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# Documentary on YouTube: The failure of the direct cinema of the slogan

Alexandra Juhasz  
*CUNY Brooklyn College*

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## 26 Documentary on YouTube

### The failure of the direct cinema of the slogan

Alexandra Juhasz

YouTube is the realization of many of my dearest held aspirations. I share these highly anticipated, if perhaps idealistic dreams of universal access to a democratic media with a host of scholars and makers whose rich body of radical media work I highlight in my upcoming digital 'publication', *MEDIA PRAXIS: A Radical Website Integrating Theory, Politics, and Practice*. *MEDIA PRAXIS* is an enduring, mutual, and building tradition that theorizes and creates the necessary conditions for media to play an integral role in cultural and individual transformation. I am a student, teacher and participant within this distinguished tradition, one that travels from the Soviets of the 1920s, through American beatniks of the 1950s, and African and Latin-American anti-colonialists of the sixties, to today's digital frontier.<sup>1</sup> Across the hundred-year history of the moving recorded arts, radical media theorists and makers have predicted a soon-to-come utopia where expanded access to the production, distribution and exhibition of media might reign, a magnificent future where media consumers would become producers because they could at last afford the means of production and distribution; where they could document the look, feel and meat of their daily lives; then add these records of their everyday experiences to the public sphere; and participate in the production of culture without the expertise bought at film schools. Might we all simply have been foretelling YouTube, a media environment that makes the most of the best of new media, at least as those assets are delineated by Henry Jenkins and David Thorburn (2004: 3): 'access, participation, reciprocity, and many-to-many rather than one-to-many communication'? There are many among us, like internet scholar, Douglas Schuler, who assert that the digital delivers what we've long been awaiting: 'for the first time in human history, the possibility exists to establish a communication network that spans the globe, is affordable, and is open to all comers and points of view: in short, a democratic communication infrastructure' (2004: 70).

But why, then, when I visit this marvelous place, is the stuff I see there so thoroughly unsatisfying? Every few months, I will follow through on a link, generously forwarded to me by a friend or net-acquaintance, and it inevitably takes me to some humorous confection mocking a piece of mainstream culture I never saw in the first place; a silly man dancing out the history of American music; two otters

holding hands; some kid coming out in his bedroom; two voluptuous long-haired fake-breasted babes making out in a hotel room. Wanting better, I'll travel down the page only to find more of the same. Still hoping for something just a little more interesting, I'll try a key-word of some value to me, say 'queer realism'. But there are no videos to be found under such a bookish term. 'Queer' works, but what emerges feels of little more use than the blond honeys I got on the first pass. I am assaulted, primarily, by parodies of, clips from, or interviews with cast members of mainstream fare like *Queer as Folk*, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, *The L Word*, or music videos from a band called Garbage with a song called Queer accompanied by posts that say: 'I love this video and song', and 'I want Shirley Manson to rape me'. The banality of this revolution is far more notable than its populism. Its failures utterly profound given its radical promise.

What YouTube gains in access, it lacks in knowledge. But perhaps I'm simply a snob, found out to be embarrassingly disdainful of what real folks actually make and like, especially given the Marxist leanings of the tradition I study. Or maybe this is merely a matter of refining my search tools and processes. For I have determined that if I devote the time necessary, there is an astounding range of documentary to be found on YouTube. But by looking more closely in this chapter at the loads and loads of documentaries on YouTube, I hope to establish that my problems are much more than personal. My method will be academic: I will first hold YouTube to the distinguished tradition of *MEDIA PRAXIS*; and I will then look closely at one small thread on YouTube – queer documentaries – through the theories and shared assumptions from the specific tradition that anticipated it, New Queer Cinema (and in particular writing by and about the works of lesbians, queers of color, and AIDS activists). My model is academic because it assumes that we make better media when we are serious students of what has come before. So, my process performs the work, and the troubles of expertise. In 'That withered paradigm: the web, the expert, and the information hegemony', Peter Walsh explains how knowledge hegemonies of the past, like that of media praxis, are easily toppled by the World Wide Web as the internet opens up closed bodies of knowledge by shattering the layperson/expert dichotomy based on rules and rituals that once regulated access (2004: 366–7).

And let's face it: the beauty of YouTube is that it's for neither experts nor academics. Like cinema in its pre-history, there's a gee-willickers enthusiasm for the *fact* of production, in and of itself. It seems that YouTube's staple docs – the overly-sincere or glibly-ironic talking-head clips about popular culture or personal satisfaction that populate its pages – are auto-generous, unrelated to a history of images before them, springing forth, virgin-borne from this newly accessible technology. But, I subscribe to a world-view oft-discussed in *MEDIA PRAXIS*, founded on the belief that regular people who make media to participate in and change their world should also speak to history and make theory giving context to their work. By this I do not mean high-fallutin' obscure opaque writing by continental philosophers and their acolytes, but rather, simple but systematic claims about the culture people produce and consume and its relations to the past and past work. From these regularized claims more powerful production, as well as community and politics,

ensues. 'I love this video and song', allows for no further conversation; it isn't conversation. 'I want Shirley Manson to rape me' threatens any possible association.

The failures of YouTube, even as its technology succeeds in creating the possibilities for (near) universal access, are due to its inattentiveness, or inability to unite. But on *MEDIA PRAXIS*, as in these pages, I am committed to connections: linking past theories of radical media with contemporary political practices, interrelating living communities of committed mediamakers with histories from which they can learn. I will suggest that this kind of slow, structural work – the method of experts; the labor of scholars; all tried-and-true practices available to any who will make the effort – allows a critical learning hard to establish from the rapid, solo work of linking across surfaces. For instance, *MEDIA PRAXIS* may be 'published' by MediaCommons, a digital academic press in-development that plans to use this most contemporary of media to 'create a network in which scholars, students, and other interested members of the public can help to shift the focus of scholarship back to the circulation of discourse'.<sup>2</sup> Scholarly circulation is committed, connected, and complex; YouTube is fast, furious, and direct. YouTube's decided disinclination towards ongoing bonds is made manifest through a corporate, postmodern architecture founded on the transitory and evocative link. Meanwhile, the tradition of *MEDIA PRAXIS* demands not merely numbers, access, and reciprocity but also, at the same time, a connected and lasting base of knowledge, an associated community, and a will to action. 'The sphere of the new film language will, as it happens, not be the sphere of the presentations of phenomena', explains Soviet filmmaker/theorist Sergei Eisenstein (1988: 77), 'nor even that of social interpretation, but the opportunity for *abstract social evaluation*'.

Writing in 1928, when he was participating in and anticipating the maturation of the new medium of his age, Eisenstein theorized the transition from cinema to 'pure cinema', from the technology's childhood to adulthood. He thinks from the 'tragic faults' of his own recent film, *October*, one that he explains spans 'two epochs in cinema' (1988: 74). Eisenstein predicts a dialectical overturning of cinema's previous stages to a new period that 'will come *under the aegis of a concept – under the aegis of a slogan*. The period of the "free market" in cinema is coming to an end' (1988: 77). He anticipates that which is beyond the limits of narrative and documentary, and past profits and consumerism: a new epoch of pure cinematic perception and epistemology. In our time, Alexander Galloway (2006: 60) enumerates similar claims made by the digital's most fervent boosters of our new epoch:

They write that advances such as new media, new technologies, new and faster methods of transferring information, democratization of technological luxuries, diversification of access to digital networks, the standardization of data formats, and the proliferation of networked relations will help usher in a new era marked by greater personal freedom. Heightened interpersonal communication, ease from the burden of representation, new perspectives on the problem of the body, greater choice in consumer society, unprecedented opportunities for free expression, and, above all, speed.

Galloway's claims – high on expanded freedom, communication, and consumption – never make Eisenstein's bold declaration for (universal) radical knowledge. Following

Eisenstein's distant lead, and in the face of a contemporary celebration of digital media's 'unprecedented opportunities', I will establish that access without theory, history, community, and politics, and access enabled by (post) capitalism, is not yet all we might demand the future of the cinema to be.

## The cinema of the slogan

It will be the art of the direct cinema of a slogan. Of communication that is just as unobstructed and immediate as the communication of an idea through a qualified word.

(Sergei Eisenstein, *Soviet Cinema*, 1920s)

Could the eminent revolutionary filmmaker/theorist, Sergei Eisenstein, again quoted from his 1928 article, 'Our *October*. Beyond the played and the non-played', be prophesying the internal contradictions and 'tragic flaws' of documentary on YouTube today? It seems both prescient, and also naïve of this distinguished communist to call forth the *slogan* for his own developing medium, cinema. The slogan seems so much more apt for the technological developments now displayed on YouTube. For the slogan links activism and commerce – the simplistic selling of ideas so as to move people to fight or buy, no matter – in a manner perfected by and definitive of our era, and its definitive medium, the internet. Certainly the slogan – a pithy, precise, rousing call to action or consumption, or action as consumption – astutely describes the form of YouTube documentaries, especially in terms of their brevity and clarity. Given that the cinema consolidated itself at 90-minutes, and then television did so at 30, it has been quite a relief, really, especially given our high levels of distraction, to minimize our viewing to a reasonable three minutes: 'communication that is just as unobstructed and immediate as the communication of an idea through a qualified word'; bite-sized, word-sized, postage-sized cinema; strong, intense, interchangeable, and forgettable films; the stuff of YouTube.

Certainly, this particularly appetizing format had already been conventionalized by the television advertisement and later its music video, but those things sold products, whereas most YouTube documentaries do not (unless we understand that the ironic mimicking of mainstream media, or even the heart-felt response to one's favorite daytime drama, are cheap but effective advertisements, in this case made by consumers and not the ad-men of yore). But slogans simplify in the name of selling or striving. And, given that nothing of documentary form or content, outside of duration, is yet standardized on YouTube but perhaps only standardizing, and that its pages hold or could hold every possible style of documentary ever made, what we currently see is the many possible forms of documentary simply shoved into a shorter, simpler format. Certainly direct-to-camera talking-head confessional realism is the documentary format of choice, given its sheer ease of production. And the straightforward documentation of important public/private events (marches, speeches, interviews, community meetings) are also highly evident. But, on any one page of YouTube you'll actually find a dizzyingly eclectic array of documentary styles, from sources as varied as art-videos, music videos, and mainstream television. And of course, there are advertisements, some even by ad-men.

The slogan prevails on YouTube. Most of the site's diverse producers cram their eclectic content and miscellaneous formal devices into the length, strength, and function of a music video: selling something through artisanal and forceful condensation. That is, unless one posts a precariously un-sloganlike documentary onto the site, accepting the standardized viewing practices of modern-day viewers who scan along one's carefully produced 20-minutes of abstraction or 50-minutes of rhetoric, reducing its depth to surface because that's all this screen, and the viewing practices it conventionalizes, can hold. Once posted on YouTube, one's best cinematic slogan, in all its stirring surface fanfare, could get a lot of hits, but it will rarely be seen with the level of care and commitment that engenders connection. The viewing context of YouTube serves to quiet the radical potential of even the most repeatable and rousing of phrases. No matter how hard you shout, no matter how well crafted is your slogan, no matter how deeply you feel it and how precise its summary of the unjust, your cry, potentially heard by many, is only one such call in a sea of noise. This quieting function of the sloganlike structure of YouTube is described by David Sholle (2004: 347) as he delineates the disparities between 'information' and 'knowledge' technologies, the former defined by the piecemeal and fragmented, the transitory, and through rapid flow while the latter is known through structure, endurance, and situatedness. Information moves fast, and reaches many; knowledge comes slowly and waits to be found by the trained.

Certainly political filmmakers have always wanted larger and more diverse audiences; they have sought to be heard and understood by many. However, radical filmmakers have never been able to isolate this demand from a commitment to activist exhibition (that creates possibility for conversation and then action), and radical form (that creates new ways of seeing and knowing). 'I would like to add that a militant film has to reach further', writes Joris Ivens about his 1937 Spanish Civil War film, *The Spanish Earth*, made to raise money for ambulances. 'After informing and moving audiences, it should agitate-mobilize them to become active in connection with the problems shown in the film' (1969: 137). Ivens' claims for connection are structurally untenable given the architecture, ownership, and advertisements on YouTube. It is not that such goals couldn't be reached on the internet, but that given the corporate ownership of YouTube, they will never be realized on this dominant site.

When Eisenstein set forth the slogan as a model for pure cinema, this was in dialectical relation to the tired-out cinema of the free-market, and the first stages of Soviet film. However, as we know too well, films continued to consolidate within the capitalist model of narrative Hollywood film. We are currently seeing how the promise of the epoch of the slogan, still possible on YouTube, is held short by the closing down of critical possibilities of conversation, community, and complexity. In its short history, YouTube has allowed individuals to speak and even be heard in unprecedented numbers about an awesome range of topics including the implicit critique of capitalism expressed through the volume of documentaries on its pages that are dedicated to individuals' isolation and pain.<sup>3</sup> In the following brief demonstration, after celebrating this significant accomplishment – Access – I will then sketch two ways that YouTube's corporate architecture forecloses the next critical

steps by disabling what I will call Knowledge/Theory/Context and Ethics/Community/Politics. I will conclude by looking more closely at the failures of the direct cinema of the slogan by holding queer documentaries on YouTube to the tradition of queer media criticism, and will demonstrate how the linking of postmodern and postcapitalism on these pages forecloses the knowledge and activism that are definitive of *MEDIA PRAXIS*.

## Access

I will give you my definition of art: art is making.

(Jean Renoir, *Popular Front Cinema, France and the globe, 1930s* (1974: 99))

Renoir states a premise dear to radical filmmakers: art production has been elitist, kept distant from people due to hard-to-get machines and training. Radical cinema will be made by the many when media is structured so that consumers become producers. YouTube does model to the many the possibilities of making. It provides a platform for the easy distribution of non-professional, democratic media production. Open the floodgates, and see, Jean, it's true, everyone can be an artist, people are making in numbers unprecedented in cinema's history. Radical film theorists also assume that once more people can speak, knowledge itself will transform to the shape of regular peoples' experiences and needs. Feminist documentary filmmaker, Barbara Halpern Martineau (1984: 263), articulates a position commonly held by committed media theorists. The 'simple' or 'naïve' form of the talking-head – certainly the most normative realist mode on YouTube because it is now, and has always been, the easiest form for non-specialists to learn while also allowing for new voices to be heard – is of political use: 'by empowering ordinary people to speak as experts, they question a basic assumption of dominant ideology, that only those already in power, those who have a stake in defending the status quo, are entitled to speak as if they know something'.

YouTube allows everyone and anyone (with access to the technologies) to speak about everything and anything they please. I speak, you watch. But without context or community, who cares, and more critically, then what? Under the key-word 'queer documentary', I find a clip from a longer documentary, *Queercore*, posted to the site by its maker, Bret Berg, who is creating web-based documentary content for and about LGBT youth. The 4:39 minute excerpt allows us to meet, in standard talking-head style, the organizers of an all-age, lesbian-focused, queer dance club in Los Angeles. Yes: these young women are rarely afforded expertise. But, left hanging from the documentary that surrounds them, and boxed in by two other trailers for random, if queer, documentaries – one on lesbian femmes and the other on Queer Dragon Boat Racing – their specialist knowledge about organizing queer community events is deflated, dispersed, and thus, de-valued.

## Knowledge/Theory/Context

Q: How do you explain the camera as a gun? A: Well, ideas are guns. A lot of people are dying from ideas and dying for ideas. A gun is a practical idea. An idea is a theoretical gun.

(Jean Luc Godard, *Post-68 France*)

Within the tradition of *MEDIA PRAXIS*, the construction and dissemination of ideas, even ‘theory’, are understood as critical to the project of cultural transformation. Beyond regular people making media, in numbers, they need to do so in conversation with past and developing thoughts. While art starts with making, it culminates with comprehending, according to 1960s Third Cinema filmmaker/theorist, Tomas Gutierrez Alea:

Art’s function is to contribute to the best enjoyment of life, at the aesthetic level, and it does this not by offering a ludicrous parenthesis in the middle of everyday reality but by enriching that very reality. At the cognitive level, it contributes to a more profound comprehension of the world.

(1997: 116)

While the ease of posting media on YouTube allows enjoyment of life, and its comments function opens access to the sharing of words, the site’s architecture limits the gun-potential of theory through downsizing and dumbing-down: ‘hahahahaha’ or ‘ ☺ ’. Here we find ideas far from theoretical guns, and closer to ludicrous puns. Like this response to the trailer for *All Natural*, a documentary about transgender queers. ‘I’ll bet you are worried you’re gay because you can’t get a girlfriend. But you can’t get a girlfriend because you have an ugly mind. Gay people don’t want to hang with creeps like you, so don’t worry about that. Just worry about your ugly mindset.’ In a second post, this author’s thoughts are elaborated upon: ‘p.s. I’d tell you my IQ, but I know you can’t count that high.’

YouTube, like the internet more generally, according to Wendy Chun (2006: 2), works to ‘free the flow of information, reinvigorating free speech’, but this occurs in an anarchic and privately motivated environment that disallows the unification of these oddly assorted, if free, demands, images, styles, or viewers. Space limitations, as well as a rapidly conventionalizing culture built upon comments, phrases, or at best slogans – ☺ – rather than sentences or paragraphs, limit participants’ abilities to communicate with complexity. It seems rather hard, with such words, to gain collective intellectual or filmic momentum, the ‘abstract social evaluation’ or ‘profound comprehension of the world’ our tradition seeks. For, without a linked body of theory as their guide, newly liberated artists must rely upon popular culture. Octavio Getino and Fernando Solanas, also writing about and making Third Cinema, in Latin America in the 1960s explain:

The cinema of revolution is at the same time one of destruction and construction: destruction of the image that neo-colonialization has created of itself and us, and construction of a throbbing, living reality which recaptures truth in its expression.

In our epoch, documentaries made for YouTube primarily replay, de-construct and re-construct mainstream media, or other distractions or parentheses from daily life: kittens, comedians, clips-already-aired. YouTube registers a media, post-capital and post-colonial, where the majority of technology’s newest makers aren’t thinking past the mainstream culture’s quieting confections. ‘Just as they are not masters of the land upon which they walk, the neo-colonized people are not masters of the ideas that envelop them’ (Solanas and Getino 1997: 37).

Thus, theorists of media praxis have often proposed that radical media should promote critical reading practices. In their writing about the Trans-Atlantic Black Cinema of the 1980s, Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer discuss a cinema organized to make the critical connections between popular culture and its internal contradictions:

What is in question is not the expression of some lost origin or some uncontaminated essence in black film-language but the adoption of a critical voice that promotes consciousness of the collision of cultures and histories that constitute our very conditions of existence.

(1988: 4)

While any discrete video on YouTube might perform the function heralded by Julien and Mercer – for Julien’s very own videos could be posted there – the total YouTube experience, where Julien’s video would be randomly sandwiched between clips from *Queer as Folk* and clips from documentaries about *Queer as Folk*, undermines both the adoption of a critical voice and its associated growing of consciousness. YouTube is defined by empty and endless collisions of discrete documentaries aligned by an apolitical search engine, itself organized around broad and often banal user-generated keywords. Thus, YouTube manufactures collision without consciousness: each lone documentary unmoored from the critique, culture, history, or intention – the context – that produced it.

Pratibha Parmar, also a participant within the New Queer and Black-Atlantic Cinema movements of this time expresses a commonly held interest in scattering authority. ‘The more we assert our own identities as historically marginalized groups, the more we expose the tyranny of a so-called center’ (1993: 4). YouTube serves well the de-centering mandate of post-identity politics by creating a logic of dispersal and network. However, while there is unquestionably both freedom, and otherwise unavailable critical possibilities, offered by such fragmentations, YouTube limits our possibilities for radical comprehension by denying opportunities to re-link these peripherals in any rational or sustaining way. Collective knowledge is difficult to produce without a map, a structure, and an ethics.

## Ethics/community/politics

The real crime of representation is representation itself.

(David MacDougall, participatory ethnographic cinema, 1970s)

A significant strain of media praxis is dedicated to considering the power at play in acts of representation. Communal production and engaged reception have been two strategies modeled by this tradition to counter the power imbalance inherent in the cinematic act.<sup>4</sup> The re-thinking of human relationships through cinema can be understood as a media ethics, an intellectual and practical attention to how mediation affects individuals and communities. From this tradition, Jonas Mekas writes about the New American Cinema in 1962:

The new independent cinema movement – like the other arts in American today – is primarily an existential movement, or if you want, an ethical

movement, a human act; it is only secondarily an aesthetic one ... One could say that there is a morality in the new.

(1978: 104)

On YouTube there is amorality in the new. Since there is no place for ideas or interaction about production to surface, communal authoring, while possible, is rarely taken advantage of. Communal consumption is almost definitively absent. As for engaged reception: individual viewers may be creating useful maps across and between material, but these are hard to share. It is virtually impossible for two or more viewers to go down any YouTube road together.

Because people consume media in isolation on YouTube, even if a documentary presents radical content, the viewing architecture maintains that viewers must keep this to themselves. In this way, even as the self may be changing because of the conditions of new media, the self is also consolidated. 'The boundaries between the subject, if not the body, and the "rest of the world" are undergoing a radical refiguration, brought about in part through the mediation of technology,' writes cyber and trans cultural media activist, Allucquere Rosanne Stone (2000: 517). Like much new media, YouTube disturbs the public/private binary, opening up new possibilities for combinations inconceivable without the technology. Yet YouTube forecloses the construction of coherent communities and returns production, consumption, and meaning-making to the individual, re-establishing the reign of the self. Alexander Galloway (2004) explains that the end result is fragmentation, and while this may be continually exciting to postmodern cowboys endlessly anticipating the demise of the self, it has never served well people who are political, people who need to stand strong together in the name of something that must not be in the here and now. Thus, *MEDIA PRAXIS* has also defined and long debated utility. 'Intentionality is commonly a discredited concept in media criticism,' writes AIDS activist videomaker, John Greyson, about this 1980s media movement. 'Yet for any video artist making social change media (and certainly for the majority of these AIDS producers), it is a central issue.' YouTube strips intentionality from any documentary production found on it pages by unmooring it from its context and community.

In 1969, Julio García Espinosa wrote his manifesto about filmmaking, neo-colonialism, and socialism, 'For an Imperfect Cinema'. Here he included a lengthy if utopian description of a world to come that seems surprisingly familiar. The world he anticipates might almost be our own: one where there is surplus time and material resources, expanded education and cheaper technologies, simply put, a world where *everyone makes films*.

Quoted below, but not like a slogan, is a paragraph or two by Espinosa, left intact so that the richness and depth, the knowledge that he builds through lengthy listing, can be surveyed in full. Espinosa forecasts that changing conditions will result in the revolutionary outcome of universal art production. We will see that almost all that he anticipated has come to pass here in the United States, but perhaps not in Cuba from where he wrote. But because of YouTube's postmodern and post-capitalist wedding of technology and commerce to access and communication, sadly we end not with social justice, as he wished, but fragmentation, as he feared.

When we ask ourselves who it is we who are the film directors and not the others, that is to say, the spectators, the question does not stem from an exclusively ethical concern. We know that we are filmmakers because we have been part of a minority which has had the time and circumstances need to develop, within itself, an artistic culture; and because the material resources of film technology are limited and therefore available to some, not to all. But what happens if the future holds the universalization of college level instruction, if economic and social development reduce the hours in the work day, if the evolution of film technology (there are already signs in evidence) makes it possible that this technology ceases being the privilege of a small few? What happens if the development of video-tape solves the problem of inextricably limited laboratory capacity, if television systems with their potential for 'projecting' independently of the central studio render the ad infinitum construction of movie theaters suddenly superfluous?

What happens then is not only an act of social justice – the possibility for everyone to make films – but also a fact of extreme importance for artistic culture: the possibility of recovering, without any complexes or guilt feelings, the true meaning of artistic activity. Then we will be able to understand that art is one of mankind's impartial or uncommitted activities. That art is not work, and that the artist is not in the strict sense a worker ... For us then the revolution is the highest expression of culture because it will abolish artistic culture as a fragmentary human activity.

(1997: 72)

Espinosa's final wish for humanity will not be realized in our time, at least not through documentaries on YouTube.

## YouTube through New Queer Cinema

Any political movement with a media component needs self-aware writing that creates a social, political, intellectual and aesthetic context and structure for understanding new media work, for connecting it to other work, present and past, and then, most critically, for relating the work on display to contemporary claims and acts bent upon changing the world. While this might sound like too much, I have learned that the integration of a theoretical practice with a media practice is definitive of and integral to media praxis: that is, media that is made in connection to an articulated project of world and self-changing. For instance, in *Queer Cinema: The Film Reader*, the first paragraph of the general introduction explains that queer film cannot be understood outside of queer theory, an approach to rethinking human sexuality that sustains the film work produced, the critical writing about it, and the community served and hailed by this integrated body of cultural production. Activist rants, bits and pieces of queer television, hot guys kissing on a gay pride float, each of these stand-alone snatches of queer documentary practice, each of these isolated and solo fragments found on YouTube, are not the stuff of a political or film movement until someone, or better yet, some group unifies them, by linking their claims, strategies, and goals.

This was the function of B. Ruby Rich's seminal 1992 article, 'New queer cinema'. While the movies came first, the article theorized their style, function, and context. Rich explains how many of these films from the early 1990s share a postmodern vocabulary, both aesthetic and political, while also making sure to note the critical differences between the media practices of the girls and those of the boys (Rich 2004: 15–22). Then, Andrea Weiss (2005) builds upon Rich's taxonomy in her article 'Transgressive cinema: lesbian independent film', to note that lesbian cinema can be defined by its 'attempts to construct alternative visual codes' deriving from 'lesbian self-definition' and the '1970s lesbian/feminist movement'. Note how form and politics are linked to and through theory in both of these written works. This explains why the politics of AIDS is key to understanding what New Queer Cinema was and queer video on YouTube is not. Monica Pearl suggests that 'New queer cinema is AIDS cinema' (2004: 23) because a great many of these films and videos were created in the name of, or in response to this devastating crisis that needed answers ... immediately. While all the films and videos were certainly not *about* AIDS, they shared what Julianne Pidduck calls 'an ethical ground' (2004: 86). I understand Pidduck to mean something quite simple and definitive for effective media praxis: New Queer Cinema was made when producers were fighting for something, and in the name of that goal, particular and linked media forms, practices and strategies were developed, in dialogue with other work and producers. Michele Aaron, in her Introduction to *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*, describes a mutual style and politics organized around defiance: of what it meant to be gay, the sanctity of the past, cinematic conventions, and the meaning of death, precisely because of the place of AIDS. Because YouTube cannot generate an ethics – a shared sensibility and belief system – between its video or its viewers, it also forecloses the possibility for media politics.

Furthermore, as these few examples from the critical writing connected to New Queer Cinema demonstrate, when people theorize a political cinema while and after it is being made, a critical conversation about the imperatives and commonalities of form, as well as content, emerges. Since there is no formal unity and consistency across the works found on YouTube, this theoretical prerequisite is also belied. Without such theoretical bedrock – that is, theory about form – queer documentaries on YouTube cannot take what is the most common second step for political film movements. Namely, as representation increases, those studying a movement quickly realize that expanded visibility is only the most preliminary of radical ambitions. For while it is certainly true that YouTube opens up access and visibility so that, for instance, young, isolated queer youth can see images of people like themselves in ways unimaginable without the technology,<sup>5</sup> this isolated practice is a preliminary and solo step. What happens next according to Anat Pick is the realization that 'screening lesbianism is not simply a matter of making the invisible visible, but of negotiating different regimes of visibility', thus using cinema to herald 'new ways of thinking, being, and screening lesbian and queer' (2004: 115). New ways of seeing, like the delivery platform that is YouTube, are only the first move in a more radical and multifaceted project that commits to innovative thinking and novel ways of being. Here we must return to Eisenstein's demands for 'abstract social evaluation'. It

is this, most fundamentally, where YouTube fails, not because radical queer thinking and being, epistemology and ontology, are not modeled in the content and even form of some of the videos on display, but because this is neither coherently nor consistently patterned across the work and across the pages that surround the work.

Given YouTube's aimless structure, there's no way to build. For instance, the term 'Lesbian Community' delivers to me first, seemingly erroneously, a TV news clip about Prince William, of the UK, splitting up with his girlfriend, then a short clip featuring the popular but ubiquitous dykes-on-bikes from an un-named gay pride parade, something from a Rosie fan club, a clip from the seminal lesbian documentary *Forbidden Love*, a few clips from lectures and shows at various gay and lesbian community centers (these, however, primarily featuring gay men). Meanwhile the vast majority of clips (remember from 'Lesbian Community') are titillating glimpses of gay male sex including videos called Bears and Leather Guys, Hot Speedo Guys, Gay Leather Guys, and Gay Guardian Angel.

(Lesbian) community is defined by interactivity, strong affective bonds, a shared moral culture, and deliberation, according to Amitai Etzioni (2004: 87) who answers the title of the essay, 'Are virtual and democratic communities feasible?' with a relatively resounding no. At odds for lesbians, and others, seeking community on the internet is the interplay between commodity and community, a sloganlike predicament that defines the structure and limits of YouTube. In their introduction to *Queer Online*, Kate O'Riordan and David Phillips document how 'through the 1990s, ownership and control of the infrastructure of the internet, including the backbone carriers, ISPs, and Web Portals, became increasingly the domain of fewer, larger, and more integrated media corporations' so that a gay and lesbian internet that was once answerable to 'geographic and political communities' began answering 'primarily to advertisers and investors' (2007: 5). YouTube's edifice, which reduces media production and consumption to the discrete and unlinked output or viewing practices of random queer individuals, also functions to disallow the establishment of community, which was perhaps the foremost goal of New Queer Cinema. The liberated mediamakers creating and viewing queer content in unheralded numbers, do so with no plan or possibility beyond their private production and consumption. 'Freedom is fostered when the means of communication are dispersed, decentralized, and easily available ... Central control is more likely when the means of communication are concentrated, monopolized, and scarce, as are great networks' (de Soja Pool 1983: 5).

Ending with the failure of queer community, I hope that I have begun to mark the places where YouTube misses out. Namely, as YouTube explodes numbers, it minimizes elsewhere: a theory or theories; a politics; a sense of history; and a community. What YouTube achieves through open admission, it loses in focused vision. When I search for a queer documentary media praxis on YouTube, the tradition that undergirds contemporary queer realist images proves to be there, absolutely. On YouTube is available much I would have never had access to without it: short videos by undistributed queer artists, scenes from lectures, parades, protests, and bedrooms. However, these images, although exceedingly diverse, are undifferentiated and poorly categorized. They stand in sorry isolation from the time, place, community, aims, contexts, and theories from whence they were produced, each

ving, and linking with other undifferentiated videos in a sea of queer documentary images that is removed from the specificity and motivating clarity of causes and communities. Now, certainly, each of these videos, re-contextualized on a queer page, or even more specifically, an AIDS page, or a page on lesbian sexuality or identity, would function more in the vein of media praxis. But this is not the language of YouTube: fragments, clutter, information, commerce, and slogans.

Eisenstein and others anticipated a slogan that would counter capitalist yearning with life-affirming knowing. This is what they hoped for in Latin America in the 1960s: 'The result – and motivation – of social documentary and realist cinema? Knowledge and consciousness; we repeat: the awakening of the consciousness of reality. The posing of problems. Change: from subject to life' (Birri 1997: 4). And we continue to want this via today's technologies:

Such a cinema would tap into the potential of new video (and digital) technology, draw its resources from while serving communities that struggle against oppression and, most importantly, engage with and resist the decentered and dispersed forms of late capitalist domination that operate transnationally and across different identity formations'.

(Leung 2004: 158)

I have seen slogans work in just this way. SILENCE EQUALS DEATH appeared on posters, buttons, and leaflets. It was chanted ad infinitum in meeting rooms, on city streets, and at government capitals. However, we used this slogan, in these varied spaces, to fire us up (We Can't Take it Anymore!), and then, to continue into conversation, interaction, and better yet, action, towards change, together, in the name of what we knew was right and what we communally and defiantly expressed could be better. Because I have yet to find this communal energy, or action, or interaction, on YouTube, and more critically, because I think it is not possible on its pages, I will continue to seek theories and practices of radical media elsewhere.

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## Notes

- 1 I have written, taught about and produced activist video within the AIDS, feminist, and queer media movements of the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s.
- 2 See <http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org>.

- 3 I credit Rachel Lee with this observation.
- 4 See Juhasz (1995).
- 5 See Gray (2007).