Watching YouTube: Extraordinary Videos from Ordinary People.  

On the surface, it is easy for many people to dismiss a lot of what is called Media Studies. Whether writing critically or academically about television, music, or comic books, people often ask, “How can you study that?” I imagine that when writing an academic treatise on YouTube, Michael Strangelove heard his fair share of that refrain as well. Rest assured, however, that Watching YouTube is firmly planted in academic terrain, but as it is concerned with a much larger popular cultural artifact is easily accessible as well. The fact that Strangelove is even able to pull off a meaningful look at a current technological marvel is a feat unto itself, as anyone who has ever purchased a new electronic device can tell you, since it is often outdated by the time you get it home. Fortunately for Strangelove, YouTube has managed to maintain its prominence in the four years or so since he began his research and right through the writing process until today. His approach to the topic affords it the respect it deserves as both an historical and a current topic of intense academic scrutiny. As such, his arguments are relevant, timely, and firmly rooted in emerging sociological, media, and cultural studies trends.

Strangelove has focused on the relatively new phenomenon of YouTube in order to address a wide range of social questions such as gender, representation, identity, politics, community, and religion, amongst others. He looks to YouTube as the emergent forum in which an increasing segment of modern society participates in some form, whether as creator or viewer. His historical reflection lends scholarly power to the work. This commonality with other cultural and social theorists is important as it establishes a recognized starting point across different disciplines and thus lends credence to Strangelove himself. It would be easier for critics to instantly dismiss his positions if he were to break with tradition immediately, but he does not.

Strangelove writes that the “Internet and its newest darling, YouTube, are changing the audience’s relationship to commercial media” (p. 181), and with this primary focus takes us on a journey through Media Studies’ historical conception(s) of the audience. Looking back to early Frankfurt School configurations of the mass audience as passive “victims” of the almighty culture industries as envisioned by Adorno and Horkheimer, and then transitioning through the emergence in the 1980s of the “active audience” theories as espoused by Ang, Fiske, and others, Strangelove posits that YouTube has created a “hyperactive” audience. This audience is hyperactive because it has been moved beyond being active in creating meaning to also being active in the appropriation, creation, distribution, and consumption of content made possible through technological innovations like YouTube. Through examples such as “hyperactivity,” the strength of Strangelove’s work shines through. By focusing on the technological component it would be easy to descend into a deterministic model, but that doesn’t happen here and it is one of the strengths of this work. It commonly appears that many writers jump on board the newest techno marvel and proclaim it a revolutionary force in society, only to see it all but gone only a few years later (MySpace anyone?)

I remember the momentousness that seemed to come with Time magazine’s dec-
laration that “You” were the 2006 person of the year, referring of course to the increasing role that individuals had in helping to reconfigure media production, distribution, and consumption—that interactive role is what Strangelove is highlighting in his book. He references an important idea in his chapter “The Post-Television Audience” that the modern audience was once conceived of as heterogeneous. He writes, “what was once a highly centralized mass audience is now an array of smaller viewing collectives, as increasing numbers of cable channels spread the audience across multiple content options” (p. 167), to show that our historical configurations of both media industries and of media consumers are no longer valid. With the emergence of the hyperactive audience we witness the appearance of a new model, one of decentralized production and distribution. He also potentially understates his case when he writes, “commercial cultural production is coming under the influence of amateur cultural production” (p. 162). Using the term “influence” is clearly intentional so as not to place too much power within the realm of technology itself and again respects the idea that this entire milieu is not simply reducible to that argument.

Strangelove’s discussion of how we appropriate existing texts and then alter them (or as Henry Jenkins says, remix them) for political or other purposes is crucial. This opens a critical door to ask questions about current hot button issues like Intellectual Property, copyright, or even authenticity. One of Watching YouTube’s biggest strengths is that it does not deteriorate into a “and there’s this video and then this video” rundown of content, but does in fact utilize specific examples, some viral and well known and some not, as support for his thesis without burying it. This book is ultimately an unabashed look not just at videos, but also at those people who create and share them with everyone else. As someone who can easily lose hours of my life in a YouTube frenzy, this is an appreciated and important text.

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