
Video and Participatory Cultures: Writing, Rhetoric, Performance, and the Tube

[Geoffrey V. Carter](#), Saginaw Valley State University

[Sarah J. Arroyo](#), California State University Long Beach

Enculturation 8 (2010): <http://enculturation.gmu.edu/video-and-participatory-cultures>

In this special issue of *Enculturation*, we invited scholars to explore the ubiquity of video and participatory cultures. We started our own investigation into this theme in a panel presentation, “*YouTube* U.: Home Video Goes to College” at the Conference on College Composition and Communication in New Orleans in 2008. In our work, we considered the limitations of viewing *YouTube* merely as a broadcasting platform and argued that *YouTube* should be regarded within the context of an ever-changing and growing networked ecology. We decided our questions and conclusions might be best extended in an on-line journal setting like *Enculturation*, especially as possible contributors could link to and engage with examples of video directly. Our [initial CFP](#) drew inspiration from a series of propositions about video culture forwarded by Henry Jenkins, and as the project unfolded, we looked for ways for our authors to respond to emerging scholarship, such as John Burgess and Joshua Green’s *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture*, Michael Strangelove’s *Watching YouTube: Extraordinary Videos by Ordinary People*, and Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau’s *The YouTube Reader*. We see our collection as speaking to these recent works while also forging new connections and drawing sometimes conflicting conclusions about video and participatory cultures.

We hoped our authors might find varying historical and conductive associations aimed at these themes in general. What we found, however, was that “*YouTube*” - despite our resistance to focusing on this platform exclusively - dominated the investigations into video culture. Rather than resist this emphasis, we realized that both the concepts of “you,” and even more so “tube,” were critical to the connections, themes, associations, and networks this technology makes possible. You-Tube, then, as an associative conduit, actually created the loose organization of the collection and served as the framework for negotiating video and participatory cultures. Broadly speaking, the contributors in this issue expanded these terms, finding ways to negotiate a vast video archive, becoming attuned to particular exigencies of demographics and interfaces, while also carving paths with which future scholars might engage in an inventive fashion. Individually, many of the contributors elected to embed videos to give participatory examples, and some generated and remixed videos of their own to performatively explore the implications of what we are beginning to theorize as “tubing.”

Long associated with the negative connotations of “going down the tubes,” the “boob tube” of early television sets, and the totally dated, “totally tubular” slang of Valley Girls from the early 1980s, “tubes” and “tubing” have re-emerged as concepts that make video sharing sites emblems of participatory culture. “Tubes” can be thought of as the videos themselves, “Tubers” as the participants, and “Tubing” as the act of participating and contributing material with which others will interact. Tubing captures the drift of an electrate, digital conduit that is remaking our understanding of writing. Drawing on the late Alaskan Senator Ted Stevens’s infamous gaff that the Internet is a “series of tubes,” we’ve clustered this collection in four different “series” in his honor. We return to Stevens’s tubes because, as technically inaccurate (and silly) as his description of the Internet is, the meme that resulted from Stevens’s description speaks to the [generative nature of tubing](#) itself. It also sets off a series of relevant associations that our “Tubes” explore with the intention of eliciting further sets of Tubes. As humorists like John Stewart continually [remind us](#), participation in the Tubes means drifting with these kinds of mis-takes and re-inventing through the re-purposing of these rhizomatic Tubes.

The following “Tube,” a video created by Cortney Smethurst, who is a graduate student at California State University Long Beach, speaks to how we theorize “tubing” by setting off associations while also showcasing several facets (or series of tubes) of video and participatory cultures: the move from literacy to electracy; the cultural importance and prevalence of memes; the limitations and benefits of *YouTube*’s architecture; the possibility for cultural and civic engagement through video; and video’s scholarly potential. Smethurst explains her video as follows:

My “Tube” identifies images (particularly those of amateur and pro-am “tubes”) as image events, or, rather, an alternative means with which we generate new traces of meaning in both our choral, online worlds and our offline, disparate realities. Rather than transmit a series of authorial objectives in an analysis, I played with platforms that offer permutational, electrated spaces with which people may disrupt the otherwise oppressive boundaries of mechanical, text-based societies. My “tube” is not a rebel yell for the complete destruction of the literate apparatus; it is a performance that complicates, as much as it communicates, the transforming mediums with[in] which we can now participate.

We believe this Tube serves as an appropriate introduction to video and participatory cultures, and we see it as a choral starting place for inquiry into electrated modes of production. Another way of putting this is to say that Smethurst’s work captures the collective spirit of the eleven works we’ve assembled here; indeed, after viewing it, we also can’t help think (and link) that its sense is derived from that same creative place where musical amplifier tubes ["all go to eleven."](#)

Video Cultures: Image Activism

Available for download via [Vimeo](#) and via [Enculturation](#)

In what follows, we’ve assembled the eleven different “Tubes” we received into four different series, and we see these tubes and series speaking to each other in potentially productive ways. Not only do many of these works address similar participatory examples and draw upon recent scholarship, many of the contributors address each other’s work directly. It is our hope that just as the scholars speak to each other (sometimes through video) that readers, too, may ultimately wish to extend the implications of these works, perhaps through video remixes of their own. Each series highlights the interdisciplinary nature of working in video and participatory cultures by juxtaposing work from Rhetoric and Composition with the Social Sciences and Performing Arts. The varying methodologies show that investigation into the culture of video sharing necessarily extends beyond disciplinary boundaries. Thus, we hope the range of scholarship itself speaks to the exigency for investigating new cultural practices and infrastructures appearing as a result of the prevalence of the Tube and the participatory communities it makes possible.

Archive.

The First Series considers the archival nature of the tubes and wrestles with the implications for working in and with such an unwieldy archive. Despite the fact that “tubes” represent a motley collection of [home movies](#), [blooper](#)s, [music videos](#), [parodies](#), [classic](#) (and [forgotten](#)) movie and [television moments](#) (as well as the overwhelming assortment of [odds](#) and [ends](#) that we so sweepingly call participatory culture, which are hard to categorize much less catalogue), the first series considers what tubing might mean for the archival nature of the university and the scholarship being done there.

Alex Reid's "[Exposing Assemblages: Unlikely Communities in Digital Scholarship, Video, and Social Networks.](#)" which features an excellent re-mix of its own, speaks in a compelling manner about the unique exigencies of scholarship that engages social media. Reid's focus on community is timely; using philosophers familiar to *Enculturation* readers such as Jean-Luc Nancy, Gilles Deleuze, and Giorgio Agamben, Reid argues that the exposure of video opens up new, communitarian possibilities, especially with regards to on-line publishing within the current tenure system. Reid's rigorous exploration shares much with Ryan Skinnell's "[Circuitry in Motion.](#)" which confronts recent efforts to come to terms with the Tube Archives in places like *The YouTube Reader*. As Skinnell notes, "*YouTube's* archive has been conceived by most scholars as either not an archive or as a very bad one." Skinnell responds to these arguments by turning to Jacques Derrida, who explores the inherent incompleteness and openness of archives in *Archive Fever*, and, who, for Skinnell, helps us move beyond thinking that too often posits participatory culture as the 21st century equivalent of "Why Johnny Can't Write."

In a manner that responds precisely to the misgivings about the *YouTube* Archive, however, Alexandra Juhasz discusses her own ongoing project working in and teaching with *YouTube*. [Juhasz's piece](#) repurposes both her experiences teaching a course on *YouTube* within *YouTube's* architecture and the ensuing scholarship that arose from her total submersion in the Tube. Among other matters, Juhasz shows that the *YouTube* archive is so out of control and incompletely catalogued that scholars should be wary. Instead, she has created an archive of her own, full of videos, blog entries, and other "texts," which she has assembled into an archive more conducive, she contends, to scholarly work in the digital humanities. "Working our best against the chaos of *YouTube*," Juhasz writes, "we instead created four more transparent and reasoned routes that the 'video-book' uses to structure its critical thinking about *YouTube*: [tours](#)." These tours codify the archive and introduce a catalogue of her own work within digital culture; they are also intended to facilitate scholarly exchange in order to extinguish the current chaos of scholarly work existing within and alongside everything else on *YouTube*. This phenomena – the scholarly and "serious" mixed up with the mundane, offensive, and otherwise non-scholarly – sets up exigency for the remaining sections of the collection. While Juhasz sees a need for a separate infrastructure for scholarly work, the following scholars see the platform itself as the very thing that influences participants' experiences in video culture, scholarly or otherwise.

Infrastructure.

Our Second Series considers the cultural infrastructure of the Tube. It should come as no surprise that our understanding of the possibilities for the future of the Tube should be shaped by the technological framework that makes it possible. We are fortunate to have researchers who not only take a look at the broader culture in which the Tubes are embedded, but also consider the machinations of the Tube itself. Patricia G. Lange, a scholar whose various studies of the semiotics of *YouTube* are becoming benchmarks for interrogating video sharing sites, offers an extensive ethnography of how videos are shared. Although its length is unusual for *Enculturation*, [Lange's piece](#) showcases a two-year study that looks into the social ramifications of reciprocity, a complex lens that helps address the question of how and why people interact with the Tube in the first place. The possibilities of this social engagement are explored further by Virginia Kuhn, who [examines how using sites like YouTube can expose ideologies](#) - familiar in print culture but difficult to define in digital culture - residing in the infrastructure of the platform itself. Kuhn shares her own thoughts and experiences with the panopticon-like "gaze" of *YouTube's* design, which, by ill-virtue of its "draconian content identification and dispute processes" contributes to an atmosphere wherein participants, especially scholars, often "begin to check themselves, censoring their digital expression." These works by Lange and Kuhn are important markers for how the Tube works in our present cultural moment, and they offer both revelations and condemnations of the practices enabled by the Tube's code.

[Ryan Omizo's work](#) follows suit by interrogating the longevity and popularity of mundane *YouTube* videos and vernacular video genres as they exist alongside professionally produced videos. By turning to the key concept of *vulnerability*, Omizo posits that the mundane videos - and especially the genre of the "sad vlog" - most accurately reflect vulnerability, which, as Lange has noted before him, serves as the bonding mechanism for and in

participatory culture. Vulnerability, Omizo suggests, offers a complex and timely explanation for a new video vernacular, which is made possible through the architecture of the *YouTube* platform. In the case of the famous "[Charlie Bit My Finger](#)" video, Omizo suggests it "hail[s] audiences through a primal cry of a child in pain and then allow[s] them to participate in its sublation so that now everyone can engage with the video with a positive social face." Vulnerability goes hand in hand with Lange's reciprocity in particular and participatory culture in general, and Omizo advocates for a better understanding of both when working and teaching in video culture.

Production.

Our Third Series focuses on the production of the Tube. As we alluded to previously, we see the possibilities of the Tube as being connected to the pedagogical turn from print-based literacy to what Greg Ulmer calls hypermedia-based electracy. Though Ulmer certainly deserves credit for anticipating aspects of this production in works like *Teletheory* (1989) and *Heuretics* (1994), the discussion of *sociopoetics* forwarded by Craig Saper and the *digital anaphora* of Justin Hodgson suggest that electracy thinking is further expanded by and through the Tubes. [Saper's work](#), for example, begins with a nod back Ulmer's own proto-Tube, *The Mr. Mentality Show*, a VHS video shot in the style of the *Mr. Wizard* television show that foreshadows the *YouTube* memes of today. But Saper's effort also looks ahead - through the "felt lining of the Tube" - as it contends with the emergence of movies like *The Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, a movie that Saper suggests speaks to our collective challenge "to forget other people's memories," especially when it comes to sites like *YouTube*. "The very essence of participatory culture," Saper writes, "demands that sociopoetic experience: the simulation of forgetting and the surprise and delight of remembering."

[Hodgson](#), too, picks up on the paradoxical relationship between remembering and forgetting, when he explores the un/productive possibility of what he styles as "the fade" or aposiopesis. Aposiopesis, or the "becoming silent" in the midst of a video's production, is, for Hodgson, critical to pedagogy that remains open to "the missing elements" that are "filled in by the imagination of the audience." Allowing for these interruptions or absences to emerge in the midst of one's video opens up a space for the "complimentary or contradictorily co-present" layers that we might return to in our classrooms and on sites like *YouTube*. Digital anaphora, the rhetorical return(s) that Hodgson calls the "fictional, factional, fashionable, fantastic, and fantasied micronarratives," emerge out of those evocative spaces represented by fades to black/white that bring the theorizing of production up to the very precipice of performance itself.

Indeed, with Joshua Hilst's "[The Tactical Tube](#)," we see how various theories of film production and performance come together in a short movie that anticipates the space of classrooms to come. Drawing on Saper's *Networked Art* (2001) and Deleuze's work on cinema, Hilst searches for synthesis with the "cacophony" of the Tube, especially Christopher Baker's large, digital installation of thousands of *YouTube*-style diaries playing simultaneously. Hilst draws upon Saper's notion of a fully networked, "intimate bureaucracy," exploring the potential of these thousands of videos to imagine a participatory form of filmmaking akin to what Deleuze detects in efforts of directors like Jean Rouch. In filming his presentation, Hilst's work approaches a mode of performance not unlike what Reid renders in the opening of the collection, but Hilst's emphasis on the classroom, particularly through the work of scholars like Saper, Geoff Sirc and Thomas Rickert, lends itself to a more ready-made sense of production. As Hilst says, when it comes to a more participatory sense of *YouTube* "what is expressed is not this or that individual, but rather the connections, the swarm of images that creates something new."

Performance.

Our Fourth Series sets the Tubes into motion as performance. If there's one thing that ties the performance of the

tubes together, it's the how the tubes come to reflect upon their status as tubes. This reflexivity shares much with the previous series, but performative paradigms are less focused on theorizing and/or pedagogy and more concerned with exploring their limits through video itself. That is, these performances offer an enactment of potentialities for both convergence and video cultures. In the case of Sheri Wills's ["Video as Performer."](#) we see how video might be integrated into the live musical and stage performance of *The Dybbuk*, a 1914 Yiddish play by S. Ansky about a dislocated soul that comes to possess another person's body. Through a set of gossamer screens, Wills manipulates images in real-time with the stage and musical performers and shows how advances in video technology enable her to convey a truly ethereal sensibility. As Wills writes, "The video, instead of embodying absence, is no more or less present than the actors and musicians."

This notion of presence/absence, which is certainly echoed in the section above by Saper, Hodgson, and Hilst is extended by the efforts of bonnie kyburz and her piece ["status update."](#) While kyburz's work may initially appear to theorize pedagogy, especially since so many of the participants in kyburz's movie are leading scholars in the field of Rhetoric and Composition who do precisely that, we see her "Fantasy Ethnography" as something different. Her film, in particular, suggests a collective and paradoxical reluctance to perform, and yet, within this suggestion, we see performance nonetheless. Stat-us, then, communicates a peculiar kind of static, a static that suggests that video "status" (and all the rhetorical associations related to it) is un/necessarily, yet inexorably, linked to our predisposition towards the printed text. Like Wills's dislocated spirit, however, kyburz still manages to capture a video version of a "Status Update" that hovers at the edge of our screens. And, despite kyburz's initial belief that "once people started video updating that they might discover a liberating pleasure," by the end of her ethnography that explores our very willingness to participate in such pleasures, she seems to suggest that her findings lead her back to the start of her project: "Why aren't we updating with video?"

kyburz's concluding question is one, too, that we see as relevant to the study of the role of video in emerging *YouTube U.* classrooms, especially since she speculates that the idea of status is linked to text and to our hesitancy to become participants in the very medium we often study (Interestingly, kyburz's conclusion/re-beginning is similar to the one Reid reaches in both his essay and video). While our initial questions remain in flux, we now have an assemblage of material with which to forge new connections. These connections will continue the inquiry into video and participatory cultures and will expand the network of possibilities. We hope you enjoy the Scholarly Series of Tubes we've assembled here as much as we enjoyed working with the contributors over the last year.

We would like to thank all of the members of the *Enculturation* Editorial collective who reviewed pieces for this collection, particularly Jenny Bay, who went above and beyond the typical expectations as a reviewer. We would also like to thank Jim Brown and the *Enculturation* staff who put this issue together. We greatly appreciate your efforts.

Works Cited

Burgess, Jean and Joshua Green. *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture*. Malden, MA: Polity P, 2009. Print.

Saper, Craig. *Networked Art*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001. Print.

Snickars, Pelle and Patrick Vonderau, eds. *The YouTube Reader*. Sweden: National Library of Sweden, 2009. Print.

Strangelove, Micheal. *Watching YouTube: Extraordinary Videos by Ordinary People*. Toronto: U of Toronto Press, 2010. Print.

Ulmer, Gregory. *Heuretics: The Logic of Invention*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994. Print.

---. *Teletheory*. New York: Routledge, 1989. Print.