

Trans on YouTube

Intimacy, Visibility, Temporality

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Abstract For the first time, media created by trans people is being produced, distributed, and consumed on a mass scale. This article argues that trans YouTube videos succeed because their formal strategies exploit the platform's penchant for the personal and the spectacular. Trans "talking head" videos expand the tradition of the feminist consciousness-raising documentary to establish trans youth as experts and create a sense of intimacy between vloggers and viewers. Transition videos become spectacular by displaying the subject's body in ways that affirm their felt gender and through dramatic temporal compression. These videos operate according to a temporality I call "hormone time." While it is easy to decry the formulaic nature of trans YouTube videos, genre conventions help amateurs enter the field and attract new viewers. Trans youth creatively exploit the platform's predilections in order to author and affirm their bodies and selves, in the process generating far-flung communities of support.

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For the first time, media created by trans people is being produced, distributed, and consumed on a mass scale. On August 2, 2014, a search for the word *transgender* on YouTube yielded more than six hundred thousand hits. More specific search terms bring up videos that are almost exclusively made by trans people themselves. On YouTube, there are more than 240,000 videos labeled "ftm," more than 209,000 labeled "mtf," and almost 21,000 labeled "gender-queer." The predominant form is first-person, direct-address videos, referred to as *vlogs* (a term that combines *video* and *blog*). Though trans people also use platforms like Vimeo and Tumblr, YouTube has almost single-handedly transformed the trans mediascape.

At this crucial moment, it is important to ask: How do the parameters of YouTube affect the form and content of trans vlogs? What strategies do vloggers use to make their felt gender legible to viewers? Why have transition videos, which document the subject's transition from social recognition as one gender to another, become so popular? And, finally, what are the implications of these

developments for trans bodies, selves, and communities? I argue that trans videos are structured by YouTube's penchant for the personal and the spectacular and that they succeed because they use formal strategies that exploit these tendencies. Trans "talking head" videos expand the tradition of the feminist consciousness-raising documentary to establish trans youth as experts and create a sense of intimacy between vloggers and viewers. Transition videos become spectacular by displaying the subject's body in ways that affirm their felt gender and through dramatic temporal compression. These videos operate according to a temporality I call "hormone time," which contrasts with recent theorizations of "queer time," as I will discuss. While it is easy to decry the formulaic nature of trans YouTube videos, genre conventions help amateurs enter the field and attract new viewers. Trans youth creatively exploit the platform's predilections in order to author and affirm their bodies and selves, in the process generating far-flung communities of support.

Transgender studies and new media scholarship are only now beginning to grapple with mass DIY video creation and circulation. While scholars have noted the importance of the Internet to trans identity and community formation since the 1990s, much of this work was completed before YouTube was invented in 2005 (Whittle 1998; Gauthier and Chaudoir 2004; Hill 2005; O'Riordan 2005). Primarily sociological, this work does little close analysis of online media forms. Scholars have analyzed other kinds of trans media more closely, like written autobiographies, zines, documentaries, fiction films, and Tumblr blogs (Prosser 1998; Halberstam 2005; Regales 2008; Fink and Miller 2013). The burgeoning literature on YouTube in the field of new media, on the other hand, never mentions trans vlogs (Lovink and Niederer 2008; Burgess and Green 2009; Snickars and Vonderau 2009; Strangelove 2010; Kavoori 2011). Only a few recent works by Tobias Raun and Avery Dame consider trans vlogs directly (Raun 2010, 2012a, 2012b; Dame 2012, 2013). Raun's PhD thesis, "Out Online: Trans Self-Representation and Community Building on YouTube" (2012), is the most comprehensive and rigorous. Raun and I come to similar conclusions—that these videos are enormously productive for the trans youth who make and watch them—but he emphasizes their content and psychological effects on viewers, whereas I attribute their success to their specific formal strategies and strategic exploitation of the YouTube platform.

Transition videos are only a subset of the many trans videos on YouTube, but they are the most popular—and the most controversial. Some complain that transition videos are clichéd and give the impression that all trans people are alike; for example, one vlogger grouches, "Everybody sits on there and talks about the exact same shit. . . . 'Oh, now that I'm on T, I can make a video like everybody else!' So is that what you're transitioning to be, like everybody else?" (7BLUNTS7 2011).¹

While the strong conventions of transition videos may create the impression of monotony, these conventions have made the videos easier to create and circulate than any previous media form, and the experiences shared by vloggers can vary significantly. Transition videos are also criticized for implying that there are only two genders and the most livable space is in one or the other; that transition is always a linear, goal-oriented process; and that medical intervention is necessary to legitimize trans people's gender identities. The popularity of transition videos does instate transition as a norm, but many vloggers also interrogate these assumptions in their videos. Other people, like documentary producer Tiffany Woods, complain that transition vlogs focus too much on individual self-realization and not enough on systemic aspects of trans oppression, like poverty, racism, and access to health care, or on collective political action (Raun 2012a: 13). While explicitly political media like Woods's documentary *Trans Francisco* (2010) is essential, trans vlogs are also a form of political action, in that they allow trans youth to author their bodies and selves, grant them expertise over their own bodies, and provide a framework for communal support.

The "talking head" is the constitutive format of the YouTube vlog, and trans vlogs are no exception. The format is particularly powerful for trans youth. While documentaries and television news traditionally use talking heads to convey authoritative information from "experts" (usually white, cisgendered men), activist filmmakers have long used talking heads to grant expertise to working-class women, women of color, and lesbians. In these films, the talking head allows oppressed peoples to articulate their perspectives to each other and a wider public (Lesage 1978; Martineau 1984; Juhasz 1999). They also encourage viewers to find common cause with the people onscreen.

Trans vlogs follow in and expand this activist tradition, even when vloggers do not conceptualize their recordings as political. In the YouTube version of this format, subjects sit in front of a video camera and microphone embedded in their computer monitor or cell phone. The framing varies from extreme close-ups of the head to full-body shots but most commonly captures the subject's head, chest, shoulders, and upper arms. Thus, the talking "head" is more accurately a talking head-and-upper-torso, which is important because the chest is such a charged site of trans body modification (see discussion in Raun 2012a, 171–73). Videos generally fall into one or more of the following categories: (1) daily or weekly diaries, (2) autobiographical narratives, particularly stories about the vlogger's childhood and realization that they were trans, (3) explanations of a term or concept relevant to trans experience, (4) "how to" videos that transfer skills like making a packer or developing a different voice, and (5) commentary, including responses to other vlogs. They are often around seven minutes long. Most vloggers appear to be in their mid-teens to mid-twenties. Vlogs position trans youth as

experts, implicitly contesting the expertise over trans bodies claimed by medical professionals, educators, and parents (Dame 2013). For this reason, they should not be read as “confessions.” Rather than being impelled and judged by an authority figure, they are framed as conversations between a group of assumed peers (Raun 2012b: 167–69). They are instead akin to the talking heads of feminist documentaries, which mimic the structure of consciousness-raising groups (Lesage 1978).

Trans vlogs become even more powerful by generating impressions of authenticity and intimacy. The vloggers typically sit alone, in a private domestic space such as a bedroom, dorm room, or living room. While some vloggers use professional equipment and shooting conventions, most vlogs have formal markers of amateurism, ranging from visible pixilation to unbalanced exposure, backlighting, high contrast, buzzing sounds, or background music that makes the voice difficult to hear. Some vlogs are edited and some are not, but most give the impression of being a continuous monologue recorded over a discrete period of time. These formal qualities—close framing, a private setting, direct address, and amateur style—make the claim that this person is *real* and their statements true. They also position the viewer as a secret confidant. Despite the public nature of YouTube, trans vloggers often act as if they and the viewer are the only ones in the room. In one video, a trans male vlogger says to the camera: “Y’all ain’t gonna tell anybody, will ya?” Sometimes vloggers even whisper to the camera so that their parents or roommates won’t hear.

The closeness of the face to the camera and use of direct address mimics a face-to-face conversation or, more accurately, a conversation on a video chat program like Skype. Vloggers often greet the viewer (e.g., “hi guys,” or “hey YouTubers”), ask for advice, and pose questions, making the video even more like a two-way conversation. Many end videos by requesting feedback. Viewers, in turn, respond to vlogs by posting comments, sending private messages, or recording response vlogs. Unlike documentary interviews in which we sense the presence of an interlocutor, no one stands between the viewer and the vlogger—only (seemingly) the glass of the screen. The subject seems to be looking right at us, they can tell that their video has been viewed, and if we contact them, they usually respond. Of course, while the vlog may feel synchronous, reciprocal, and one-on-one, it is actually nonsynchronous, unidirectional, and one-on-many. Though viewers may feel personally addressed, they are nevertheless “safe” from the vlogger’s look back.

While all vlogs can produce a sense of intimacy and authenticity, these qualities are particularly generative for trans vloggers and viewers. As Vivian Namaste, Julie Serrano, and others have observed, mainstream representations of trans people are often distancing and objectifying, treating trans people as freaks or curiosities (Namaste 2005; Serano 2007; thepowerisys 2010). They

assume their viewers to be cisgendered and establish a logic of “us” (nontrans) looking at “them” (trans). In contrast, the YouTube talking head brings trans individuals *close* to the viewer, both in seeming physical proximity and feelings of intimacy. Trans vloggers become subjects, rather than mere objects, of representation, and often assume that viewers are young trans people like themselves. This collectivizing address is particularly powerful for young people who may not know anyone else who is trans. Trans vlogs on a variety of topics exploit YouTube’s penchant for the personal through talking heads, private settings, direct address, and formal markers of amateurism, creating a powerful sense of connection between vloggers and viewers.

However, the talking head makes many aspects of social identity visible, sometimes reinstating existing social hierarchies. Body size, skin color, and accent affect how often vlogs are viewed and what sort of responses they receive. Attractiveness seems to be the strongest factor determining a vlog’s popularity. There is an obvious bias toward slimness and, in trans men, toward muscularity. Many of the most popular trans vloggers look “all male” or “all female.” While less attractive vloggers who post regularly can attract significant numbers of viewers, they rarely become YouTube celebrities like more conventionally attractive trans vloggers such as Julie Vu (PrincessJoules), who has received almost 16 million views (as of August 2014).

Race and ethnicity also play a role in which vlogs get watched. The top results for racially unmarked search terms (i.e., *transgender*, *mtf*, *ftm*) are mostly white, supporting Raun’s observation that whiteness is an unstated norm on YouTube (Raun 2012a: 204–12, 304–11) and mirroring the pattern of platforms like Tumblr (Fink and Miller 2013). However, tens of thousands of trans people of color do post videos and many actively comment on each others’ videos. These networks are invisible, though, to anyone who does not specifically seek them out. These videos only appear when searching for terms like *black mtf* or *latino ftm*. The biggest trans communities of color on YouTube appear to be black men and women. (My search in August 2014 yielded eighty-nine thousand videos, seven times more than any other nonwhite group). Lower, but significant, numbers of trans vloggers identify as Asian, but fewer identify as Latin@ or other ethnicities. The dominance of whiteness in racially unmarked search results should not blind us to the active presence of trans people of color in this space. However, the dependence on the visible body means that attractiveness and race/ethnicity invariably structure viewers’ encounters with the videos, reiterating existing social hierarchies.

Out of all the trans vlogs on YouTube, transition videos have become particularly popular because they also exploit the platform’s inclination for the spectacular, an aesthetic of visual attractions akin to early cinema’s (Gunning

1986). However, they exploit this inclination differently than mainstream media has, using formal strategies to create and affirm trans bodies rather than display them as oddity or puzzle. Different genres of transition video engender visual attraction in different ways. Video diaries become spectacular through inventive ways of displaying bodily signs, while retrospective slideshows and time-lapse videos become spectacular through temporal compression. In these videos, medical, audiovisual, and network technology cocreate the vlogger's body. Webcams, microphones, monitors, speakers, routers, and servers become prostheses of the metamorphing trans body (Stone 1998), a process that Raun (2010) calls the "screen-birth" of "media-bodies."

In video diaries, subjects use a profusion of techniques to direct viewers' attention to new aspects of their bodies that signify their desired gender. For example, in one vlog, a trans man enumerates the physical changes he has noticed due to testosterone injections. Sitting on a couch, framed in a medium close up, he narrates:

As far as physical changes, it looks like my hairline's starting to change, here [he points to each temple with a finger]. . . . I'm gettin' more facial hair comin' in [he runs his hand over his chin], more hair on my chest [he looks down at his chest, which is covered by a tank top, and runs a hand across it] . . . I'm gonna give you guys [he picks up the camera] a quick view of the facial hair [he brings the camera close to his chin and moves it around as he talks]. I've always had these chin hairs but it's gettin' coarser and darker. . . . If you guys can see, I'll try to— [he moves the camera so the lighting is better, the whole screen is filled by his cheek, including a number of black hairs] Yeah, and my doctor told me that facial hair's the last thing to come in, most of you guys probably know that, but that's why I'm so excited about this.

In this short segment, the vlogger uses sound (verbal description), gesture (directing his own gaze, pointing with his finger, touching with his hand), and cinematography (moving the camera closer) to register particular, male-signifying aspects of his body. These techniques accrue a body out of disparate parts. The enumeration draws attention to the aspects of the body that reflect the felt gender and away from aspects that don't, sedimenting the body through accumulated detail. These pointing strategies are characteristic of transition diaries and are adopted by trans women and men alike—although trans women often "tell" more than they "show," because many of the changes they describe, such as growing breasts or a curvier waist, are under clothing. These ways of pointing to trans bodies work in opposite ways from mainstream films, which

traditionally use lighting, framing, camera movement, makeup, and acting style to expose characters' assigned sex (Kuhn 1985; Straayer 1996).

However, it is not quite accurate to say that the vlogs make the desired body *visible*. Often, the viewer cannot actually *see* the changes described, either because they are hidden under clothing or because of bad lighting, exposure, or resolution. Vloggers acknowledge disjunctures between what is perceptible to them and what is perceptible to the viewer through comments like, "I know you probably can't see this, but . . ." The viewer's access to the vlogger's body and voice is mediated by recording, distribution, and display technologies. While some vloggers go to great lengths to achieve a perfectly visible image, most seem surprisingly unconcerned with whether they are backlit, washed out, or pixilated. Vloggers' lack of concern for actual visibility suggests that other forms of registration, such as verbal description and the vlogger's own touch, can be sufficient to instantiate these media-bodies. Because so many strategies are mobilized simultaneously, the video instantiates the body even when the viewer's vision fails. Vloggers strive for visibility, but accidental failures of vision are made acceptable by purposefully redundant, multisensory forms of witnessing.

Other types of transition videos become spectacular through temporal compression. Many of the changes associated with transition—the growth of hair, rearrangement of fat, growth or diminution of muscles—take place at a pace that is imperceptible in real time. These corporeal changes exist in what Walter Benjamin (1999: 512) calls the "optical unconscious"—visual phenomena registered by our senses but not perceptible until a camera intervenes, while the changing voice could be said to exist in an analogous "auditory unconscious." Photographing and recording the body at set intervals and viewing it without the intervening time allows these changes to become perceptible. The revelation of otherwise imperceptible processes is what makes the videos spectacular, and thus well-suited to YouTube's economy of attention. In retrospective slideshows (vloggers call them "timeline" videos) and time-lapse videos, trans bodies morph as if by magic, drawn inexorably toward their felt gender.

Retrospective slideshows consist of a montage of photographs of the subject that proceed chronologically, often from infancy, through transition, to living full time in the felt gender. Often accompanied by sentimental or inspirational music, they appear similar in format to photo montages shown at graduations and weddings. The temporal compression is significant, as perhaps twenty years pass by in five minutes. These types of videos don't use the pointing strategies of the diaries, nor do they use cropping, cutting in, or zooming to call attention to particular parts of the body. Framing the montage as an illustration of gender transition (rather than of growing up, say) draws our attention to gendered signifiers, but there is more freedom to choose which aspects of the body to look at.

Many use on-screen text to frame the images and describe the process of transitioning as a heroic journey of coming into oneself, moving from fear, deception, and self-hatred to joy, authenticity, and confidence. Text often indicates when the vlogger started hormone treatment—prompting the viewer to pay extra attention to corporeal changes after this point. Text is also used to point directly to parts of the body. For example, a slideshow by a trans woman named Asuka includes the text “Happy with how clothes started to fit. Finally developing a waist” over a photograph of herself looking into a full-length mirror (Asuka Kan 2013). If not for the text, we might pay more attention to other aspects of her body. She also uses text to give us access to her thoughts and feelings, noting in particular when they are at odds with the image. On a photograph of a smiling, well-dressed, male-presenting person, Asuka superimposed the text “After donating all my hair I was crying inside. Worst idea in a while.” The text thus guides the viewer *not* to read the short hair as an indicator of the vlogger’s “real” gender but as self-defeating camouflage of her true identity. These kinds of moments assert a lingering gap between the visible and felt body of the sort Gayle Salamon (2010) has explored, in contrast to the celebratory pointing employed by diaries.

Time-lapse videos enact the most spectacular form of temporal compression. While not very common, they can generate a huge number of views. A video by a trans woman named Ashley that was featured on *Huffington Post* received more than 5.4 million views between October 2012 and September 2013 (iiGethii 2012; *HuffPost Gay Voices* 2013). In these videos, the subject photographs her-, him-, or theirself at regular intervals for one to three years and then assembles the photos into a several-minute video. Most are medium close-ups of the head and upper torso, though a few include the whole body. Time-lapse videos exchange the slower, more deliberative look cultivated by diaries and slideshows, for a flickering, generalized impression of the changing body. Each photograph appears so quickly that we cannot consciously grasp what the subject’s body looks like in that particular photograph. There is a push-pull between the elements of the image that change and the ones that stay the same. As in the slideshow format, vloggers use text to note when they began hormone treatment or had a particular surgery, heightening our attention to corporeal change at these moments. Time-lapse videos make trans corporeal change seem like magic, akin to a fairy tale or special effect. They evacuate technologies and social contexts in favor of a body that seems to morph on its own.

What kinds of temporality do these manipulations of time produce? I argue that most transition videos operate according to a progressive temporality we might call “hormone time.” Time begins with the first shot of testosterone or HRT pills (hormone replacement therapy) and is measured against that date, even years afterward. For example, many trans men start their video diary with their

first shot of testosterone and title subsequent vlogs “1 week on T” or “testosterone week 23.” Though many trans women start their vlogs earlier, when they begin wanting to live as women full time, they still date their videos by the amount of time elapsed since beginning HRT. Diaries, slideshows, and time-lapse videos all state the amount of time on hormones in their titles and descriptions. Other markers of time, such as the calendar date or the vlogger’s age, are indicated far less often.

Hormone time is linear and teleological, directed toward the end of living full time in the desired gender. It borrows a Christian temporal structure—time begins with moment of rupture and points in a particular direction. Just as the alleged birth of Christ launches the Gregorian calendar, the first medical intervention launches the vlog’s dating system. Likewise, Christian millennialism argues that time is teleological, marching forward toward a future paradise on Earth. While hormone time is not as grandiose, it also points toward a utopian future, in which the subject experiences harmony between the felt and perceived body.

Retrospective slideshows are the clearest example of hormone time. Unlike video diaries, which can be viewed in any order, in slideshows the author controls the pacing and order of time unfolding. Time only ever moves forward and the subject only ever becomes more and more his or her “true self.” Through the judicious choice of photographs and textual commentary, vloggers create the impression of a smooth progression from one gender to another. The retrospective slideshow can be considered a variation on the transsexual autobiographies that Jay Prosser has analyzed (1998). Autobiographies and slideshows alike employ narrative structure to shape their maker’s experiences, imposing, for example, a beginning, middle, and end. In both forms, trans subjects narrate their lives in order to cohere former and present selves, judiciously choosing images that add up to their present self-understanding. Time-lapse videos also show transition as linear and teleological, a smooth slide into the desired social gender.

Individuals don’t experience transition only according to hormone time. As Julian Carter (2013) argues, transition can involve complex temporal movements “forward, backward, sideways, [and] tangential[ly]” all at the same time, a process he calls “transitional time.” Indeed, transition diaries often reflect these multiple temporalities, as vloggers insert and comment on older videos of themselves, imagine future selves, and sometimes question, pause, or stop hormone treatment. Despite these experiences of temporal multiplicity, many vloggers construct the more straight-forward, progressive hormone time in their videos. While, like all narrative, hormone time simplifies, this insistently affirmative structure is powerfully enabling to trans youth trying to imagine a future.

Hormone time, focused as it is on progressive change and futurity, is at odds with “queer time,” which has been theorized along postmodern lines as

asynchronous, out of joint, and antifuture (Halberstam 2005; Freeman 2007; Dinshaw et al. 2007; McCallum and Tuhkanen 2011). While experiences of transition can “enfold” queer and other temporalities (Carter 2013), and trans lives and artworks can generate queer times and places (Halberstam 2005), hormone time itself is not queer. Rather, it appropriates the “straight” temporality of progress for radical ends—proving that trans self-determination is not only possible but viable and even joyful. Unlike “straight” time, the goal is not children or the future of the nation but expansive trans subjects and communities. Just as Jose Esteban Muñoz (2007) has argued that queer antifuturity can be unhelpful for black subjects who are already not guaranteed a future, criticizing hormone time for not being “queer” enough misses the life-saving work that these vlogs do. Hormone time’s orientation toward a joyful future is analogous to Muñoz’s (2009: 1) theorization of queerness as “the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality.” The crucial difference is that, for Muñoz, this future is always out of reach; whereas, for trans vloggers looking back on their process of transition, it is achieved. These narratives of success inspire trans viewers to come out to friends or family, try dressing as their felt gender, seek out other trans people, and sometimes begin the process of transition themselves. Though post-transition vloggers continue to face challenges and collective social justice lingers on the not-yet-realized horizon, vloggers often state that they inhabit a new, warmly illuminated world. Images of sunrises and metaphors of being “born again” are common, as are expressions of gratitude. While these videos propagate a mythology of transition that excludes many trans experiences, these repeated, individualized narratives of success contrast a mainstream media culture that produces trans subjects as “other” or as allegorical figures. The retrospective and heroic narrative common to transition videos is simplifying and teleological, but it is also enabling because it personalizes a generality. That is, the narrative structure may be conventional and the genre may be characterized by uniformity, but the coupling of this conventional narrative structure with the assurance gained by repetition produces an enabling pattern for trans youth.

YouTube’s predilection for the personal and the spectacular have made it a powerful tool for some trans people to construct the ways that their bodies are looked at and heard—and to connect geographically disparate people in intimate ways. To put it bluntly, these videos save trans lives. Distributed freely through the Internet and easily found, they collectively tell trans youth that self-determination and transformation are viable routes. They also generate forms of intimacy between vlogger and viewer that solicit desire, empathy, and emulation. The fact that there is a strong formal similarity from one vlog to the next is the point, for the cumulative force of these statements of presence draw upon each other to establish community. The repetitive and shared narratological structure of

transition vlogs—rather than their uniqueness or individuality—voices its message through a dispersed collectivity that cumulatively (and performatively) produces a community.

At the same time, YouTube should not be mistaken for a utopian space. The popularity of transition vlogs, and of hyperattractive, predominantly white vloggers, institutes hormone time, beauty, gender cohesion, and whiteness as uncomfortable norms. However, these videos have broken open the mainstream media's stranglehold on trans representation and provided many otherwise vulnerable subjects the opportunity to shape themselves and their world. The conventions of these genres will continue to evolve as they are taken up by ever more trans people in ever more parts of the world. What will not go away, however, are the attempts to use audiovisual and network technologies to grapple with the gaps between the felt body and the body as seen and heard by others. Though most trans YouTube videos operate according to strong generic norms, they have nonetheless provided trans people important new tools to present their experiences and create their bodies anew.

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Note

1. YouTube videos discussed in the article can be found in the videography section following the references. Additional examples that are not discussed in the article are listed as well.

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