneously, both to my students' work and to YouTube video more generally. That said, I will only look to my students' videos, using their inventive projects to draw out the terms for effective academic communication with a YouTube pen. While each of these stylistics can be found within traditional expression through writing and through the media, I suggest that they are modified, hybridized, and amplified in my students' online academic video writing in ways that serve to demonstrate the current state of video within web 2.0, as well as how we might best teach it. As you will see, some of these "writing forms" are focused on larger social issues (public/private, amateur/expert, for example), while others are more aesthetic and formal (reflexive, visual, and so on); and some of the terms encompass the social and pedagogic experience of the class (on YouTube and off), while others are much more focused upon understanding the aesthetics of the class's output. Needless to say, pursuing this close and complex relationship between style and content, form and ideology is defining for my practice, for the dreams of media literacy it is founded upon, and for the course itself. Thus, as I look at my students' writing, I will aim to raise not just the relevant aesthetic and textual issues but also the social, institutional, and political ones that writing with YouTube encompasses – including the relationship with larger questions of media architecture, ownership, industry, and power, which was brought to our attention through the process of learning from within a corporately owned social network.

There are the three overarching styles used with all 10 forms of my students' video writing. The first is word-reliant. In this academic form, the user writes a more or less traditional paper and reads the words on to video. Notably, this variety of writing allows for the expression of the most complex meanings and for the construction of the least interesting videos. Words that travel straight from paper to video take up too much time and are too didactic for YouTube's vernacular of speed and condensation. The powerful expressive capacity of the image is also denied. Particularly at the beginning of each semester, many of my students would read papers to the camera, or even type them as a scroll onto the screen. Next – probably the most common and arguably the most successful form for our purposes – is the illustrated summary, composed through the bullet-pointing of more detailed ideas, which are then cut to

images from YouTube as evidence. This is YouTube as PowerPoint, and it's a method of communication we are already familiar with. Here the student reads or writes a list of short ideas and uses YouTube videos to illustrate them. Finally – perhaps my favorite, and certainly the most creative form – is the YouTube hack, where academic content is wedged into a popular YouTube vernacular mode, making its argument through an integrated approach, which occurs in both form and content. An example would be a video about advertisements on YouTube, expressed through the form of a popular YouTube advertisement. Beside these common formats, I also note the ubiquitous use of two more common tones and structures across my students' 10 forms of writing: parodic humor and self-reflexivity. Given the ubiquity of these two approaches, my students will still sometimes pull the unexpected power play of sincerity, which creates productive tension with YouTube's expected cynicism, humor, and self-reflexivity, and does so in ways that define the site.

Public Writing

ALEX JUHASZ: We're recording! If you don't want to be seen on YouTube for this class, you should know we're recording, so you might want to be behind this area over here. You're going to be on all semester.

STUDENT: It's so awkward.

JUHASZ: You're in the shot.

STUDENT: I know!

(Learning from YouTube: September 4, 2007, Pt. 1)¹

Web 2.0 technology has altered human behavior, interaction, and communication in more ways than I can introduce here. Of greatest relevance to this consideration, however, is one particular and much noted phenomenon: the digital's influence upon the increasingly open nature of private life. On Facebook, YouTube, and the like users ubiquitously and unflinchingly post for social scrutiny images from the realm of home and family, once thought to be private. In his book on YouTube, Michael Strangelove (2009, p. 33) explains: "Whereas much of the home movie-making of the analog era was guided by a desire among filmmakers to show themselves to themselves, we now stand witness to a growing compulsion among online videographers to show themselves to the world." However, as publicity-seeking YouTubers readily make use of the recognizable, tried and true do-it-yourself (DIY) forms of home movies or family snapshots, things change when their new practices modify these forms' traditional locale. On YouTube, conventions for both the content and the use of the home movie have changed. Strangelove clarifies the differences: "The home movies of the 1970s generally did not focus on unfamiliar people, death, arguments, use of the bathroom, vomiting, and sexual intercourse" (p. 29).

On YouTube, home users train their camcorders on people, activities, and behaviors that used to fall off the radar of the permissibly visible: on parental drinking and

fighting, on soldiers' views of war zones and abuse against civilians, on the internal life of college classrooms. When the private becomes public, the focus of students' work also adapts. "In the hands of teenagers the camera becomes a tool for rebellious and transgressive behavior" (p. 49). In this vein, many of my students gladly show themselves and their peers on YouTube in compromised positions: under the influence of drugs or alcohol, engaged in sexual flirtation, titillation, or interaction. For instance, in "Picture of America (Hilarious Drunk College Students)," by CollegeKnowledge,⁴ my students ironically suggest that the "Future of America" will be in the hands of drunken college students: "What would you do if you were president?" "Legalize marijuana, end the war in Iraq, subsidize the refining of glass." While student video-makers have always pushed envelopes of propriety, this used to be visible only within the small community of the classroom. How does this radical public openness affect the teaching of video?

Usually (or at least ideally), the exclusive liberal arts classroom where I work depends upon an intimate and "safe" gathering of high-paying (or scholarship receiving) and carefully selected students to create a communal pedagogy. In my typical Pitzer College classroom, once the doors are closed, students are asked to contribute their interpretations and sometimes personal experience or knowledge to the class community, being always aware that they are not professionals but are certainly experts in training. Students, often feeling vulnerable in the eyes of their classmates and of their esteemed professor, are challenged to add their voices to the building dialogue – one in which they are active, continuing members. Meanwhile, aware of the power dynamics that structure the classroom by allowing some to speak with comfort and others not, I engage in strategies designed to alter the "safety" of the space. After leaving the classroom, students write for the professor, and sometimes to each other; but the general public is neither their audience nor their critic. The classroom's privacy and possibilities for mutuality encourage the development of a voice.

In this dynamic it is odd for a professor to make *her* work public. And yet I began this class – planning for its structure to imitate my understanding of YouTube's – with a press release. Picked up by a local newspaper (as I anticipated it might), this went onto the Associated Press (AP) wire (which I did not anticipate), and then the course was covered in print, radio, television, and across the Internet for about two wild weeks. While initially thrilled by such media exposure, the students quickly tired of the mainstream and digital media, which, while quick to judge, were astoundingly superficial in their coverage. Needless to say, lofty (and time-trusted) pedagogic dynamics shift when the world can see – and also participate in – the work of classroom learning. What does it mean to ask a novice to learn in public, or for a teacher to do the same? When students "write" on YouTube, their efforts at developing a voice are open to public scrutiny and to YouTube's sandlot culture. Many viewers of my students' (first) videos responded with nasty comments telling them to "learn to use a tripod" – not to mention the ubiquitous personal attacks, which were almost uniformly made against women, people of color, or those perceived to be gay or lesbian simply on account of the act of speaking as themselves, visibly on the site.

While making the class and its assignments publicly available serves to increase access to higher education and expands the limited participation within any brick and mortar classroom, it is vital to note how the disciplining structures that safeguard and control learning in a closed classroom – or a paper written for course work that will circulate privately between teacher and student – no longer function. In their absence, such confinements become both surprisingly visible and unusually desirable to students. For instance, the compact (and grades) of a closed classroom insure that all student participants are (relatively) committed and attentive. This is unenforceable in a YouTube classroom. Given these conditions, it was fascinating to see my students bent upon re-establishing the privacy of their classroom by using YouTube to create protected group pages, for instance, thereby holding out the curious and insulting public that I had initially invited in. This is only the first example of their efforts to bring discipline to a class where I had given it away, in my efforts to expand their voice and control in ways that I thought were mirroring the user-generated platform we were studying.

Thus this new public video writing demands that the YouTube professor make central to her teaching considerations of control, sexism, voyeurism, censorship, and self-censorship. America's definitive structures of public and private, profit and non-profit education also come to the fore, which allows for a meta-focus upon how the systems of higher education at large, and the college classroom more specifically, organize and control both student output and teachers' attention.

Isolated Writing

In "MS130 Want Some High School Musical 3? Watch till the End!"⁵ the student video-maker whose YouTube user-name is ziliemd begins with the inter-title "3 steps to become a YouTube Guru! Nov 2008 . . . Input: an ordinary guy . . . And the transformation begins . . ." We watch as this mild-mannered Chinese college student, in classic to-the-camera, video blog (vblog) shot, begins his online presence, then, cut to "step 1," he takes on costumes and attitude, seeking more fame and attention, and, cut to "step 2," adds "entertainment elements," lip synching with a friend, to elevate the fun even as the class assignment is to do the serious work of explaining the academic book *Serious Leisure* (Robert Stebbins, 2006). Thus ziliemd expertly produces in video form the kinds of practices that Stebbins introduces in writing.

In same-time counterdistinction and close connection to the public writing mentioned above, much YouTube writing, while openly presented to the YouTube public, is produced in and about isolation and in the hopes of finding community. The lone and lonely individual speaking to the computer camera in her bedroom – the video blog – is a definitive form of the medium. While it is highly debated (on YouTube and off) whether networked pleas for friends through the expressions of the individual and unique self can produce the desired effects of community's sustained interaction, recognition, mutuality, shared goals, and connection, it is clear that a

great many YouTubers write videos from the seclusion (and safety) of home and with some hopes of departing this place: whether this be to find fame or simply a friend. What does this portend for the teaching of YouTube writing?

Interestingly, the voice of the written text (like mine here) is typically not particularly self-conscious about its solo status (why, oh why, am I typing here alone . . . woe is me). Meanwhile, the solo YouTube writer is visually framed as a face alone, in the private sphere, and is just as often verbally preoccupied with her isolated condition. In "MS130 Want Some High School Musical 3? Watch till the End!" ziliemd literally adds a friend to his second and third shots, to reflect visually (and to increase it, because the shot is more interesting) the possibility of making friends, or at least of having more viewers. While writing with the intention of self-expression is as defining for the written medium as it is for the videoblog, it is the purpose (and possibility) of actually interacting with others eventually, in almost real time – although often in less than real space – that most distinguishes these various writing forms. And yet, counterintuitively, a good deal of isolated YouTube video seems to be meaningless, silly, or egotistical ruminations on self – hardly a calling card for further interpersonal interaction. Interestingly, video art, too, has been long censured for being a "narcissistic" mode: a technological mirror allowing the self to interact solely with itself, in an endless loop of absorption and fascination. On YouTube we merely see a democratization of this effect. "The biggest content category is occupied by the 'ego clips,'" writes Bridgit Richard (2008, p. 145) in the first anthology of critical essays on YouTube. "They excessively serve the narcissistic self representation of the users. In this category a wide range from shy monologues to visual self-prostitution are [sic] to be found."

Of course, as is often true for YouTube, the reverse of narcissism is equally defining for its forms: the lonely video-maker looking outward, making sincere and humble stabs at communication, a lone voice waiting for recognition in the wilds of the internet. While the lucky few do break out to be heard around the world (as our class did), most YouTube videos suffer from "NicheTube's" guarantee that no one will actually find, see, or hear you in the uncharted and unruly sea of similarly useless attempts at communication and self-expression. Given YouTube's reliance on votes, ranking, and other forms of popularity engineered through its search and rating functions, the random thoughts of lonely girls usually go unfound and unheard. Thus, isolated video writing demands that the YouTube professor make central to her teaching considerations of self-expression and community, particularly within a corporately run architecture that allows for the most outlandish to have the best chances to be seen.

Amateur Writing

In one long take, shot in a dorm room, with a white board sloppily tipped against the wall behind him we see a student who says: "This is my video post: what can YouTube teach us? [. . .] I will do some teaching of my own. I'll teach you a little about myself

in a segment I call '5 things about Ben!' This is the '5 things about Ben board.' We'll begin with 'V-card.' I lost my virginity at 16. I'm not sure that's appropriate but I'll go with it."

(What YouTube Can Teach Us: bhecht84)⁶

The vblog is a hallmark of YouTube and a seal of amateur writing: a word-reliant format that uses the author's computer or other home devices to capture her talking in something close to real time, most often about herself (see isolated writing). Visibly (and aurally), the media production of a lay person who makes the most of consumer technology, the guarantees of production expertise, or a college education in media production (careful lighting, clear and complex sound, artful framing, story management and development) are lacking – by definition, and even by design. While bhecht84 has the skills and education to make artful ruminations for his other classes, for Learning from YouTube he produced the intentionally messy "What YouTube Can Teach Us," because his use of "bad" form permits his use of "bad" taste (see public writing); all of this comments, via form, on his understanding that YouTube loves how people talk about their inane and trivial private experiences: "I lost my virginity at 16."

Amateur writing is the easily recorded, unedited words of real people talking into their low-end cameras about their private pleasure or pain, or perhaps demonstrating their exceptional or laughable skills. Everything they *don't do* marks the veracity of the form. On YouTube "crude is cool, as opposed to slick" (Sherman, 2008, p. 162). The bad but cool video of YouTube holds itself in direct opposition to the hot and professional, the other most common vernacular of the site. In the media production classroom we teach video-making *en route* to professional standards and methods: an expensive, collaborative, skilled practice where form is either transparent or carefully figured. This is the antithesis of the developing YouTube vernacular where

[t]he use of canned music will prevail. Recombinant work will be more and more common. Collage, montage and the quick-and-dirty efficiency of recombinant forms are driven by the romantic, Robin Hood-like efforts of the copyleft movement. Real-time, on-the-fly voiceovers will replace scripted narratives. Personal, on-site journalism and video diaries will proliferate. On-screen text will be visually dynamic, but semantically crude. Crude animation will be mixed with crude behavior. Slick animation takes time and money. (Ibid., p. 161)

Amateur writing celebrates and foregrounds its formal inadequacies. In this way YouTube is not really a level playing field. By reifying the distinctions between the amateur and the professional, the personal and the social, the bad and good, in both form and content, YouTube maintains (not democratizes, as it insistently proclaims) distinctions about who really owns culture even as more people can make it. In the meantime, amateur writing has itself become a legitimate form of dominant video production. Contemporary corporate media often fakes amateurism in hopes of gaining what amateur video is thought to hold: authenticity, individuality, realness.

"The misleading 'ideology of authenticity' as a cultural consensus is based on the poor quality of the recording tools with their low resolution, as well as the presentation in small windows on the computer screen, which conspire to create 'a look of everyday life'" (Richard, 2008, p. 143). When students self-consciously use or mimic this convention (as bhect84 did so artfully), it carries this (short) history of meanings and customs.

Thus this new, amateur video writing demands that the YouTube professor make central to her teaching considerations of the relations between both professional skills and thought-through simplicity, as well as how these forms are used in relation to open-ended questions of personal authenticity and corporate legitimacy. Teaching amateur writing within the history (and changing standards) of DIY media forms is a good place to start, putting demands on the students to speak to each other in this way: exacerbating and highlighting difference and status (of women, foreign students, or working class students) who must speak as themselves, even if their vernaculars and homes mark disparities.

Entertainment Writing

"Gimme gimme more," sings Britney Spears, as this song comes up for sale from iTunes at the bottom of a YouTube video where a male and female student wear outlandish wigs and sunglasses while gorging themselves on buckets of chicken, handfuls of burritos, and shopping carts full of chips, junk food and candy. Britney sings her refrain, "Gimme gimme more," while the videomakers enact and then reverse their gluttony and purge all they have digested. The pop music track stops briefly, only at video's end, as we see a car full of these hungry fast food junkies, and our male lead says to the intercom: "Can you give me more special sauce? Can you give me ketchup and mustard? Can you give me a napkin? Can you give me pepper?"

(Britney Spears Uncensored Dancing and Eating: jweitzel)⁷

Today's middle-class students, schooled at home (and on the road!) on YouTube, iPhones, and Britney Spears ("gimme more"), want *more* information relayed with *more* ease and fun and plentitude; they want it pleasurable, simplified, and hilarious. They don't want to be bored, even as they are always distracted. On YouTube, the rule is to be entertained with video, and more of it! This occurs through forms that are readily accessible, short, and easily identifiable: like pop songs. There should be no work expended to "get" a video. Thus entertainment writing is often both about, and made with, the ripped or imitated forms of already recognizable mainstream (or YouTube) media. It is writing about and through dominant diversions. It can also take up the amateur forms of comedy or spectacle, which celebrates or parodies the exceptional or standard behaviors of real people (like YouTuber jweitzel's vomiting chicken) or pop stars. The point is to laugh, feel, and recognize – quickly and with a punch. My students' video, relying as it does upon the song as well as upon the persona of Britney Spears, uses her highly recognizable work to provide a short-hand into their critique of consumer pop culture. The artists themselves say almost

nothing, and we get it immediately. In his contribution to the *Video Vortex Reader*, video artist and writer Tom Sherman prophesizes what I call *entertainment writing*: "Extreme sports, sex, self-mutilation and drug overdoses will mix with disaster culture; terrorist attacks, plane crashes, hurricanes and tornadoes will be translated into mediated horror through vernacular video" (Sherman, 2008, p. 162). The bulimic dance of jweitzel is exactly Sherman's extreme.

Schooled as they are, contemporary students believe that even college should speak in this extremely entertaining language, which they already like and know and deserve. A good professor makes "hard" information understandable, palatable. While I have always been aware that I am a performer, I feel this to an unparalleled degree when I teach or write on YouTube. There I need to be quick and forceful, condensing my ideas into slogans: bite-size morsels of edification that are easily regurgitable. YouTube is not a place for the complex, deep, slow, or hard – which was once understood to structure the life of the mind, the work of the artist, the experience of the counterculture, the ways of the classroom. While students have often taken pleasure in the rigorous work of learning, entertainment writing is not founded on such delectations. Rather it feeds upon YouTube's staple ease, plentitude, and self-referentiality. Thus entertainment video writing demands that the YouTube professor make central to her teaching considerations of the easy and ready pleasures of the expected, comfortable, and consumable as well as of how easy these are to eliminate.

Reflexive Writing

Using only still frame grabs of the site as visuals, we hear this commentary: "YouTube provides a prime example of how the content that we as a society create is shaped largely by the forms and rules of the medium that we use to share this content. For instance, the restricted comment length and poor archiving features for YouTube comments has contributed to the prevalence of short, often inflammatory comments . . . Decisions made at the corporate level for purely capitalistic reasons effect the medium in terms of content that appears on the website."

(What Can YouTube Teach Us? baxter1)⁸

Videos about two things – about YouTube videos and about corporate entertainment media – have become the hallmark of YouTube. Making such videos is reflexive writing. But this kind of writing is also entertainment writing, because it is almost always fun, in a postmodern way . . . It makes YouTube its content as well as its form and method – since, as I've already established, a significant amount of the content and form of YouTube is entertainment. This creates a dizzying hall of media mirrors – videos quoting, mashing, and copying other videos – and then, as in all things reflexive, there are two possible results. The first is heightened self-knowledge; the second is an abyss of unknowing. These binaries (like most others) coexist on YouTube and have a mutual influence. Knowing more about YouTube allows for an

awareness of its common state of unknowing, itself a form of cynical and cyclical entertainment.

Many YouTube videos take YouTube as their subject: for instance its community, or rules, or censorship. YouTubers contribute to all manners of video studies about the site, using other videos as both evidence and substance. My students' course work for "Learning from YouTube" is a prime example of this tendency: the site holds their videos, which are its critique, built from other YouTube videos; and these are then covered by other media or YouTubers, and those stories are ripped and put back onto YouTube, where users respond again. Even in our case (an example that starts with YouTube reflexivity and leads to self-knowledge), we see how quickly "the real" dissolves into nothing more than an awareness of YouTube's knowledge of itself alone. We fall into an abyss where YouTube refers back to nothing but itself, and we are part of this loss or transformation. We become a necessary but unmissed casualty to a richer and endlessly self-referential and self-fulfilling life online. Thus this new and reflexive video writing demands that the YouTube professor make central to her teaching considerations of the real in relation to the ready pleasures of its loss, while also helping students to understand the (artificial) limits of the site and of the media it holds.

Convergence Writing

We see images ripped from the internet over which text reads: "How does YouTube function within other webmedia? Example: Googlemaps. Users can create content like pictures and video. Here's what I found when I typed in Japan." We see stills of cherry blossoms, a subway map, a sports car, and a neon-lit street. "It's still hard to connect information and create real dialogue or learning, especially because you can find things like this . . . " We see a YouTube video of a baby singing "Hey Jude" with a guitar in hand.

(YouTube in Context: kimballzen)⁹

Convergence writing is a more mobile and adaptable form of reflexive writing. As Henry Jenkins (2006) points out, the new media allow for expression that gains in impact by moving across platforms while building upon the power of ready-made memes already encrusted with meaning (and ownership). Convergence writing moves on and off YouTube quickly and sometimes virally, picking up other forms, just as a snowball does: subway map, "Hey Jude." While Jenkins argues for the revolutionary power of this rapid and free movement, after reading him and also researching on YouTube, my students and I were less sure; see kimballzen's comment that connection, dialogue, and learning are less easy to secure than the accumulation of user-added stuff. Thus convergence video writing demands that the YouTube professor make central to her teaching considerations of the many sites, forms, and languages of new media, particularly as students make their YouTube writing about

other forms of writing (*Star Wars* yields the fan fiction that is the subject of "Media Convergence *Star Wars* Fan Fiction," written by my student, wtto2005;¹⁰ there wtto2005 looks at fan fiction.net and discovers on its *Star Wars* page that, while there are 795 pages of fan fiction, one finds only 56 pages through ratings).

Visual Writing

Over one quickly edited minute and covering the Avril Lavigne's hit "Girlfriend" we see video of: cute kitten, a train ride, women mud wrestling, the Girlfriend music video, a baby laughing, a unicorn animation, and some Soulja Boy dance instruction. The video concludes with text: "YouTube is changing society and now society is changing for YouTube, have we been tricked?"

(Everything People Love about YouTube: edauehauer)¹¹

Visual writing depends on images linked through rhythm and related sounds. "Hey hey, you you, I don't want your girlfriend" plus cute kitten. It does not depend upon written words, as the writing of old did. "Hey hey, you you, I know that you like me" plus train. Its 500-character limit and sandlot culture produce a dumbing down for the written word that is structurally impossible to remedy. "Hey hey, you you, I could be your girlfriend" plus mud wrestling. Here the limits of the site's architecture hit against its corporate conditions: songs and beats, the more popular and recognizable the better to hear you with (plus baby laughing). So the way to be heard on YouTube is through video (music video). Being another category of entertainment and reflexive writing, this style banks upon the amusing stylistics of montage, appropriation, and parody. Meaning is quickly lost to feelings that are buttressed by the sound of music and cut to the speed of Final Cut Pro (or other home editing software, including YouTube's). What "people love about YouTube" is how easy it is to make and see and understand. Relying both on spectacle and on humor, visual writing is also, counterintuitively, the terrain of the expert; for it is highly dependent upon corporate popular media, even (or especially) as modified by "amateurs." Corporate videos express ideas about the products of mainstream culture in the music-driven, quickly edited, glossy lingo of music videos and commercials. They consolidate ideas into icons – which are often things to buy, like pop songs. "The current environment favors messaging, the propagation of short, direct, functional messages," writes Sherman (2008, p. 166). Importantly, this has real effects on the kinds of culture we see. He continues: "the characteristics of poetic art, ambiguity and abstraction, are not particularly useful in a messaging culture."

Understandably, visual writing is the most difficult form to use in academic video writing, but students try, usually through opposition, producing image-laden, inexplicably speedy montages that mean nothing, except that this meaningless linking (cat to train to wrestling) is how we mean on YouTube. Of course, this is in direct opposition to the vblog, where communication occurs through real-time words and where image

quality is basically insignificant. This new, visual video writing demands that the YouTube professor make central to her teaching considerations of the power of the written (and even spoken) word in relation to the ready pleasures of its absence.

Chaotic Writing

Almost impossible to describe, it's so quick (7 seconds!) and strange, to a techno beat we see: a guy dancing, a cat super-imposed and spun, a super-hero placed onto that, the guy with a walrus mask on his head and the words "do we want more from youtube?" flashed at the end.

(Worst Movie Ever Made: baxteric1)¹²

Ideally, the college classroom and its writing requirements are disciplined spaces and practices where knowledge moves in a formal and structured routine, familiar to all players. While the critical classroom begins to alter this script by giving more power to students and by allowing knowledge to be created dynamically, this is neither the random chaos of information nor the hidden controls of YouTube. *Chaotic writing* knows it will be lost (because it isn't any good, no one will watch it, and it will remain unranked and thus unseen); it tries to reach for meaninglessness, and perhaps randomly – if reflexively – it links to other meaningless writing, to which it has almost no deducible connection. It either celebrates YouTube's unstructured archive or is confused by it; or it confuses us – or it clarifies that confusion. Unknowing and pleasure are the point.

However, for effective education (and communication), structure remains paramount: to manage conversation; to allow ideas to build in succession, permitting things to grow steadily more complex; and to be able to find things once and then again, so as to link them, map them, and experience them more than once and also communally. Again, the significance of discipline within the academic setting tests the rule. Without it ideas stay vague, dispersed, and random – if fun (or funny). There is no system of evaluation and you can't find things or build upon them. Chaotic writing laughs at education in the name of entertainment; it celebrates the waning of meaning and the spiraling out of control of signification. It is either celebratory or anguished, and usually it is both: "Do we want more from YouTube?" This new, chaotic video writing demands that the YouTube professor make central to her teaching considerations of the random and the structured, the euphoric and the forlorn.

Control Writing

In this video, I speak to my computer, sitting in my office, as I read a list of twelve reasons why it is hard to learn from YouTube over two minutes of real-time video.

(Summary of Learning from YouTube at the Midterm 2: MediaPraxisMe)¹³

Control writing works against, and in response to, the previously mentioned chaotic, undisciplined culture of YouTube and attempts instead to force structure and the possibility of building complexity into its pages. It attempts to map or connect work, while making the most of YouTube's weak architecture – a web 2.0 environment that disallows most of what we expect on the web: linking, versioning, tagging, saving. Control writing strives to organize its own visibility, legibility, and linkability through the rigorous, theorized production of titles, tags, and networked promotion. It tries to understand the mechanisms, rules, and forms of YouTube so as to better direct these toward comprehension. Otherwise ideas stay vague and dispersed, there is no system of evaluation, and you can't find things or build upon them. Categories and order allow for discipline, which may punish or provide elegance, or both. This new, control video writing demands that the YouTube professor make central to her teaching considerations of discipline and structure, as well as their absence. YouTube separates the artist from the user. "Artists must pick up on the everyday forms of videos, but move beyond this. Artists must identify, categorize and order the various strata of everyday videos by using an appropriate video language to interact with the world effectively and with a certain elegance" (Tollman, 2007, p. 170). Here the professor gains and loses control as she attempts to question how the rules of traditional academic writing and video production do and do not translate into work penned through a video stylo.

Censored and Copyright Writing

To see "Blacks on Youtube Final," by VannaBlack4u,¹⁴ a research project on whether empowering or positive images of black people are ever popular on the site, you have to authorize that you are of age. This is because it has been flagged by users as being inappropriate for younger audiences. Many videos by my students have been taken down because they used songs owned by the music industry, while others still are gone for reasons of self-censorship: maybe the students didn't want their sophomoric efforts visible to you (or me).

Censored and copyright writing are corporate varieties of control and/or chaotic writing (it's all so confusing!) and are definitive of YouTube (usually heralded as a "democratic" platform). Content is built upon a promise of free expression; users nevertheless routinely flag it, servicing the corporation, whenever ideas stray from the comfortable confines of the hegemonic. "How do you find Black people on YouTube?" VannaBlack4u asks. Simple: "by SEARCHING for terms like Fight, Babymomma, Bitch, Ass, Trick, Ho." While sexual and violent images are easily found across the site, both ideological and corporately owned content are quickly lost. Then YouTube itself commonly censors content through a system of rules and procedures that are both opaque and shifting. Thus this new form of video writing – censored and copyright writing – demands that the YouTube professor make central to her teaching

considerations of voicelessness in the face of corporate control, a political theme that permeates all the previous categories. And here again the corporate architecture of the site creates and controls user behavior and access to information.

Stylo Dreams Deferred

If one wishes to be part of the twenty-first-century, media-saturated world and wants to communicate effectively with others or express one's position on current affairs in considerable detail, with which technology would one chose to do so, digital video or a pencil?

(Sherman, 2008, p. 163)

A pencil? YouTube is a corporately owned, highly structured domain that allows average users to write beyond the reach of a pencil with networked video. While infinitely more visible, their writing is also always circumscribed by capital, hegemonic ideology and by dominant media. If the pen or pencil is cheap and easily bought at the mall or online, but if it does not come with a teacher, we learn from YouTube that it will predominantly be used to mimic familiar forms, not to challenge them. We learn that, while everyone can be a writer, not all users will be “masters”:

The media-master is characterized through technical expertise and perfection, and has special skills relating to the medium and its structure. [. . .] Seen from the point of view of the art system of fine arts, the amateur normally represents the infantile, naïve and unreflected, almost too perfect imagery, that is generated through visual stereotypes or motifs of popular culture [. . .] Most YouTube-uploaders do not intend to establish or implement a new art form or aesthetic. (Richard, 2008, p. 150)

The dream was never simply to write, but to do so with a view to a better, integrated, and original aesthetics of the now, of the self, and of the self-aware. Contemporary digital video writers, like my students, armed with their pen and enabled by YouTube, also need digital video teachers who will work with them to produce video writing that integrates history, aesthetics, analysis, and control to truly fulfill this perennial dream of visibility, expression, and everyday communication and expression.

NOTES

- 1 Friedberg is referring to Jean-Luc Godard's reference to film critic Alexandre Astruc.
- 2 My YouTube page about the teaching of this class is at <http://www.youtube.com/MediaPraxisme>. A “video-book” about these efforts was “published” by MIT Press in 2012 as well; it can be found at <http://mitpress.mit.edu/catalog/author/default.asp?aid=38947>.

- 3 I will give the title, author and universal resource locator (URL) for each of the course videos I discuss, but obviously the best way to write about YouTube video is online, at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8CDrYwXVOn4>
- 4 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KdGsM-y-dXQ>
- 5 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lxPwe6FjTjk>
- 6 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hZ00UqFRmzg> (removed)
- 7 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AuZpKTA3ZQ>
- 8 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9UFRHgP71us>
- 9 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EYe6mOYUOWk>
- 10 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=crlcYR2oySc>
- 11 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a2eUPc3F08A>. All of these images and sounds are found from the "most-viewed" videos on YouTube.
- 12 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P9E-j8c6KZc>
- 13 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ulK9XZwGqDc>
- 14 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y6rd5MscyPI>

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