Rhetoricizing Visual Literacies [1]

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Abstract

Discourses about media literacy often separate professional and amateur media makers into static, binary categories. These scholarly and popular discourses tend to idealize professionals and characterize amateurs as disinterested in form. Yet discourses of quality appear on video-sharing sites such as YouTube, as participants evaluate their own videos. Using discourse-based framings such as announcements, apologies, and accounts, uploaders point out aesthetic and technical flaws with regards to factors such as lighting, white balance, and camera angles. Uploaders use such framings to rhetoricize or persuade viewers that creators actually possess sets of knowledge and visual literacies that may not be apparent in a particular execution of a video. Such framings enable video uploaders to display identities of technical competence, and to attend to viewers' sensitivities and expectations. These rhetorical strategies challenge the notion that vernacular video making skills are forever frozen in time, rather than continually being evaluated and reconsidered by creators.

Introduction

A prominent scholarly discourse on everyday video production revolves around whether the dividing "line" between amateurs and professionals has now blurred (Kinder 2008). Informing this discussion are assessments of video quality and a media maker's overt attention to visual aesthetics. Some media professionals claim that the distributional power of video-sharing sites such as YouTube erodes the division while others feel that there is value to respecting vernacular creators and their "good enuf" aesthetics, to use the words of John Seely Brown (as reported in Kinder 2008: 55). Yet, it is misleading to speak of a "line" or binary break between professionals and amateurs. Studies on leisure argue that professionals and amateurs exist on a continuum based not only on income derived from the activity, but also on numerous cultural and social criteria that include external reputation, knowledge of specialized techniques, and interaction within particular social networks (Stebbins 1977).

To argue that vernacular media makers are content with so-called "good enuf" aesthetics is to ignore the fact that not all amateurs produce low-quality work, and not all professionals produce high and lasting art (Stebbins 1977). Turning on the television will quickly disavow academics of that notion. Rather than speak of a "line," it is more theoretically accurate to recognize a nuanced set of continua containing professionals and amateurs who often share certain values and personal aspirations about creating media. Scholars recognize that numerous novices and advanced amateurs have important knowledge and skills (Müller 2009). Müller rightly points out that a discourse of quality exists on YouTube in which advice and discussion is exchanged with regard to what constitutes a "good video."

Indeed, Kinder (2008: 55) asks, "Isn't it condescending to assume that amateurs are incapable of aspiring to aesthetic rigor or conceptual innovation, particularly if we accept the premise that users always know best?" To willfully misrecognize amateurs' attempts to improve their media making is to freeze them in time and assume they can never improve, a characterization which reifies structures of power in media making. Of course, it is also the case that aspirations may not always map to one's execution in both vernacular and professional contexts.

The present paper examines how YouTubers participate in a discourse of quality through self-evaluations of their work. Of interest are the following questions: Do YouTube participants attend to technical aspects of video making? If so, how do viewers "know"? Do creators believe that their technical abilities and knowledge can simply be "read" from a single video? What clues do participants provide that their aspirations may not always match their execution? What rhetorical strategies do they use to index their visual literacies, and how do these strategies aim to structure viewership on YouTube? Do all YouTubers consider their so-called "good enuf" aesthetics as truly good enough?

This paper combines ethnographic and discourse analysis approaches to investigate how video makers on YouTube communicate assessments of their work, and how these assessments reveal productive desires. It argues that many YouTubers do attend to quality, including specific kinds of aesthetic features

such as lighting, white balancing, and framing. When their execution does not map to their aspirations, they use rhetorical strategies in the titles, text descriptions, and content of their videos to display and negotiate identifies of technical competence. Rhetorical strategies include announcements, apologies, and accounts that explain past choices and future ambitions with regard to creating online videos. For example, to apologize for bad lighting is to indicate that one has the visual literacy to know that the lighting would not meet certain viewing standards. These tactics attempt to "rhetoricize" or persuade viewers that the video maker is aware of particular visual literacies or sets of accepted video making practices, even if these literacies cannot be gleaned from the image alone. Rhetorical strategies attempt to structure viewership by improving perceptions of video makers' abilities in the eyes of their viewers.

Situating Visual Literacies

What is meant by visual literacies, and how do we know YouTubers have achieved or seek to achieve such literacies? To speak of any particular "literacy" or set of literacies is to invoke highly normative and often contentious debates about which forms of knowledge are deemed appropriate and necessary to achieve success in particular cultural contexts. Yet what counts as accepted knowledge sets "are under continuous development and negotiation through social activity" (Ito et al. 2010: 24). What constitutes an acceptable practice in one setting may not be seen as necessary or important in another.

The New Media Consortium (2005: 2) defines media literacies as:

> The set of abilities and skills where aural, visual, and digital literacy overlap. These include the ability to understand the power of images and sounds, to recognize and use that power, to manipulate and transform digital media, to distribute them pervasively, and to easily adapt them to new forms.

Within this larger definition, visual literacies may defined as sets of knowledge about image production and interpretation that facilitate communication of particular messages. Jenkins et al. (2006) argue that in addition to these criteria, media literacy should be considered a "social skill" that takes into account how media structures perception and how negotiations about media help determine what will be considered "equal participation" in everyday contexts.

In terms of producing videos, an initial baseline includes the codified sets of knowledge in text books, how-to manuals, and film schools. However breaking such "rules" can often be accepted as playing with form or creating unique stylistics. For example, "home movies" or "home mode" video often breaks standard "rules" through shaky camera movements, frequent use of panning and zooming, and lack of external lights or microphones (Moran 2002: 168). Yet these "violations" have together yielded a genre or "sub-code" of home mode video with recognizable stylistics that professionals now incorporate into feature films to transmit messages about a character's emotions or past (Moran 2002). These stylistics often have an air of authenticity and truthfulness. How and when "rules" may be broken are culturally negotiable.

Rather than seeing literacy as a neutral set of skills that are intuitively desirable and achievable through approval by standardized bodies, scholars working in the tradition of new literacy studies seek to

understand how the promotion of particular literacies are used to achieve particular ends, to negotiate identities, or to maintain asymmetries of power (Ito et al. 2010; Street 1984). Ignoring discourses of quality on YouTube helps maintain perceptions of asymmetrical knowledge between so-called amateurs and professionals, even though the situation is far more nuanced. For example, Moran (2002: xix) argues that certain categories of "professional video production" such as event recording, "are frequently indistinguishable from the amateur videos that they simulate." Whether or not one agrees with Moran's statement in all cases, he is correct when he states that binarizing discourses work to "defame" amateurs and the contribution they make to culture and society.

The field of media literacy in education has moved toward cultivating the active skills necessary to create as well as parse effective media (Brown 1998; Zettl 1998). Media literacy studies increasingly emphasize how people may more effectively communicate, cultivate a public voice, develop their creativity, and enjoy greater general agency (Ito et al. 2010; Rheingold 2008) through media production. Such research may be particularly necessary in environments in which skills are not adequately being developed. For example, in their study of 12 households in the United Kingdom, Buckingham et al. (2011: 125) found that developing media literacy through making private home video was "more or less irrelevant to [study participants'] needs." However, the move toward encouraging production continues to exhibit a tension between enforcing normative goals while remaining sensitive to the needs of participants in everyday communities of interest, which are vital for connecting people and helping them explore their creativity (Gauntlett 2011). Müller (2009: 127) calls this tension the "participatory dilemma," meaning that scholars embrace democratization of media while expressing concern that "new 'uneducated' participants neglect professional standards of craftsmanship, aesthetic quality or ethic norms."

Discourses about amateurs' lack of ability are often invoked to maintain asymmetrical power arrangements between traditional media and vernacular voices. But amateurs quite clearly draw on traditional media aesthetics to shape the participatory reception of their work (Lange 2011a; Müller 2009). Aesthetics may be defined here as the "basic image elements (light and shadows, color, two- and three- dimensional space, time and motion, and sound) and how they interrelate and interact with one another" (Zettl 1998). Technical qualities include the choice of equipment and settings that influence the production of particular aesthetic effects. For example, Müller (2009) cites many examples in which participants offer and view tutorials about how to improve video quality when operating within a limited budget. If vernacular aesthetics were "good enuf," then presumably such tutorials would not enjoy enormous popularity on the site.

Whether any particular skill is important is socially negotiated. For example, video makers may ask, can videos "go viral" while exhibiting bad lighting? Is it possible to create a video with generally-accepted beautiful lighting yet still contain content that is dull or pointless to most viewers? Should a video that family members will enjoy just not be posted if the white balance is off? Gauntlett (2011) argues that the roughness of videos serves to encourage novices to give video making a try, and thus enter into the process of improving their media literacy skills. Gauntlett states that the uneven content on sites such as YouTube gives participants courage to try out their public voice, make their own media, and connect with others. He states, "A focus on content rather than style [can convey] the powerful, inclusive, happy

message that 'anyone can do this'" (Gauntlett 2011: 85). What counts then, as meaningful literacies may be empirically addressed by investigating different parties' perceptions of video quality and its importance in particular contexts.

On YouTube, participants often display concerns with issues of quality. The site provides a number of ways in which discourses of quality emerge, including ratings, and tips in comments, not to mention the plethora of video tutorials that demand study in their own right (Müller 2009). Müller (2009: 137) argues that, "Although video-sharing sites allow for more diverse forms of participation than traditional mass media ever did, the quality discourse on YouTube works to structure possible acts of audiovisual participation according to well-established conventions and standards."

Building on Müller's theme, this paper analyzes how creators use discourse to frame and present their media. It concentrates on the everyday ways in which creators label their videos to present the self in a public setting (Goffman 1959) and to exhibit their aesthetic stance toward media literacies. Such contextualizing discourse provides an opportunity for participants "to experience or assert [their] position in social space" (Bourdieu 1984: 57). In other words, labeling one's own video situates that person within a group that deems a particular feature as important.

But what happens when a participant posts a video that does not conform to his or her perceived or actual ability or aesthetic taste? How does the creator handle discrepancies emerging from Müller's (2009) "participatory dilemma"? One solution is to refrain from posting the video. Another option is to persuade one's audience that the video does not isomorphically map to the creator's actual abilities or desires, but rather is the result of a number of constraining factors, such as limited time or budget. In these cases, YouTubers use rhetorical strategies to demonstrate that despite what appears in the public, visual artifact, the media maker actually possesses important visual literacies. By combining ethnographic research with an investigation of the discourse that surrounds videos, it is possible to analyze video makers' points of vulnerability, and the strategies they use to persuade their fellow YouTubers that their so-called "good enuf" aesthetics are not always good enough.

Investigating Discourses of Quality on YouTube

The principle methods of investigation for the present study were ethnography and discourse analysis of text in the titles, description, and content of videos. The analysis is framed and informed by a larger ethnographic study that was funded by The MacArthur Foundation for the purpose of understanding U.S. kids' use of online and participatory media. Within this larger study, I conducted a two-year ethnographic investigation of YouTube, and interviewed participants who were interested in experimenting with video to communicate aspects of the self and to connect with other participants who shared similar interests. While some participants merely wished to make videos for fun, others saw themselves as advanced amateurs or pre-professionals who intended on forging a career in media. A dominant genre among the interviewees was video blogging, in which people faced the camera and recorded personal thoughts. I also analyzed several other genres, including comedy sketch videos and parodies, which were common among interviewees.

The YouTube study that I conducted involved data from several lines of research including: 1) semi-structured interviews with 150 participants (mostly from the U.S., although prominent participants from Europe, Australia, and Canada were also interviewed); 2) direct participation (I established my own channel page, called *AnthroVlog* and uploaded weekly videos and analyzed text comments posted to my videos); 3) observation of online interactions (such as text comments posted in response to participants' videos or to other commenters); 4) examination of artifacts, including content analysis of more than 200 YouTube videos; and 5) attendance at YouTube meet-ups across the United States.

Interviews and participation on and off of the site enabled first-hand observation of whether or not participants oriented to the technical and aesthetic qualities of making videos. In addition to interviewing 150 participants, I also interviewed 16 professionals and academics in new media. These interviews added an interesting dimension to the debates and discourse about quality on YouTube. For example, at one media conference held at the University of Southern California, I had a particularly interesting exchange with Howard Rheingold, a prominent scholar in communication who investigated early online communities. Rheingold generously agreed to be recorded on camera to discuss his ideas about new media. Our interaction revealed interesting insights about video literacies and their productive negotiation.

Ideally, I would have directed us to a location prior to the interview that would have yielded an evenly-lit image. Yet, as he began speaking on camera, I realized that either I had chosen a poor setting for our conversation or the light had changed such that he was speaking in harsh, direct sunlight. Fearing an unpleasant, washed-out image, I stopped the camera and asked if we could move to a better location (see Figures 1 and 2). He agreed, but at the same time reminded me that stopping to attend to aesthetics when someone had been providing important content may not always be ideal in a new media environment. Here is our exchange once we were repositioned:

Rheingold: [What] I discovered is, forget the lighting, forget the sound, if they're on to something, let 'em roll!

Lange: That's a good point, there's a trade-off between capturing the insight and worrying about the tech, right?

Rheingold: This is vernacular video. YouTube is not really about high production values.

Figure 1: Interview with Howard Rheingold, February 2008, (prior to moving)

Image recorded by author.

Figure 2: Interview with Howard Rheingold, February 2008, (after relocating)

Image recorded by author.

In different ways, both the interviewer and interviewee enacted productive video-making literacies. By suggesting a move to a more evenly-lit location, I (as a YouTube participant myself) displayed affiliation

to the importance of lighting and image quality. To say that I wish I had set up the shot properly from the beginning or that I should have delivered a better final image would be examples of rhetoricizing my own display of visual literacies.

Rheingold also displayed knowledge of video-making standards. Earlier in the interview, he paused as a noisy airplane flew overhead, thus threatening to degrade the sound quality of my recording. In so doing, he demonstrated knowledge of the importance of sound, which some argue is as important as is image quality to facilitate reception. As Verdi and Hodson (2006: 76) state, "Sound makes all the difference when it comes to shooting good quality video." Rheingold's point about being sensitive to interviewees was another demonstration of video-making literacies. His point echoed that of many video bloggers who sought to make human connections through media in ways that were not self-censored by over-attention to dominant technical aesthetics. Trying to over "direct" the scene in the middle of an interview could have a stifling effect that might interfere with a communicative exchange during an interview.

Discussions about production values were not limited to media professionals. I observed that in a number of instances, the YouTuber whom I was interviewing during the ethnographic portion of the study might start off our conversation by providing suggestions about I how should record them. They tried to help me attend to particular aesthetics with regard to my video recording. For example, at a meet-up in San Francisco, which was held at Pier 39 by the ocean, a YouTuber recommended that we switch places so that the position of my external microphone would encounter less wind noise and thus yield better sound. In another instance, a YouTuber suggested that we move to avoid shooting in direct sunlight. The point of these vignettes is that participants did attend to the circumstances under which I was recording them. Meet-ups often passed quickly, and people often came from far distances to meet their favorite YouTube stars and friends. Yet, even in this time-constrained context, many YouTubers tried to address challenges in the immediate environment to create videos that conformed to standard principles of good video-making.

In addition to ethnography, another method that assists in analyzing issues of quality is discourse analysis, and the ways in which language is used to frame reception of videos. Researchers in discourse analysis are concerned with how people use language in particular cultural and social contexts. The goal is to analyze the structure and components of particular texts and their interpretations, paying attention to how texts are crafted with respect to an assumed audience (Johnstone 2002). The present exercise uses discourse analysis to understand how people display knowledge and competencies about visual literacies, and how they use the structure of YouTube to communicate aspects of their knowledge.

To identify videos relevant for analysis, I conducted a search on YouTube of three phrases, "bad lighting," "bad white balancing," and "bad camera angle." The elements of lighting, white balance, and camera angles were chosen because I observed YouTubers orient to them during the ethnographic portion of the study, and because they are elements that are commonly addressed in text books and how-to manuals that codify filmmaking and video blogging techniques and standards (Bordwell & Thompson 1997; Verdi & Hodson 2006; Dedman & Paul 2006). Lighting typically referred to exhibiting sufficient levels to discern or appreciate the participants or their actions. Camera angles referred to

framings of action. White balance is a camera setting that helps accurately reproduce and balance colors, depending upon the kind of light (say indoor or outdoor) being used during filming.

I examined the first twenty-five relevant videos that emerged from the searches in each of these categories, thus yielding a total of seventy-five videos for examination. My search originated in the United States and thus videos were in English. If a repeated video appeared, it was eliminated and the next relevant video was chosen. Similarly, off-topic videos were omitted. An off-topic video might be one that described recording a bad "lightning storm" rather than addressing the lighting of the video. Also eliminated were tutorials (unless they were about something other than making videos), as the goal was to focus on how media creators commented on their own media. The purpose of the searches was not to identify a random sample of videos that could be analyzed to generalize framing practices across YouTube, which is overwhelmingly vast. Rather, the present exercise more modestly aimed to identify patterns in how some YouTube participants framed their own videos in titles, description, and content.

The YouTube search engine enables users to choose one of four categories to display results. These categories are: relevance, upload date, view count, and rating. For the purposes of this exercise, I elected to sort the search according to "relevance." If I had attempted to identify a random sample of the entire list, the sample would likely have included entries from later in the list that the search algorithm coded as less "relevant" for the terms chosen. Given that users tend not to look beyond the first page of search results, search engines are designed to at least attempt to provide more relevant items early in the search result list (Höchstötter & Lewandowski 2009). The goal was not to test the quality or impartiality of the search engine, but rather to identify relevant rhetorical strategies that creators use to index or display knowledge that viewers may not be able to "read" from a video. Therefore, the first twenty-five, and thus more relevant entries were chosen from the search results. The videos discussed in the subsequent analysis were drawn from the aforementioned searches conducted on the site.

Rhetorical Strategies that Index Visual Literacies

Rhetoric has been defined in many ways, with definitions that have been exhaustively debated. For the purposes of this paper, rhetoric is simply defined as a series of communicative signs that attempt to persuade someone of something (Burke 1950). For Burke (1950: 50), rhetoric "seeks rather to have a formative effect on attitude." Burke (1950: 86) argues that images do not represent a single thought, but rather contain "a whole bundle of principles." When a person posts a video, they communicate the content of the video, and they display levels of qualitative execution that involve a wide range of aesthetic and technical choices, with varying levels of importance to media makers and viewers.

Whether most viewers try to "read" the visual literacies of producers from a single artifact is an empirical question. It is clear from observing discourse that some creators felt self-conscious about their work and used rhetorical strategies to manipulate viewers' interpretations of the video and the video maker's skills. These strategies attempted to "frame" the viewer's experience by providing "metacommunicative" information that gave the viewer "instructions" on how to understand the message within the frame (Bateson 1972: 188).

To rhetoricize a visual literacy or set of literacies is to use communicative signs that attempt to persuade viewers of a creator's attitudes and abilities with regard to making visual media. Three ways in which YouTubers rhetoricized their visual literacies included announcements, apologies, and accounts that explained why an image did not map to their productive desires. Below I discuss these rhetorical strategies in terms of lighting, white balancing, and camera angles (framing). In some cases, video creators displayed a tension about whether or not to post something that did not meet their expectations. In other cases, the video represented an effort as executed at a point in time, with acknowledged room for improvement in a creator's trajectory of learning.

Announcements

In some cases, participants merely announced that an aspect of their video was "bad." The announcement might appear in the title, video description, or content of the videos, or in some combination of the three. An announcement of "badness" is a display of literacy, in that it shows that the video creator had knowledge of a particular benchmark even though that knowledge may not be visually apparent.

Labeling a particular feature as "bad" is one method of performing technical affiliation to the idea that the feature is important for making good videos and that the uploader is knowledgeable about it. Performing technical affiliation refers to displaying alignment to cultural beliefs, values, or practices that are often assumed to be associated with particular cultural groups (Lange 2003, 2011b). Announcements of problems enable uploaders to perform technical affiliation to the importance of particular visual aesthetics and to invite viewers to share in the evaluation. For example, Figure 3 shows a participant announcing a problem with a video which was posted on August 11, 2010 and is entitled, "Naruto+gravitation piano songs WARNING : Bad camera angle D:".
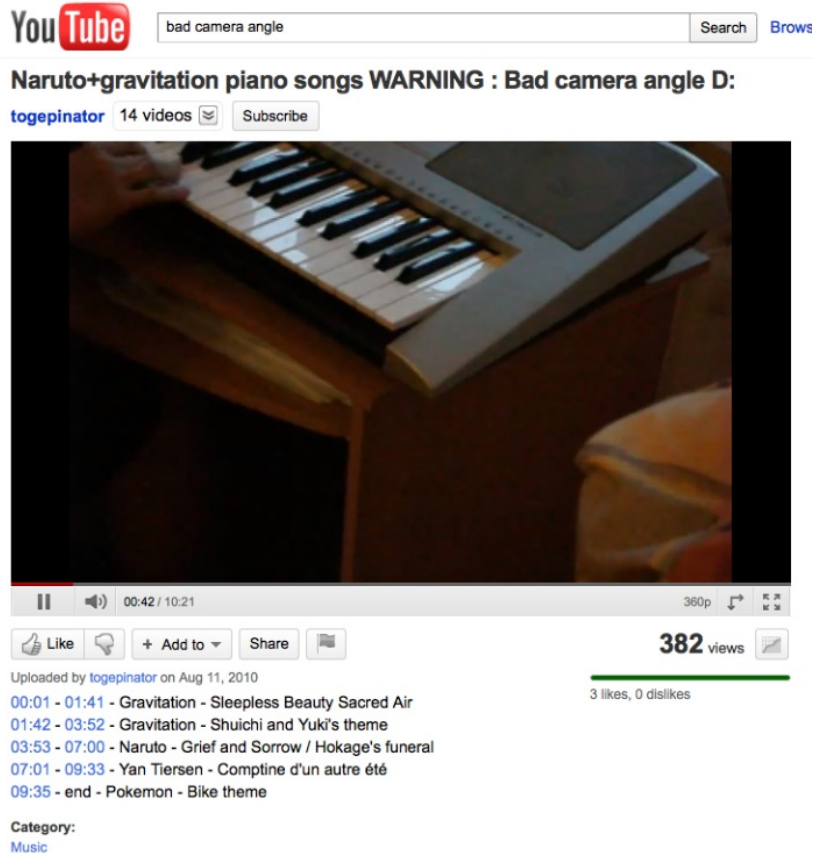
Figure 3: Announcement of a bad camera angle

Screen capture by author, October 2011

Naruto and *Gravitation* are works from the genre of Japanese animé, and the video shows someone playing selected songs from these works. Throughout the video-recorded performance, the pianist's hands are not visible or are only partially visible.

In this announcement, and in several others in the data set, no explanation is provided about what constitutes a "bad camera angle" or why the video was filmed in this way. The announcement codes the person who presumably made and uploaded this video as someone who knows that the execution was not ideal for depicting piano playing. It presumes another kind of literacy, which has to do with how one should frame action when video-recording someone playing the piano. The implication is that the hands of the piano player should be visible.

By announcing the problem, the video maker performs technical affiliation to the idea that camera angles are important to attend to when filming videos. In addition, the announcement serves as kind of warning to viewers that the video is deficient. It is interesting that several videos in the sample are labeled as having bad lighting, angles, or white balance in the titles, sometimes preceded by the word "warning" and sometimes merely listed in the title. For example, one video, which was posted on

November 9, 2010 is entitled, "Winter Vegetable Lasagna (Warning: Bad Lighting and No Narration)." Another video is a short clip of a touch down by player #67 during a football game at a local school. The title of this video, which was posted on November 7, 2010 is "livonia eagles TD, #67, bad camera angle." Without specific explanation, one might infer that what makes the camera angle "bad" is the faraway shot of the player's catch of the ball in the end zone.

Without accompanying explanation, these announcements presume knowledge of an intersection of literacies that include not only the visual literacies of recording an image, but of the proper way to record a particular activity. Whereas the literacies of recording may be obvious for some viewers in certain contexts (such as proper ways to record someone playing piano), they may not be as obvious to viewers who are not familiar with a particular activity or what makes a good recording of it. Videos appeared in the search that contained self-labeled bad camera angles for activities such as playing computer games, pole dancing, and skateboarding.

Given that the search was ranked by relevance, it is not surprising that videos appeared in the search in which the video titles contained the search key words (bad lighting, bad camera angle, and bad white balance). However, it was somewhat surprising to me that YouTubers would such code problems in the title of their work. A video title is an important aspect of a work, as it communicates something distilled and crucial about its meaning or identity and is often crafted to attract viewers. Announcing problems in the title associates the video and its public identity with its shortcomings. Why would a YouTube participant announce such shortcomings so prominently? Part of the reason may be suggested by the desire to perform technical affiliation and alert viewers to the fact that the video maker is aware of certain benchmarks of video making even if they were not met in the recording of a particular video.

Discourse analysis is concerned with analyzing anticipated audiences and how "talk and text define and 'position' the people who are involved in discourse" (Johnstone 2002: 111). From this perspective, making announcements about the quality of videos positions both creators and viewers as concerned about particular aesthetic characteristics. Providing such self-assessed problems is arguably unnecessary for viewers who are ignorant of or unconcerned with particular aesthetic components. By announcing potential problems, video makers anticipate that at least some portion of their viewers will attend to these factors and would wish to be alerted to them. Announcements are thus not only meant to display aspects of a YouTubers' proposed technical identity, but also interpellates whole swaths of audiences who may also orient to similar aesthetic expectations.

With or without an explicit "warning" term to accompany the title, announcing problems invokes a spirit of *caveat spectator*, the visual analogue of *caveat lector* (reader beware) which warns a reader that a work may contain problems, errors, or inconsistencies. Researchers in discourse analysis are concerned not only with the content of discourse, but also its structure, and what may be gleaned by its position. That announcements appear in the title as well as text is significant because it has the potential help frame reception, and speaks to the identity of the video viewer as well as its creator. By announcing a video's shortcomings, creators display knowledge that an image does not exhibit certain benchmarks of quality. Announcements also suggest sensitivity to viewers by warning them that they may have to

endure problems in a forthcoming video. Whether appearing in the title, text, or content, announcements constitute both creator and viewer as concerned about issues of quality.

Apologies

In some cases, uploaders offered an apology when they announced problems with a video. Apologies took various forms, including using traditional apology words such as "sorry," as well as requests from viewers to bestow their "forgiveness." These are known as "formulaic" apologies because they contain familiar apology-associated words such as "apologize, sorry, forgive, excuse, pardon" (Meier 1998: 216). "Causing damage or discomfort to others" has been found to be one of the seven main reasons that people offer an apology (Wolfson, Marmor & Jones 1989: 178-9). Apologies have been found to be both "speaker-supportive," meaning that they help manage the impression of speakers or restore their public image, as well as "hearer-supportive," as when they are used to address the needs of an injured party (Meier 1998: 221). In this case, the injured party is presumably a viewer who endures sub-standard videos.

Examples of apologies appeared in several videos. For instance, in a video called "Hello Kitty cake," which was posted on June 20, 2009, the text description and video narration includes apologies about the lighting. The video consists mainly of an image of a cake, and a hand turning the cake on a swiveled base as the narration describes aspects of its construction. The text description to the video states, "sorry about the bad lighting." During the video, the narrator also states, "I'm really sorry about the lighting. So it kind of looks like pinky-orangish color, but yeah." In a video posted on February 23, 2009, entitled, "Belly in bad lighting," a man touches and shakes his prodigious belly. In the text description, he states, "Sorry about the lighting, my camera sucks."

Apologies sometimes appeared in video titles. An example, is "shining darkenss bad camera angle sorry**"** (sic) which was posted on August 14, 2010. The video is an example of the "unboxing" genre which is popular on YouTube. In "unboxing" videos, people open a box with a new object, often a technologically-themed game or device, and they provide commentary, demonstrations, or reviews (Strangelove 2010: 134). In this example, the uploader opens a package from the game *Shining Darkness*, a trading card game based on the *Yu-Gi-Oh!* Japanese animé themes. The uploader says he wishes to show the cards "quickly" since he needs to be at work soon and has to "rush" through the pack.

In much of the video, the cards are not completely visible to the camera. He acknowledges in the narration that the viewer has probably not seen the cards that he has pulled due to the camera angle, and says, "sorry." He explains that he is using a stack of tissue boxes as his tripod. In the text description, he states, "really bad camera angle. so u know what. im making the decision to have someone tape for me or buy real tripod." In the text description, he makes an announcement and states a future consideration to buy a "real tripod," that would presumably assist him in obtaining a better camera angle.

Classical rhetoric is said to have time dimensions, with the goal of persuasion often oriented to the past or future. According to Burke (1950: 70), traditional rhetoric includes a "forensic or judicial" component,

"involving the past," as with a jury's hearing evidence to decide the level of guilt of the accused. An apology addresses this guilt by showing contrition for the "damage or discomfort" (Wolfson, Marmor & Jones 1989: 178-9) that may have been caused by viewing the video. In addition, rhetoric exhibits a "deliberative," dimension designed to "sway an audience" (Burke 1950: 70). In the example above, the uploader tries to sway the audience that he has appropriate skills as he contemplates either having someone record the video for him or purchasing a tripod that will improve image quality. He undergoes his own deliberation about how to change his behavior so that he can execute videos with better camera angles. Although he considered the video good enough to post quickly, he did not consider his handling of the technical aspects of the video to be sufficient for his future work.

In a video called "flexing yet again.lol," posted on April 13, 2009, a man shows his torso on screen as he flexes his well-developed muscles. In the text description to the video, he admits that the video has "bad lighting," and he promises that he "will be making a better one in a few days." The video, "Let's play Mario Sunshine part 1," which was posted on April 2, 2011, also includes an apology and a promise to improve. The text description to the video states, "Sorry bout' the shitty quality and camera angles. Next episode will be better." In a video about a hockey game which is entitled, "A First in the Second City" and was posted on June 6, 2010, the video maker apologizes for several unfortunate aspects of his video. In the text description to the video he states, "Please forgive my crappy camcorder: with the zoom that's not smooth, spotaneous white balancing, and bad audio. Plus I did not use a tripod when I left the house, so its shaky:)". He asks the viewer's forgiveness for a poor quality camera that yields what he refers to as "spotaneous" (sic) white balancing.

These apologies and requests for forgiveness work both to address the impression management of the uploader as well as the sensitivities of the viewer. In a sense, they accomplish what Goffman (1971: 108) called "remedial work," or attempts to "show that a possible offender actually had a right relationship to the rules, or if he seemed not to a moment ago, he can be counted on to have such a relationship henceforth." Goffman was speaking of interactional norms in which interlocutors had certain responsibilities about how to act. In the present argument, it is possible to think about norms with regard to attending to the needs of one's viewers, as well as to rules about what makes a good video. When interactional expectations are not met, some YouTubers engage in remedial work to address these "offenses." As Goffman pointed out these include apologies, and as discussed in the next section, accounts. Goffman noted that remedial work often aimed to assure one's interlocutor that although problems were not addressed in the past, they would be so in the future. In several examples, apologies that address the infractions of the past were accompanied by promises to improve.

In some cases video makers tried to ameliorate, or soften the impact of their mistake by pointing out positive aspects to the video. They noted that the video had features that justified its posting despite its problems. Ameliorations might appear when a video maker wished to emphasize that aspects other than the visual image may be of greater importance or enjoyment to viewers (or more specifically listeners) in certain genres or contexts of recording. An example appears in the video, "RSV 4 factory aPRC sound on bike (on board) with Austin Racing GP2," which was posted on September 6, 2011 (see Figure 4). The text description states, "Sorry about the bad camera angle(and lack of wide-angle lens) but I made this to show the incredible sound of the V4 with the GP2 exhaust." For the entire video, the

viewer sees the rear end of the driver, who apologizes for this angle, but notes that the most important aspect of the video is the sound of a particular motorcycle with a specific kind of exhaust system.

Figure 4: Perspective of the video "RSV 4 factory aPRC sound on bike (on board) with Austin Racing GP2"

Screen capture by author, November, 2011

In some contexts, recordings of singular events merited consumption of a video, even if certain aesthetic factors did not measure up to the uploader's standards. For example, the video, "Jeff Mills @ Distillery Leipzig 3|9|11," which was posted on September 6, 2011, primarily shows concert footage of a band. In the text description, the video uploader offers an apology and amelioration. He states, "please excuse bad lighting + but hope you enjoy the sound." The presumption is that although the band was filmed in dark lighting and is difficult to see, the sound and enjoyment of the band may still merit viewership. Indeed, in ethnographic interviews, young people said that they listen to music on YouTube, and may be accomplishing other tasks, such as homework simultaneously. Thus, they may not always attend to the visual aspect of YouTube videos.

An argument about the importance of sound is made in the video, "Senator Chuck Schumer at the 2011

SUNY Purchase Commencement," which was posted on May 21, 2011. The video is a recording of a politician at a graduation ceremony. The video image shows that the camera was positioned rather far away and to the side of the speaker. In the text description of the video, the uploader states, "Sorry for the bad camera angle. The audio's still good!" No explanation is provided about what makes the camera angle "bad"; perhaps the viewer is meant to interpret (and may feel annoyed with) what the uploader codes as a "bad camera angle." The uploader ameliorates the mistake about the bad camera angle by reminding the viewer that the audio is good, and that people interested in the Senator's remarks may still enjoy hearing them.

A band performing at a particular place and time, as well as a politician's speech at a special ceremony are not things that can be re-recorded, as they are one-time events. The apologies show sensitivity to the viewer's expectations, but also attempt to justify the posting of a video that might be considered sub-par in certain ways. For reasons that may be shared across viewers interested in the subject, the uploader posts the videos despite their flaws. In addition to being one-time events, these videos also share an emphasis on the importance of sound over the image.

Apologies rhetorically address offenses of the past, while promises to improve are oriented to future behavior. Both function to manage the impression of the video maker as well as to engage in remedial work that addresses the viewers' aesthetic needs. At times, uploaders posted what they coded as subpar videos because they were one time events (such as special occasions) or because aspects other than visual characteristics were judged to be more indicative of a video's merit.

Accounts

Accounts may be defined as explanations for why something failed or went wrong in an interaction (Levinson 1983: 306). In addition to apologies, Goffman (1971) also identified accounts as important aspects of remedial work. A number of participants who either announced problems or apologized for mistakes also provided accounts for a video's flaws. Accounts fell into two main categories: external impediments and internal factors. External impediments included recording problems or environmental conditions—such as the weather—that originated outside of the video maker. Internal factors involved issues originating within the video maker, such as inexperience or being in a bad mood.

An advanced video maker might argue that ultimately, all issues lead back to internal factors such as the experience of the creator. Given enough practice, instruction, and resources, a media maker should be able to handle any external impediments they encounter. For example, if bad weather yields insufficient lighting, an experienced video maker would know to use additional lights, and would have the resources with which to purchase and use such equipment. However, for the purposes of the present discussion it is important to distinguish the factors that participants identified as external as well as internal to their current state of ability. This taxonomy is advanced so that perceptions of literacy may be better understood and appropriate interventions may be designed.

External Impediments. The main reasons people cited for bad lighting were the weather, insufficient lighting in the room, and the quality of the camera that they used. One video maker cited insufficient brightness settings on a game that the video uploader was playing.

A common complaint was that the weather was poor and offered insufficient light for recording. An example is found in the video, "Acrylic Nail Art: Zebra Stripes Tutorial" which was posted on January 18, 2010. In the text description, the uploader notes, "really bad lighting, the sun is apparently not my friend :(". In another example, even a video maker's attempts to compensate for the problem do not work. In the video blog, "Friday: bad light levels of doom!" which was posted on March 21, 2008, the video maker explains that the weather is "dreary" and that he tried to compensate by using three lights in his room. He holds up three fingers to the camera to emphasize the effort he had made. Whereas the "nail" uploader claimed that the sun was "not her friend," the "Friday" video blogger explained that he actually tried to compensate for the bad lighting, but was unsuccessful.

An additional external explanatory factor had to do with time. The video maker might show awareness of an important technical feature, but also wished to capture important action before the moment passed. For example, in the video, "Dumbest cat ever!" which was posted on September 22, 2009, the text description notes: "Cat with its head in a tissue box...sorry about the bad white balance, i was in a hurry to shoot so as not to miss it :P". This apology and accompanying account do not address the worthiness of the video's content (i.e. a cat running around with a tissue box on its head). This type of content has given YouTube a particular character, or what Burgess & Green (2009) called the "YouTubeness" of YouTube, and seems to divide audiences in terms of qualitative assessments. Whereas some people enjoy these types of light-hearted and funny videos, others see them as examples of how quality is degraded or missing in vernacular video. Notably, the uploader displays the need to both apologize and account for why the *technical* setting of the white balance was off. By invoking such discourse, this uploader rhetoricized their visual literacy and performed technical affiliation to the idea that white balance is important when making videos.

Accounts anticipate potential criticisms from viewers, and are targeted toward those viewers who share the same kind of visual literacies and expectations about video standards. In a video entitled, "Let's Play Broken Sword: The Angel of Death 21 (HD): Bad lighting conditions!" which was posted on September 13, 2010, the video narrator carries on a simulated dialogue with the viewer and mimics the criticisms about lighting that he expects to receive. In the video's text description he states, "Seriously, this video is horrible. My audio got weird for some unexplained reason, the brightness of the came is way too low, it keeps lagging." (Presumably, he means "game" when he says "came"). As he demonstrates the game and walks the viewer through it, the uploader engages in a dialogue with the viewer and accounts for the dark image. He states:

> Do you, do you see this [referring to the onscreen game image]? No? I don't either. Um, you know there also might be a lag because this is going to be a shitty video. This is really really dark. [In a mocking tone]: "And like, oh, bluh, turn up the brightness" [Back to his normal voice]: But see there's no brightness settings. You cannot turn up the brightness in this game.

The video uploader anticipates that it will be a poor video. He uses a mocking tone and mimics the voice of an imagined viewer who will be critical and whiningly ask him to "turn up the brightness." He then responds to this critical viewer by showing a screen of the game settings and demonstrates that it has no setting to adjust brightness.

The perception of these uploaders is that external factors degraded the quality of the videos. Even though they took the decision to upload them, their accounts display visual literacies about what was important, even when the image was not commensurate with their knowledge. Factors such as the weather, the device, and time were all coded as potential impediments to creating better videos for YouTube. Whatever criticisms they might receive about content, some YouTubers displayed sensitivity to how their videos would be received from visual, aesthetic, and technical perspectives.

Internal Factors. The most common internal factors that uploaders cited for the poor quality of their videos was lack of experience or effort. A prototypical example is found in the video, "Wild Mountain Edit #3" which was posted on December 2, 2008. In the text description of the video, the uploader states, "sorry about some of the clips that theyre really bright im still getting used to setting the white balance and exposure on my camera." In the aforementioned video entitled, "Acrylic Nail Art: Zebra Stripes Tutorial," the uploader promises to make better videos when making tutorials about polishing nails. She states, "suscribe for more videos coming soon... the quality of my vids will hopefully get better as i get the hang of this thing ;) lol". In a video entitled, "The Bang - Bad moon rising," which was posted on February 20, 2009, a video maker addresses the poor white balance of the video. He states in the text description to the video "The Bang performing at the Ethos Open House 19May07. This was before we figured out how to white balance the cameras."

What unites these internal accounts is the factor of time. Each of the videos situates the visual literacy of the uploader on a temporal trajectory in which they have either improved their abilities or they anticipate improving. The "Wild Mountain" uploader refers to "still getting used to the white balance" setting. Similarly, the "nail tutorial" uploader anticipates that the quality of the videos will improve as she "gets the hang" of making videos. Finally, the "Bang" band video uploader notes that the video marks a moment before the video makers "figured out how to white balance the cameras." Presumably, the video uploaders now have new visual literacies of production that include proper manipulation of lighting and white balance settings that exceed the production knowledge they had prior to recording and sharing the videos.

These temporally-charged discourses challenge notions of a static "vernacular video" that is frozen in time with regard to internally-perceived and externally-assessed levels of quality. Academic discourses of vernacular video often use language that seems to deny the ability of individuals to change or to even recognize that their execution may not map to their skills or aspirations. However, such misalignments between knowledge and productive skill do not guarantee willful ignorance or indifference among all participants. Even when offering videos with modest content (flexing muscles or chasing cats with tissue boxes on their heads), some participants were still interested in persuading viewers that they recognized

and aspired to offer better quality. Using announcements, apologies, and accounts, they invoked rhetorical strategies to perform affiliation to particular sets of technical knowledge, and they assured viewers that their abilities would improve over time.

Discussion

During the ethnographic investigation, concerns about quality emerged when YouTubers created videos and tried to manipulate recordings amid particular conditions at in-person meet-ups. Participating in such events enabled me to view how YouTubers attended to aesthetic and technical factors, such as lighting and sound. However, many of the actual texts of these conversations were lost because they occurred during set-up, before the on-camera interview occurred. Yet these conversations contain a wealth of information about participants' visual literacies and discourses of quality. They are invaluable data in the fields of research on media literacies. Researchers studying literacies and informal learning would do well to leave the camera on during these exchanges, in order to capture the small moments that reveal much about how participants perceive the circumstances of recording and how they maximize aesthetic quality through technical manipulations.

In addition to the strategies that participants used in person, a search of terms such as "bad lighting," "bad camera angles," and "bad white balancing" on YouTube revealed that many creators were sensitive to these aesthetics when recording and publicly sharing their videos. Many other similar topics—such as sound, editing, camera movement, and myriad other qualities--could yield additional important insights. Even within these broader categories, many sub-categories would be worthy of deeper investigation. For example, for some participants "bad lighting" referred to insufficient levels to see the image. But "bad lighting" might refer to other things, such as unflattering light on people's faces, lighting that does not match the mood of a piece, and other factors. These findings suggest that literacies include sets of knowledge as well as production capabilities. However, future studies may address how they are interwoven in practice.

The present study also focused on qualities that participants self-labeled as "bad." But it is also important to study what YouTuber participants code as "good." What do they consider to be positive aspects of their technical execution? For example, one video that emerged in the search on "bad white balance" actually discussed positive camera performance. This video, which was posted on January 18, 2011, was entitled, "808 #8 Keychain spy camera outside at night. White balance is wicked!" 808 cameras are small inexpensive devices. In this test video, the uploader states in the text description that despite the discourse that the white balance of these small cameras is poor, a test revealed that it was actually "pretty damn good." Future empirical work might attend to a broader array of factors, sub-categories, and more positive identifications of skills, abilities, and literacies that YouTubers code as important or present in their videos.

The present discourse analytic approach focused on what participants disclosed in text or in the narration of their videos. However, participants often labeled a video as having problematic characteristics without providing detail about what was "wrong." In some cases, it is arguably true that the viewer could decipher the participant's meaning, but additional ethnographic interviews could add

important data by querying the video maker about what they specifically coded as problematic. Also, it would be important to know, do viewers interpret the problems with videos in the same ways as uploaders do? If not, how do they differ? These are important questions for understanding broader issues of quality among creators and viewers on YouTube and other video-sharing sites.

The present discourse analysis did not attempt to pinpoint the identities of video makers on any dimension of professional-amateur continua (however defined). But it is important to note that such categorization operates along a spectrum, as Stebbins (1977) argued years ago. They may share concerns about quality, although perhaps in different degrees. Professionals may not always be pleased with the outcome of a particular work or section of a work. For example, the highly successful composer and record producer David Foster (who has received 16 Grammy awards from the U.S. National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences) recalled a story in which he gave an album that he produced to famed music producer Quincy Jones. Foster (Foster & Fenjves 2008: 94-5) reports that he framed his gift with advice for Jones to avoid listening to particular tracks because they did not measure up to Foster's standards. In some cases, the singers were out of tune. As a long-time amateur singer, I can assure the reader that singing in tune is hardly a high standard exclusive to professionals.

The point is that professionals may also using framings to persuade a listener or viewer that a producer's knowledge may not, for a series of reasons, map to their execution. But failing to map to execution does not mean that the producer does not possess certain knowledge sets and productive desires about what constitutes quality in a particular work of media. Additional empirical work is required to understand how these rhetoricizations operate in various contexts and whether certain individuals tend to exhibit more use of them (e.g. some people are more inclined to apologize). Individual disposition may also play a role in how framings are used in discourses of quality on YouTube or on other video-sharing sites.

Conclusion

Literacies are negotiated in practice within specific contexts, and according to media makers' particular communicative goals. Although it is desirable to help improve general video making at all levels, at the same time framings and negotiations suggest that literacies are not always one-size-fits-all. The perceived realities and needs of particular contexts of recording may influence what is considered acceptable practice. Certain characteristics may take on greater salience in particular contexts, or amid time-pressured circumstances.

This research contributes to new literacy studies that are concerned with understanding how literacies become negotiated and negotiable, and who stands to benefit or lose from the outcome of these negotiations. As long as YouTube participants hold back and refuse to share videos that they believe have flaws according to standardized codes, their processes of communication and learning may be impeded. In addition, they may be depriving audiences of at least some aspects of media that might be interesting to experience. Rather than view subpar videos as "visual pollution" it is perhaps important to recognize that public sharing may help video makers learn how to improve, and may help them connect with other human beings.

Even though literacies are negotiable, YouTube participants displayed sensitivity to accepted and codified practices of video craft. Participants used a number of rhetorical framings with temporal dimensions to situate the viewing experience. Announcements attended to a viewer's present experience with a video and provided a warning about their visual experience. Apologies attempted to make up for past errors that occurred at some stage during the video process, such as recording or editing. Accounts provided reasons for problems, and were often accompanied by promises to improve. A number of uploaders optimistically predicted that their videos would improve as they gained more experience. Temporal dimensions should not be dismissed when discussing the opportunities and challenges of vernacular video and its impact on issues such as literacy, learning, and self-expression. YouTubers' abilities can and do change, and it is not only external commentary from viewers that assists in this process. Participants' own viewings of their work and their self-assessments also influence learning and help negotiate identities of technical competence.

To return to the question posted earlier in the paper, what are we to conclude about participatory aesthetics on the site? Do YouTubers embrace the "good enuf" aesthetics that are assumed by pundits to characterize vernacular video? On the one hand, the videos offer ample evidence that several factors often outweighed a participant's desire to ensure that a publicly shared video exhibited their own best technical benchmarks of visual production. Factors such as capturing a singular event before it passed, or video that emphasized sound over visual quality are two examples of considerations that could persuade an uploader to share their so-named subpar video.

On the other hand, a number of videos contained framings such as announcements, apologies, and accounts that coded the video as not simply not "good enough." They were labeled as insufficient either in terms of the reputation of the uploader and his or her abilities, or in terms of imagined viewers' criticisms of the video. A tension clearly existed between deciding whether or not to post a subpar video. Even when such a video was posted, uploaders often felt motivated to perform their technical affiliation to the importance of specific aesthetics and technical settings. At this stage it is wise to incorporate temporal dimensions in discussions of everyday visual literacies of media production. It is not that all vernacular aesthetics are accepted as "good enuf." Rather, many videos are seen as good enough "for the moment," as participants strive to improve their work when they share it with the world.

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