

# Screen-births: Exploring the transformative potential in trans video blogs on YouTube

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*The article takes its point of departure in Tobias Raun's PhD research, exploring the numerous amounts of video blogs (vlogs) on YouTube where trans people (using hormones and/or surgery to alter their body) document and discuss their gender transition. The article offers a characterisation of the vlog medium as it is being put to use by the trans people, arguing that the vlog operates as both a diary, an autobiography, and as a vehicle of communication and social connection. Furthermore, Tobias Raun raises questions like: What kind of possibilities do a new media like vlogs enable in connection to represent and negotiate the meaning of trans identity? Can the trans vlogs enable a sense of empowerment and help create political visibility and political action?*

*Keywords: Transgender Studies, Transsexuality, Video Blogs, Internet Research, Participatory Culture, Self-Representation, Autobiography.*

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'So today is my first day, being born, I guess' ("Wheeler", 18 years old FtM, USA)

This article takes as its point of departure the numerous amounts of video blogs (vlogs) on YouTube (youtube.com) where transsexuals (using hormones and/or surgery to alter their body) document and discuss their gender transition. The transition is often articulated as a birth or a re-birth signalling a new start in life and a new identity. 'Trans-' in its many meanings and configurations seems to be a suitable name for these vlogs as well as a fruitful and thought-provoking frame for engaging with them. In

this article I will touch upon 'trans' in three different ways, as an identity category (transsexual), as a movement of becoming (transitioning) and as a characterisation of the vlog medium (transmedia). I will argue that the vlog operates as something in-between an autobiography, a diary, and a vehicle of communication and social connection. The questions that I will pursue are: how are these various forms of –'trans-' played out in the vlogs and what might the transformative potential be?

## **'Broadcast Yourself': Introduction to the research context**

The trans vlogs are rapidly in-

creasing on the multimedia platform YouTube. YouTube as a platform was officially launched 'with little public fanfare in June 2005' (Burgess and Green 2009a, 1), as it started off as a video-sharing site run by three students (van Dijck 2009, 42). Google acquired YouTube in October 2006 and by early 2008 it was in the top ten most visited websites globally. In the early days YouTube carried the byline 'Your Digital Video Repository' but today it has been changed to 'Broadcast Yourself' – a shift from the website as a personal storage facility to a platform for self-expression (Burgess and Green 2009a, 2-4). YouTube is a 'messy' platform, containing a wide variety of movie clips, TV clips, and music videos from traditional media sources, as well as user-created content like vlogs. According to Jean Burgess and Joshua Green, YouTube is 'a site of participatory culture' (Burgess and Green 2009a, vii). Participatory culture is a term introduced by Henry Jenkins to describe what he calls the paradigmatic shift in media culture towards increased participation and democratisation (Jenkins 2006). As Jenkins states: 'Audiences ... are demanding the right to participate within culture' (Jenkins 2006, 24). More accessible digital technologies and a platform for sharing the user-created content enable potentially everybody to express themselves and 'talk back'. Vlogs are fairly cheap and technically easy to use

and produce, generally requiring nothing more than a webcam and basic editing skills. According to the recent study of YouTube done by Burgess and Green, vlogging is a dominant form of user-created content among the 'Most Discussed' and 'Most Responded' clips on YouTube. Thus, vlogging is 'an emblematic form of YouTube participation' (Burgess and Green 2009b, 94). The vlogs can also be seen as part of what Nicole Matthews has characterized as a broader 'confessional culture' (Matthews 2007, 435), including media genres such as blogging, television talkshows, reality television and a phenomenon like webcams.

### **Meeting the YouTubers<sup>1</sup>: Internet methodology and research ethics**

I came across the trans vlogs when I was searching for information and visualisations of bodily transformations with the use of hormones in order to prepare myself for my own transition. I used search words such as 'trans', 'transgender', 'transman', 'transwoman', 'FtM' (Female-to-Male), "MtF" (Male-to-Female), etc. My presumption was that I would find very few examples of people uploading their gender transition, but to my surprise there were several. Furthermore I discovered that YouTubers had started to vlog about their transition around 2006/2007 and by now it was a genre in itself with certain characteristics. A model seemed to have been developed

regarding how to address the audience, how to appear or present yourself on screen and how to document and discuss the transition. The first YouTuber I met was 'Jan' testing his new voice while singing and 'Erica' talking about her 'Transgender Life'. They popped up when I typed the above-mentioned search words and I clicked my way into their 'personal channel page' where I saw the rest of their vlogs. The channel page serves as a personal profile designed to display a short personal description, thumbnails of videos the YouTuber has uploaded, members to whom the YouTuber subscribes, videos from other members the YouTuber has picked as favourites, lists of members who are the YouTuber friends and subscribers and a section where other people can leave comments. This personal channel page often coexists with a MySpace profile, a webpage/homepage and a regular blog elsewhere. This means that these people's experiences and resources are spread across a variety of media platforms offering different points of entry for different audience segments with the result that there is 'no one single source or text where one can turn to gain all of the information' (Jenkins 2007, 1).

Some YouTubers have uploaded three vlogs, others three hundred, some stop after a couple of months, others continue for several years. I have been watching the 945 vlogs uploaded by 'Jan', 'Erica',

'Henry', 'Wheeler', 'Simon', 'Claire', 'Jonathan' and 'Larry' and an infinite number of other vlogs that I came across while browsing YouTube trying to get an overview of the phenomenon. There is a strong prevalence of young white American trans people blogging about their life, which corresponds to some of the critiques that have been raised against the democratising promise of 'participatory culture'. YouTube is US-dominated (Burgess and Green 2009a, 82) and not very racially diverse (Alexander 2002b, 101-102; Jenkins 2009, 124;).

Doing Internet research like mine raises important and interlinked questions regarding methodology and ethics. Internet research ethics is an evolving and much debated academic field in itself<sup>2</sup>, which outlines the ethical complexities and implications of conducting research online. Most ethical guidelines seem to agree that it is ethically responsible to do research without informed consent and/or use of pseudonyms if the material 'is open and available for everyone, that everyone with an Internet connection can access, and that does not require any form of membership or registration' (Sveningsson Elm 2009, 75). However, if the content is highly sensitive (and/or perceived as private by the users) and the subject is vulnerable, one should consider getting informed consent and/or anonymise the user (cf. note 2). I have notified the Danish Data Protection

Agency about the research that I am conducting and have been given permission. The Danish Data Protection Agency is a state institution providing juridical permission, protecting individuals with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data. I am following their guidelines stating that I do not have to obtain informed consent, but that I need to anonymise the vloggers when publishing my material (unless I have been given permission from the vloggers). Thus, in what follows I will elaborate on what such guidelines entail and on my own considerations in this regard.

Youtube is indeed a publicly accessible archive promoting itself as 'the world's most popular online video community', inciting 'you' to Broadcast Yourself. Uploading a video on YouTube is a form of consent, it may not be informed, but it is nevertheless a form of consent where you agree that millions of people are allowed to watch and discuss your vlog, including researchers. However, the personal/confessional articulations of gender and sexuality in the vlogs contain material too sensitive to be studied without obscuring the users. This was the reasoning by The Danish Data Protection Agency. One could add that the trans vloggers might experience the platform as a semi-private forum even though it is public. Thus, the trans vloggers address a selection of audiences (fellow trans, queer

or trans-curious people), a 'counter public' (Warner 2002), while at the same time reaching out to a larger global audience in order to create awareness and advocacy for trans-related issues and in order to make their voices heard. The personal mode of the vlogs, that according to The Danish Data Protection Agency is material too sensitive to be connected to identifiable individuals, could be perceived as part of a shift towards an increasing acceptance to expose one self and one's private matters in public and especially on the Internet (e.g. Warner 2002; Berlant 2008). However, one also needs to take into consideration that studying trans people is a contested field, given the long history of exploitive and harmful research done especially by non-trans people. Jacob Hale's 'Suggested Rules for Non-Transsexuals Writing about Transsexuals, Transsexuality, Transsexualism, or Trans' (Hale 1997/ongoing) is a reminder of this history, but also an admonition to all researchers, trans or not, to engage with this field of study with a discerning mind and compassionate heart. Changing the YouTubers usernames and not stating their hometown takes into account that some may feel personally and emotionally exposed. However, anonymising the trans vlogger's username (which often is not their real name) can potentially contribute to the transphobic myth that being trans is something you should hide

or of which you should be ashamed. Not allowing the vloggers a name can seem complicit with pathologising and infantilisation of trans people. As Kathleen O’Riordan and E. H. Bassett state: ‘the decision to disguise online activity, justified through a rhetoric of ‘protection’ may result in furthering the unequal power relations of media production by blocking full representation of alternative media’ (O’Riordan & Bassett 2002, 12). It may also fail to credit the trans vloggers with the technological and social expertise that can operate in the field (see O’Riordan 2010).

A prevalent perception and marketing of the Internet is as a ‘space’ that is peopled and inhabited, and where researchers are studying and observing human actors. This has led to the widespread application of the human subject research model, that regards the rights of the human subject as primary and the aims of the researcher as secondary (O’Riordan and Bassett 2002; White 2002). However, the Internet is also a form of cultural production and publication, which makes it important to acknowledge the highly mediated and constructed aspects of these representations. The representation/text cannot unproblematically be conflated with the human subject appearing in and producing it (O’Riordan and Bassett 2002; White 2002). An important example of this is the case of the vlogger Bree, better known as *lonelygirl15*,

who became famous for her apparently very emotional and impassioned posts about her parents and friends, but it turned out that the vlogs were a filmmaking experiment by independent producers Mesh Flinders and Miles Beckett (Burgess & Green 2009a, 27-30). I am not suggesting that the trans vloggers are not real, but I am implying that any appearance on the Internet is mediated and must be studied as such. As a visual culture theorist my analytical approach is interdisciplinary, thus taking its prime point of departure in media studies and gender studies, analysing how trans people narrate and visualise the encounter with and experience of transitioning processes and technologies.

### **Trans as a stigmatised position**

The increased possibility of participation in media culture enables trans people to take charge of their own representation. The need and the urge to do so might emanate from the fact that trans people have to submit themselves to psychological evaluations and a system of pathologizing labels before access is granted to medical treatments, which then allow for a legal change in gender status. In spite of the fact that transsexuality is an official psychopathology, ‘treatments’ are not covered by health insurance in the United States (Stryker 2008), but they are in countries such as Denmark, Sweden and the UK. However, many choose to seek

support elsewhere and fund the transition themselves (Ringkøbing 2006) because 'the diagnosis works as its own social pressure, causing distress, establishing wishes as pathological, intensifying the regulation and control of those who express them in institutional settings' (Butler 2004, 99). As the queer theorist Judith Butler sums it up: 'one has to submit to labels and names, to incursions, to invasions; one has to be gauged against measures of normalcy; and one has to pass the test.' ... The price of using the diagnosis to get what one wants is that one cannot use the language to say what one really thinks is true. One pays for one's freedom' (Butler 2004, 91).

When it comes to representation, trans individuals have often been exploited and sensationalised by others with little concern for the lives and perspectives of the trans people themselves (Shrage 2009, 5). However, the mainstream media's coverage of MtFs (Male to Female) is increasing. This increase in visibility is noticeable in reality programmes such as *Americas Next Top Model*, featuring Isis, and in *I want a famous face*, featuring Gia Darling who wants to look like Pamela Anderson. In the dating show *There is something about Miriam* a transwoman is the star of the programme, as six men are wooing 21-year-old Mexican model, Miriam. Only in the final episode is it 'revealed' to the men that she is a

trans woman. Clearly being trans is here portrayed as being somehow duplicitous. The FtM (Female to Male) Thomas Beatie has also hit the headlines as 'The Pregnant Man', appearing on several talkshows and supermarket tabloids. Despite the different ways of portraying these trans people, I tend to agree with John Philips in *Transgender on Screen* writing: 'even well-intentioned popular entertainment [fails] to produce wholly positive representations' (Philips 2006, 15). Thus, the coverage in mainstream media of the lives of trans people tends to be a tabloidization of transsexuality, often focusing on the artificiality of their gender and the inability to fully incarnate manhood or womanhood.

### **The trans vlogs**

The trans vlogs figure as short video clips (usually 2-8 minutes long) and are predominantly produced, populated and distributed by young trans people aged 16-30 years old. The YouTubers often record themselves, using the webcam built into their computer, which gives these videos a specific (low-grade) aesthetic expression. The YouTubers are speaking straight-to-camera and implicitly address an audience of fellow trans, queer or trans-curious people. The trans vlogs can in the words of Patricia Lang, be regarded as 'videos of affiliation' focusing on establishing communicative connections with other like-minded people (Lange



2009, 71). Therefore they do not have to be original or well crafted in order to attract attention as Lang points out but this can still be a determining factor in creating and sustaining an audience (Müller 2009, 129). Taking this into account, it is no surprise that 'Erica' (a 25 years old MtF, USA) attracts more viewers than many of the other YouTubers, as she is one of the first trans vloggers on YouTube and working more persistently and experimentally with the medium than many of the others.

### **Born online**

In the trans vlog, I will argue that the camera plays several important roles, but first and foremost it is a vehicle of transubstantiation<sup>3</sup>. The camera not only documents but also enables the transformation. Like the hormones or the surgical instruments, the camera has the power to turn the YouTubers into the men and women they identify themselves as.

A surprisingly large number of YouTubers start their vlogs around the time of the first shot of hormones. They often inject the hormones online as in a double 'shot' – they pull the trigger on the hypodermic needle and the camera, initiating the process of becoming man/woman. The vlogs become 'screen-births' illustrated in for instance 'Wheeler's' (a 18 years old FtM, USA) row of vlogs, starting with his first shot of testosterone and labelled 'day one'. For most of the transmen the re-

birth starts the day they start taking testosterone and they structure and label the vlogs after how many months they have been taking the hormone. The birth-metaphor is also explicated in 'Wheeler's' first video as he says:

so today is my first day, being born, I guess ... I feel really good, I feel like there is just a huge weight that has been lifted from my soul, I guess, and I feel ready to embrace life now as the person I was supposed to be. I guess it is like being born but being able to form full sentences and walk and talk and like do all the fun stuff' (February 03, 2009).

The camera witnesses the 'birth' and 'growing up' of 'Wheeler', but I will argue that it also enables him to become the man that he wants to be. As the row of vlogs progresses 'Wheeler' becomes more and more accustomed to the camera and in front of the camera he learns and relearns culturally located bodily practices that define gender. In the vlogs he is producing or performing a certain (gender) identity and trying it out in front of an audience. Thus, YouTube functions as a mirror in various ways. First of all, when you upload a video and you look at your computer screen with the webcam on, you are looking at your own reflection. You do not have eye contact with yourself but you see an already edited version of yourself as image.

The camera invites the YouTuber to assume the shape of a desired identity/representation. The mirroring effect of the screen is evident, as the YouTuber seems absorbed in his/her own reflection, adjusting his/her hair, clothes or smile while talking. Thus, there is a constant and ongoing evaluation of oneself as an attractive image and trying out different 'styles of the flesh' (Butler 1990, 177). Thereby the camera indeed is an important tool in the transubstantiation. The YouTuber literally talks to themselves, but knowing that other people might be watching on the other side of the mirror/screen. As Giovanna Fossati states: 'YouTube reflects you and you reflect (on) YouTube' (Fossati 2009, 460). This is taken very literally in some vlogs, for instance by 'Simon' (a 21 years old FtM, USA) who asks the viewers to be his "mirror" and tell him what shirt to wear (June 06, 2009). The vlogs can be read as ongoing mirror stages enabling the formation of the ego/I via the identification and internalization of one's own specular image. As Jacques Lacan points out:

This act [looking into the mirror], far from exhausting itself, as in the case of the monkey, once the image has been mastered and found empty, immediately rebounds in the case of the child in a series of gestures in which he experiences in play the relation between the movements assumed in the image and the re-

flected environment, and between this virtual complex and the reality it reduplicates – the child's own body, and the persons and things, around him. (Lacan 2002, 3)

The mirror/vlog is a medium in which to master one's identity, trying out and incorporating the ideal reflection of the ego. Furthermore, the mirror/vlog can also become an ideal reflection or a role model for others. Thus, the YouTubers are proving to themselves as well as others that transubstantiation is possible. The vlogs offer guidance and direction on 'the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image' (Lacan 2002, 3).

The screen-birth of one YouTuber anticipates the (screen-)births of others, often in very concrete ways. One example is 'Erica's' request for more trans people to blog: 'I issue a challenge – make our own videos [...] If I can do it, you can do it' (March 05, 2007). However, it seems as if the request is not just about blogging but also about coming out and claiming a trans identity.

### **Autobiographies of the digital age**

These vlogs can be seen as autobiographies of the digital age, part of the increasing number of publications of transsexual autobiographies (starting in 1933 (Hoyer 1933) and seriously increasing from the nineties). The autobiographical act is a



crucial part of trans people's lives as they are constantly required to elucidate the origin and ongoing sense of gender. In order to access a medical and legal sex reassignment trans people need to be diagnosed with 'Gender Identity Disorder' and 'pass' the following criteria:

There must be evidence of a strong and persistent cross-gender identification, which is the desire to be, or the insistence that one is, of the other sex (Criterion A). ... There must also be evidence of persistent discomfort about one's assigned sex or a sense of inappropriateness in the gender role of that sex (Criterion B)" ... To make the diagnosis, there must be evidence of clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning (Criterion D). (DSM IV 1994, 532)

The process of diagnosing a trans person is above all narratological as the diagnosis derives from the person's narrative (Prosser 1998, 104). The potential polyvocalities of lived experience are silenced because the stories that the trans people tell the clinician must mirror or echo the diagnosis, matching the master narrative. As Prosser points out: 'In effect, to be transsexual, the subject must be a skilled narrator of his or her own life. Tell the story persuasively, and you're likely to get your

hormones and surgery' (Prosser 1998, 108). This is not just the case in the clinician's office but also on YouTube. Many YouTubers use their vlogs as a way to raise money for their transition, often by listing an account number where you can donate money or by explicitly asking for funding, like for instance 'Larry' (a 32 year old FtM, USA) who urges people to donate money for his long wanted top-surgery (September 22, 2009).

A coherent explanation is often also expected from trans people's family and friends. There seem to be two possible options, either you tell the story of your lifelong suffering in the 'wrong body' (enabling their understanding, but pathologising yourself) or you refrain from telling a story of suffering, explaining it as a choice you have made (keeping your feeling of 'sanity' and agency, but putting their understanding and acceptance at stake). The fact that the first autobiographies often take place in the clinician's office set the standard for highly formalised narratives. This may be the reason why the written autobiographies of trans people tends to be 'structured around shared tropes and fulfilling a particular narrative organization of consecutive stages: suffering and confusion; the epiphany of self-discovery; corporeal and social transformation/conversion; and finally the arrival 'home' – the reassignment' (Prosser 1998, 101). The vlogs seem to a certain extent to fol-

low the linear and conformist master narrative of transsexuality in the written autobiographies – they too become voyages into an authentic self. In a Lacanian sense the vlogs can be seen as a movement from a disidentification with the reflection to a full identification. The YouTuber slowly sees him/herself in the ‘mirror’ and, yet, in the imaginary the man/woman was there all along. But the vlogs are also dilating the purpose and scope of the literary autobiographies because of the ongoing re-presentation, re-visioning and re-writing of the personal story.

Vlog as a medium gives the YouTuber a multimodal opportunity for documenting, telling and commenting on their story and their gender changes continually – and to get feedback from others. ‘Erica’s’ biography has been written and rewritten several times as she is one of the first and most persistent trans YouTubers. In collaboration with a documentary maker she has made a film about her life story and her life on YouTube, using her earlier vlogs as footage. This film is of course uploaded on YouTube where it becomes part of a meta-reflective vlogging practice. What ‘Erica’ shares with us in this film is how YouTube increasingly is being used by trans people to represent identities and ask questions that have been censored or denied representation elsewhere. Watching other trans people’s stories enabled her own realisation process and the

recognition of her own biography as a trans narrative. The vlogs have become visual as well as narrative maps for her self-construction and self-reflection as trans. It has transformed her gender identity from a private fantasy to a public display. Thus, digitalising her life is very much part of a process of becoming ‘woman’. As Prosser points out: ‘Yet as this corporeal reconstruction is made possible through narrative and, indeed, as the transsexual self must be represented before it is realized in the flesh, transsexuality is equally bound to representation, dependent on its symbolisation to be real’ (Prosser 1998, 209). The vlogs become certificates of presence or birth certificates trying to catch and promote the (re-) embodiment of the subject. Not just ‘Erica’ but the majority of the trans YouTubers use vlogs as a medium for continuous digital lifestory-telling, utilising the vlog format as ‘a personal media practice’ and a way of ‘crafting an agentive self’ (Lundby 2008, 3-5). ‘Erica’s’ life on YouTube has enabled her to (re)invent her transsexuality from being something extraordinary (which it often is in mainstream media) to something ordinary and back into the extraordinary because of the massive attention that the vlogs have given her.

### **Video diaries**

As a diary the vlogs serve the function of documenting the YouTubers recent activities, thoughts, problems

as well as enabling the release of emotional tension, which is similar to regular blogging (Nardi, Schiano and Gumbrecht 2004). However, the vlogs predominantly update and map the bodily changes, and therefore the vlogs are often structured around verbal enumeration and visual registration of what the hormones and/or the surgery have facilitated. The camera plays the role of an attesting and attentive other, securing the YouTuber a personal repository. Mapping the ongoing process of materialisation also involves registering the changes that the voice goes through and therefore a lot of vlogs contain singing.

'Jan' (a 26 years old FtM, USA) has explicitly labelled his vlogs as 'transman diaries' highlighting their function as present-status update. He has several vlogs with himself singing in front of the webcam in his room. In one of the clips he is singing 'Come What May' (2001), the song popularized by Ewan McGregor and Nicole Kidman from the movie *Moulin Rouge*, after 6 months on testosterone. The vlog incorporates a private *mise en scène*, which is common for trans vlogs, thus we are in 'Jan's' room with a half naked 'Jan' singing. The lyric of the song seems to symbolise 'Jan's' transition and his feelings towards it ('suddenly my life doesn't seem such a waste'). He cannot foresee what he will become but surely there will be changes and challenges. Anticipating those changes and challenges, it seems

like he is comforting himself: 'Come what may, I will love you until my dying day'. The setting and the use of the camera establish a feeling of an intimate encounter. He looks directly into the camera with a playful and flirtatious look while singing. He draws the viewer into the song, makes us believe that this song is for us as he instructs us when the female and male part is coming up – and wonders with us if he will be able to sing the female part. As he says: 'This shall be funny' while he smiles at us (September 26, 2008). The vlog produces evidence of 'Jan's' live body and provide a spontaneous, present-status update with the use of deictic gestures. Half way through the song he reaches out for the computer in order to turn up the volume and his arm is heading directly towards my field of vision. I hear the well-known sound of a mac computer adjusting its volume, 'Come what may' a little higher and 'Jan' laughing as he cracks while trying to sing the female part. 'I hope you enjoyed it' he says in the end whereby he transits feelings of connection. Like a diary the style is intimate, outspoken and yet these vlogs are very communicative, directing attention towards a potential sympathetic viewer.

'Simon' also uses his vlogs as diaries, sharing intimate details about his therapy sessions, relationships and fears. In one of his vlogs he touches upon the confessional mode that he himself and oth-

ers use. He talks about being very sensitive, emotional, shy and afraid of rejections, but still he exposes himself in front of a global audience. He explains it this way: 'I'm really shy, and these videos are easy because right now all I do is talking to a camera, talking with self, which I do in my head anyway, talk to myself'. Later he states: 'I hold back more in real life than on the computer' (October 07, 2007). 'Simon' pinpoints the camera as a kind interlocutor, someone you can trust and tell everything. The camera is the eye that sees and the ear that listens powerfully but without judgement and reprisal. Thus, YouTube becomes 'an archive of affective moments or formations' (Grusin 2009, 66), a platform for 'emotional resonance' creating space for solidarity and authenticity, self-esteem and self-efficacy, fear and anger like live trans support groups (Schrock, Holden and Reid 2004). However, the vlogs also in some respects restage the confessions that transsexuals are bound to go through in order to access hormones and/or surgery. The question is how and why this continuous confession can be liberating? Is it used as a re-appropriating strategy, part of a continuous self-naming and retelling one's story at one's own request? Read with Michel Foucault in mind confessions are not inherently liberating, but we have been pushed to see them that way by the powers that extract confessions from

us. Confessions make us subjects in both senses of the word – we are subjected to powers (doctors, government officials, judges, teachers, parents, etc.) that draw confessions from us, and through confession we come to see ourselves as thinking subjects, the subject of confession (Foucault 1998). The concept of 'empowering exhibitionism' (Koskela 2004) seems applicable and well suited to capture the paradox of self-disclosure at stake in these vlogs.

### **YouTube is my hood. Creating an online community**

Besides serving as an autobiography and a diary, the vlogs also engender (trans)national communities by the conversational character of engagement. The YouTuber persistently hails potentially interested parties with a 'Hi guys' and invites feedback and discussion, either as text comments below the video or as video responses. Thereby the camera is a vehicle of communication and social connection used to merit attention in a way that resembles face-to-face interaction. The titles of the vlogs ('Just to update you guys' ect.) also sometimes frame them as oriented towards human connections.

For the transgendered YouTubers social networking is highly important, as they recount experiences of transphobia and numerous problems with getting medical and economic support for the transition.

They also express feeling alienated around their family who have difficulties relating to them in their (new) gender identity. YouTube becomes an online community, connecting individuals across geographic divides thereby challenging spatial borders and opening up for the construction of transnational communities. In this vein, 'Jonathan' (a 35 years old FtM, Canada) has facilitated a mapping project in order to make visible and connect the huge amount of transmen across the world. He did this because he lives in 'a pretty small community' where he rarely meets other trans men. And as he says: 'I got inspired to do this because I think that anyone who goes through transition at some point has one of those days where you feel kind of alone through the whole thing' (February 22, 2009).

The trans people seem to use YouTube as a way to create new social relations which distinguishes the use from the way that SNS (Social Network Sites) is predominantly used, namely as a way to maintain pre-established relations (Boyd & Ellison 2008). Many of the YouTubers express both a strong connection and an obligation to the YouTube community. Sharing knowledge about how they feel about being trans, how to make a packer<sup>4</sup>, how to inject hormones, what kind of surgery to get etc. becomes a communal commitment and way to offer support. As 'Larry' (a 32 years old FtM, USA) says 'I

appreciate this community...If it wasn't for you I don't know what I would do' (September 11, 2009). YouTube is articulated as a forum removed from the YouTubers immediate physical locality and constructed as an alternative and somewhat utopian 'place', a space of fantasy communion that satisfies the desire to belong. YouTube is to some extent perceived as a 'parochial space' (O'Riordan and Bassett 2002, 9) engendered by the attention and support the transgendered YouTubers get. The support can be in the shape of concrete economic funds for the transition and places to stay when abroad or as emotional recognition and encouragement.

### **'Trans'-formations**

For a viewer just brushing through the trans vlogs, the continuous self-reporting may seem overwhelmingly self-absorbed. However, my argument is that these vlogs have a transformative potential. First of all, they seem to engender the ongoing process of materialisation, of becoming man/woman. The YouTubers are born online as media-bodies, using the vlogs as a performative tool assisting in the dismantling of certain gendered signifiers and the creation of others, which on the one hand ensures the YouTuber with a *new* body image and yet on the other hand bond him/her to the former image. This bodily becoming tends to be visualized and narrated as an empowering re-

invention and re-birth.

Secondly, the vlogs bear out the feminist slogan that the personal is political by their personalised unravelling and negotiating of the meaning of trans identity. Computer technology seems to be a powerful tool that gives LGBT people access to political visibility and a possibility to challenge their under-or misrepresentation in traditional print and broadcast media (Alexander 2002a). The vlogs can help to mobilise and disseminate information about transition and trans identity (O’Riordan 2005) and therefore the vlogs can be read as online global activism, assisting in challenging the image of transsexuals as passive and pathologised subjects<sup>5</sup>. Lastly, vlogging enables new transnational networks besides maintaining already established communities. However, commerce and community goes hand in hand as many YouTubers use the vlogs as a way to raise economic funds for their transition.

Visibility plays a key role in these transformations and becomes a prerequisite for the transgendered YouTuber’s (new) identity, engendering them with a voice, an image and a community. The visual media is highly important as it promises (like transition itself) to make visible the identity that often begins as imperceptible (Prosser 1998, 211). Previously, many trans people were reluctant to be visible as ‘trans’ because they feared stigmatization and wished to ‘pass’<sup>6</sup> (Green 2006),

but that seems to be changing with these vlogs. However, visibility still seems to be somewhat of a paradox for trans people enabling them to be part of a community and be out and proud about their transness but potentially complicating their assimilation as men/women.

### Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> The YouTuber is a category that operates in the community itself as well as in academic discourse, see Burgess and Green 2009a and Lange 2007.

<sup>2</sup> See for instance AoIR 2002; O’Riordan & Bassett 2002; White 2002; Bromseth 2003; Buchanan 2004; Ess 2009; Svenningson Elm 2009.

<sup>3</sup> I am using “transubstantiation” with its references to the Roman Catholic term used to describe what happens to the bread and wine during the celebration of Holy Communion. Transubstantiation means that the bread and wine have been supernaturally changed into the body and blood of Christ. The miracle of the Incarnation is repeated as Jesus Christ once again takes on human form for our benefit. However, I am also inspired by Judith Butler’s use of “transubstantiation” in her reading of “Paris Is Burning” by Jennie Livingston. Here Butler specifically connects transubstantiation to transsexuality as she points out that some of the characters in the film “are engaged in life projects to effect a full transubstantiation into femininity and/or whiteness” (“Bodies that Matter”, 134). Thus, Butler is also connecting transubstantiation to the effect of the camera – e.g. “the camera acts as surgical instrument and operation, the vehicle through which the transubstantiation occurs. Livingston thus becomes the one with the power to turn men into women who, then, depend on the power of her



gaze to become and remain women” (“Bodies that Matter”, 135). I am also inspired by Jay Prosser’s use of “transubstantiation” as a way to capture the complex process whereby embodiment and re-embodiment play a key role in the narratives of transsexuals

<sup>4</sup> A packer is an item used by transmen in the front of his pants or underwear to give the appearance of and install a feeling of having a penis. A huge amount of trans vlogs share information about how to make your own packer out of different kinds of cheap material and where to buy a good and cheap pre-manufactured life-like packer.

<sup>5</sup> As is often the case within medical discourse as well as in research like for instance Raymond 1994 and Hausman 1995

<sup>6</sup> To pass is a crucial issue for many trans people, connected to a feeling of being recognised as the gender they feel they belong to. As Sander Gilman points out, “Passing’ is not becoming ‘invisible’ but becoming differently visible – being seen as a member of a group with which one wants or needs to identify’ (Gilman 1999, xxi). Passing is the ‘ability to become (in)visible, seen but not seen’ (op.cit., 42). Invisibility involves being part of a norm instead of being considered deviant; being unmarked contrary to being marked. Passing is therefore about inclusion and exclusion, suggesting that identity involves performance and recognition of certain kinds of signifiers. Passing can be a wish, a possibility and also an imperative for certain people, for instance trans people. For trans people passing aligns inner gender identity with social identity, thus assimilating as a man/woman often necessitates a concealment of your transgendered history (e.g. Prosser 1998, 184-187).

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