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Audiovisual Literacy and the Ghost of Silent Cinema in Contemporary YouTube Clips

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Author details:

Dr. Mathias Bonde Korsgaard, Assistant Professor, School of Communication and Culture, Aarhus University, Denmark.

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Notes on contributor:

Mathias Bonde Korsgaard is Assistant Professor in Film and Media Studies at Aarhus University. His work focuses on music video, audiovisual studies and remixing. He has published several pieces in international journals and anthologies, is the author of *Music Video After MTV* (Routledge, 2017) and co-editor of the online film journal *16:9*.

Abstract:

Examining the formal similarities between certain YouTube clips and some of the classics of early silent cinema, this article argues that the collective process of exploring audiovisual modes of expression in contemporary online *produsage* eerily mirrors the similar explorations undertaken by the early pioneers of silent cinema more than a century ago—whether consciously or not. In this light, “Charlie Bit My Finger” is the contemporary equivalent of the

Lumière brothers' *Baby's Lunch*, while internet magician Zach King is a Georges Méliès of the digital age. Following the analysis of these similarities, the article pursues the argument that these YouTube clips can be taken as an indication of the fact that more and more people are becoming *audiovisually literate*, that is, that they are naturally adept at using cameras, microphones, and software to create their own audiovisual texts. Finally, the article examines the differing degrees of audiovisual literacy at display in the selected examples and engages in an open-ended discussion of whether or not practices like these can be considered genuinely empowering.

Writing about YouTube in 2008, Henry Jenkins notes that even as there is much that is new about YouTube, “there is also much that is old” (Jenkins 2008). Jenkins explains how, for instance, the DIY-culture surrounding YouTube has clear precedents in other older types of DIY-culture. Obviously, his contention also applies to the *content* that is found on YouTube—much of it is indeed old, seeing that it was produced long before the launch of YouTube in 2005. To name but one example, you can find some of the earliest ever recorded moving images on YouTube in the shape of early silent cinema (say, the work of the Lumière brothers, Georges Méliès, Edison, and several others). And even when it comes to the material on YouTube that is in fact “new,” you often get the eerie sense that there is also something “old” about such clips and the manner in which they are produced. They often share striking formal similarities with pre-established kinds of film and video. This even extends to the works of early silent cinema just mentioned—several contemporary YouTube clips share a surprising affinity with early silent cinema.

If seen through the lens of some of the early foundational work on new media—like Bolter and Grusin’s *Remediation* (2000), Lev Manovich’s *The Language of New Media* (2001) or even Jenkins’ own *Convergence Culture* (2006)—this is hardly a surprising fact. Even as these early key texts on new media pursue different ideas, they also seem to share the belief that “[w]hat is new about new media is [...] also old and familiar” (Bolter and Grusin 2000, 270). In his book, Manovich incidentally turns to silent cinema as a point of comparison, as he continually returns to Dziga Vertov’s Soviet silent film *Man With a Movie Camera* (1929) in order to illustrate how “many of the allegedly unique principles of new media can already be found in cinema” (Manovich 2001, 11). Others have also touched upon the specific relation between YouTube clips and early silent cinema, for instance Teresa Rizzo who has linked certain YouTube practices to Tom Gunning’s concept of early silent cinema as “a cinema of attractions” (Gunning 1990), calling YouTube a “new cinema of attractions” (Rizzo 2008).

Perhaps these peculiar connections between silent cinema and contemporary YouTube clips could be entirely coincidental. On the other hand, it is tempting to consider the possibility that there is nothing coincidental about the ways in which the language of moving images seems to be—perhaps partly intuitively—rediscovered in these YouTube clips. Accordingly, this article will pursue the argument that certain YouTube clips can be taken as an indication of the fact that more and more people are becoming *audiovisually literate*, that is, that they are naturally adept at using cameras, microphones, and software to create their own audiovisual texts. By way of three different examples—the famous “Charlie Bit My Finger” (2007, actually titled “Charlie bit my finger – again !”), the clips of internet magician Zach King, and the phenomenon of recut trailers—it will be demonstrated how the basic filmic premises upon which these clips rest, harken all the way back to the days of silent cinema. In this way, it is possible to retrace the evolution of the language of film as it was first undertaken by the first film directors more than a century ago in the uncannily similar audiovisual practices of the amateur producers of today. Finally, the exploration of these examples will lead into a definition of what audiovisual literacy more precisely encompasses—as well as a discussion of whether or not being audiovisually literate necessarily entails any kind of actual empowerment on part of the media user.

Silent Cinema Resurrected

As mentioned in the introduction, I am not the first to note the similarities between early cinema and YouTube clips. In her article on this connection, Teresa Rizzo focuses in particular on the re-emergence on YouTube of train films (harking all the way back to the Lumière brothers’ *L’Arrivée d’un train en gare de La Ciotat* from 1895) and dancing films (a tradition that evokes some of Edison’s earliest films). However, the correspondences between early cinema and YouTube extend far beyond these phenomena. As already indicated, it is not necessarily

surprising that we can find such media historical lineages—theories of remediation, remixing, media convergence, and cultural appropriation all rest on the idea that any kind of cultural creation builds upon previous cultural creation. Similarly, the time leading up to the invention of cinema was a period of intense technological progress on a number of levels—as can analogously be argued of the path the innovations in digital technology have taken in the last decades. Gunning has for instance proposed that the periods surrounding the beginning and end of the 20th century seem to mirror each other, not only in the sense that they are marked by such major innovations in technology, but also seeing that both periods arguably privilege an aesthetics of spectacle (Gunning 2003, 51).

Even as there are several kinds of clips on YouTube that of course bear no such direct resemblance to past traditions, there are still equally many clips that make us recall past audiovisual modes of expression—sometimes unwittingly, sometimes not. Take for instance a famous early (dare I even say “classic”?) YouTube clip, “Charlie Bit My Finger.” The fascination that has brought this clip close to having been watched a billion times is arguably the same fascination that drove the early Lumière-film *Le repas de bébé* from 1895. Apart from presenting similar situations—cute children, that is—they are also strikingly similar on a formal level. They are both short, feature no edits whatsoever, and even as “Charlie Bit My Finger” also features sound, color and camera movement (contrary to what was technically possible at the time of *Le repas de bébé*), these differences appear not so much as conscious choices on part of the father who filmed the clip, as they are simply the result of technological developments on a general level. Howard Davies-Carr, the father of the family who filmed the “Charlie”-clip, simply decided to film his children in the same way that the Lumières in their time would simply film their family and immediate surroundings. Anyone who has children and a camera of any kind will probably attest to the fact that it is a surprisingly natural impulse to point the camera in their direction. And anyone who has spent time online will also know

that there is probably only one other thing that is close to outranking children in terms of being cute and likeable and thereby capable of attracting the attention of cameras: cats. One of the main manifestations of the photogenic nature of cats is the phenomenon known as lolcats, that is, photos or films of cats doing something funny and/or adorable (oftentimes even in the presence of children). The big reveal here is of course that the Lumière-brothers were already there more than 120 years ago, filming some of the first ever lolcats to put it in anachronistic terms, in both *Le déjeuner du chat* (1895) and *La petite fille et son chat* (1899). And even before the Lumière brothers, Edison's assistant William Dickson filmed cats in *The Boxing Cats* just like Étienne-Jules Marey shot serial photographs of a falling cat with his pre-cinematic invention, the chronophotographic gun (both 1894).

But it is not only this *realist* strand of early silent cinema that finds an equivalent on YouTube. The *formalism* of the Lumière brothers' contemporary fellow countryman Georges Méliès is also eerily present in the clips made by the video magician Zach King. His clips were originally made for Vine, a now defunct short-form video hosting service, where users could share clips, or so-called Vines, lasting no longer than six seconds. King uses these six seconds to create short visual gags and video magic. While some of his clips use somewhat advanced digital techniques, many of them are simply predicated on the trick editing that Méliès was among the first to employ. One example of this could be the clip titled "How to Impress a Girl" (2013), where he uses masked jump cut editing to magically conjure first flowers, then—again—a cat. Compared to Méliès, the similarities are obvious. One of Méliès' early works like for instance *Escamotage d'une dame au théâtre Robert-Houdin* (1896) already employs the exact same editing ploy—where Méliès is able to first make a woman magically disappear, then reconjuring her as a skeleton before finally bringing her back from the dead, alive and well. And even as King manages to partly wrong-foot us by adding camera motion

in postproduction (in contrast to the static camera of Méliès), the clips often come off as being nothing more than updated digital versions of Méliès' early movie magic.

As a final example, consider the practice of fanmade recut trailers where well-known movies are provided with fanedited trailers that most often present the movies as if they belonged to an altogether different genre. In the first example of this practice to go viral, Robert Ryang recasts Stanley Kubrick's classic horror movie *The Shining* (1980) as a family comedy drama ("The Shining Recut", 2006). In a sense, what these recut trailers do is indeed very similar to the experiments carried out by the Soviet silent directors of the 1920s in the so-called Kuleshov workshops. By re-sequencing footage from the original films, these reedited trailers demonstrate the reality of the Kuleshov effect in that they clearly show us how meaning does not necessarily reside in the shot, but rather in-between the shots—in the editing. Thereby it is possible to transform the image of Jack Nicholson's character kissing a dead body—a truly horrifying image in the real movie—into something romantic in the recut trailer. The underlying principle is the very same as in Kuleshov's famous experiment where the same image of an actor changes meaning depending on the image that follows it. The analogy extends even further, seeing that the Soviet directors allegedly reedited copies of D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916) as part of their experiments in order to learn more about how the meaning of the individual images change when reedited in a different sequence (Cook 2016, 95). This is without a doubt very similar to what happens in the fanmade trailers—and in others kinds of audiovisual remixing as well.

Audiovisual Literacy

The question remains, of course: *why* do these YouTube clips resemble something made (more than) a century ago? I believe that the answer is rather simple: because nowadays common people have the means to experiment with creating moving images in the same way that a

selected elite group of filmmakers had a century ago. And whether consciously or not, they are making many of the same discoveries all anew, approaching and learning the language of film in the same way that the very first film directors did back then. In this respect, this is a question of *literacy*—or more precisely: clips such as these can be taken as an indication that more and more people are able to and find it natural to express themselves through recorded sounds and moving images.

The concept of literacy has also changed lately, in accordance with general media historical changes. Originally the concept of literacy was linked to the ability to read and write using language (and in terms of technological development connected to Gutenberg and the invention of the printing press). But in recent times it has become common to speak of multiple literacies or literacies in the plural (Belshaw 2011, 17; Cope and Kalantzis 2006; Lankshear and Knobel 2011, 32; Livingstone 2004, 7). This is not only to be taken in the sense that there are multiple differing conceptions of what constitutes being literate, but also in the sense that there are differing kinds of literacies, ranging from the classical print-, literature- and language-based literacy, to an audiovisual literacy associated with film, television and electronic media, to a current digital or general media literacy associated with digital media (see for instance Tornero and Varis 2010, 31-32; Lin et al 2013, 161). In fact, there has even been a tendency for this concept of digital literacy to encompass all other kinds of literacy as well.

In relation to these YouTube clips, I find it necessary to return to the older notion of a specifically *audiovisual* literacy and to try and disentangle it from the concept of digital literacy—at least in part. Because while it may be true that using audiovisual means of expression is an integrated part of navigating the digital media landscape, these two kinds of literacy are certainly not the same or reducible to one another. Of course, the view that we are all now potential creators of audiovisual media and not just passive recipients is certainly widespread and in no way a new claim—no matter whether we prefer Jenkins' concept of

“convergence culture” (Jenkins 2006), Axel Bruns’ concept of produsage with an ‘s’ (Bruns 2008), Nicholas Bourriaud’s notion of “postproduction” (Bourriaud 2002), Lawrence Lessig’s idea of a shift from a “Read Only-culture” to a “Read/Write-culture” (Lessig 2008), or the even older notion of the “prosumer”, first coined by Alvin Toffler (Toffler 1980, 282ff). In fact, these thoughts date back even further, seeing that this fusion of consumption and production was already predicted by Marshall McLuhan in 1964 when he wrote that “electric automation unites production, consumption, and learning in an inextricable process” (McLuhan 1964, 304. See also McLuhan and Nevit 1972, 4. For that matter, it is in a sense already suggested in Walter Benjamin’s famous essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” from the 1930s—see Benjamin 1935).

Nonetheless, it is highly likely that we have only even seen the tip of the iceberg in terms of how profoundly our ways of expressing ourselves will change—and how common it will become, or indeed has become, to use moving images and recorded sounds as a primary means of communication. The generations that grow up now are as familiar with video cameras and editing suites as they are with pen and paper (maybe even more so), and it is increasingly common to have the tools to produce audiovisual material readily at hand (also if only even in the shape of “found material” as opposed to self-produced audiovisual recordings as is the case with the recut trailers). As Julie Russo and Francesca Coppa put it:

It’s already hard to imagine our culture without ubiquitous access to audiovisual content from across the amateur-professional spectrum and the ensuing predilection to share, modify, and spread it. In less than a decade, video has become a media vernacular in unprecedented ways (Russo and Coppa 2012).

Even as the concept of “audiovisual literacy” to which I propose to return is an old one that first gained traction in the 1980s following the new wave of home video equipment, having a

video camera in your hands as a young person was still relatively rare then when compared to today where many different kinds of technological devices have built in cameras. So perhaps the audiovisual literacy is only maturing just now.

Historically, this audiovisual literacy has surely been long underway, at least since the advent of cinema. More than a century of watching and listening to film (and later on television) has certainly taught many people how to “read” audiovisually. However, most understandings of what it means to be (media) literate involve not only the capacity to read but also to write (Hobbs 1998, 16; Hoechsmann and Poyntz 2012, 16; Jenkins 2006, 170; Kubey 2004, 25). And though it has indeed long been common for the media user to be able to decode (or “read”) audiovisual content, it is only fairly recently that it has become a widespread phenomenon for users to be able to encode (or “write”) audiovisually. In a sense, reading and writing in fact become partly entangled in each other. Making a recut trailer, for instance, is predicated first on a careful act of reading the source material—so the first step towards creation is in this case in fact analysis.

In fact, even our own reading of these recut trailers involves a feeling of being audiovisually literate: much of the humor of these clips is based upon the viewer’s familiarity with the audiovisual conventions and genre codes being subverted—and thus our capacities as audiovisual readers are brought into play. In order to be in on the joke, we must be familiar with the conventions of the trailer genre, those of the original film and the horror genre, as well as those of the family comedy drama that the film is apparently turned into through creative editing, the addition of a voice-over and Peter Gabriel’s “Solsbury Hill” as the underlying soundtrack. Something similar applies to Zach King’s clips—they invite the viewer to ponder how they were made. And several of them have encouraged people not only to try to figure out how King made the clips—but also to recreate them, thereby again fostering a seamless movement from reading into writing. For instance, the clip “Ping Pong Balls for Breakfast”

(2013), where King is seemingly able to transform a ping pong ball into an egg, has spawned numerous user-generated remakes and tutorials on how to achieve the effect of the clip. To return to the above McLuhan quote, people are indeed *learning* how to use audiovisual media by turning from *consumption* into *production*—or, as Henry Jenkins has more recently put it, these acts of appropriation are best understood “as a process by which students learn by taking culture apart and putting it back together” (Jenkins et al 2009, 55).

Varying Levels of Literacy

In the same passage, Jenkins notes how the “digital remixing of media content makes visible the degree to which all cultural expression builds on what has come before it” (ibid.). This clearly resonates with all three examples presented in this article, even as the recut trailer is the only actual remix. But while the clips may be similar in this respect, they are of course also dissimilar in many other ways. In terms of their technical sophistication, King’s clips and the recut trailers far outrank the Charlie clip (though it of course outranks them in terms of views). There is a notable difference in the *level* of literacy between a young, media-savvy user like Zach King (who also has a Media Studies background) compared to that of a regular family father like Howard Davies-Carr of the Charlie family. King’s clips involve elaborate editing and he has estimated that they often take around a full 24 hours to create, whereas the Charlie clip did most likely not take any longer to create than the time the clip lasts. It may be true that more and more people are becoming audiovisually literate, but they are becoming so to varying degrees and in different ways.

This has also been one of the main criticisms leveled towards the more celebratory views of the new user-driven culture: that it is unevenly distributed, in terms of for instance age, cultural background, access to equipment and education, and so forth. Put otherwise—and somewhat humorously by Robert K. Logan in his book on McLuhan—older

people tend to limit their use of digital audiovisual media to “online banking, shopping, and booking travel” (Logan 2016, 43). Or as S. Elizabeth Bird puts it, “the majority of people [...] are not producers” (Bird 2011, 504). And to this it should be added that the differences among those who are in fact producers are also vast—as a comparison between King and Davies-Carr confirms.

The early optimism of Jenkins, Bruns, Lessig and others, where user-driven culture was mostly seen as a means of participation, democratization and liberation, has thus since been counterbalanced by more skeptical approaches—sometimes even by the authors themselves (for instance, Jenkins has acknowledged that “there is nothing about participatory culture that would inevitably lead to progressive outcomes” (Jenkins 2014, 285)). Certainly, being able to express yourself is not the same as having the power to be heard. And having the power to be heard is not the same as being able affect actual change in the world—or even the same as having something worthwhile to say. Also, it is no rare event that even seemingly innocent and joyful phenomena as “Charlie Bit My Finger” and Zach King become co-opted by corporate media or somehow commercialized. Nowadays, some of Zach King’s work has lost most of the amateur charm of being labors of love made by some guy in his garage, seeing that he has had several sponsorship commitments and has been featured in many commercials. And as for the Charlie-family, Howard Davies-Carr has estimated that the video has approximately earned them 1,000,000£ (in a clip titled “Charlie Bit My Finger 10 Year Anniversary”, 2017). At an earlier point, Davies-Carr also explained that he did not actually want to profit from a video featuring his children, but when he discovered that unlicensed merchandise was being sold, he apparently had no choice but to create his own line of merchandise (Masters 2010).

If you subscribe to the belief that money equals power, then of course it is potentially empowering to be audiovisually literate. But if we are to believe that literacy also

entails “furthering the rights of self-expression and cultural participation” (Livingstone 2004, 6), then the value of these clips is more uncertain. Some value may be attached to the fact that King’s clips have spawned several imitators, thereby enabling a partial spread of audiovisual literacy. But as David Buckingham has succinctly pointed out, “*activity* should not be confused with *agency*” (Buckingham 2009, 43). In other words, on one hand we may be approaching a situation where being audiovisually literate is more and more common—a situation, to rephrase the quote from Bird above, where it may in fact be the majority of people that are producers, even if only on a very small scale. On the other hand, it still remains to be seen to what extent practices like these are genuinely empowering.

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