

The YouTube age: the collapse of the myth of creativity

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Right at this very moment, somewhere on Earth someone is shooting some video. In no time those images will be transmitted around the world and shared via the Internet. We are witnessing the emergence of society in which the multitudes create and consume their very own video art. But might this also be a portent of a new era in which the "individual" is lost?

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If you've even heard of Norman McLaren, you're either experimental animation maniac or a Canadian (or maybe both). McLaren is one of the pioneers of experimental animation. He was most active around the 1950s, mainly in Canada. His main contribution to the genre was a series of short films including *Stars and Stripes*, that wasn't shot by cameras, but rather created by scratching or painting on the film stock itself. These films have become standard features at various short film and experimental animation retrospectives, due to their historical significance, as well as the fact that the Canadian Embassy generously provides them for free (or provides them online). You COULD get them in DVD or VHS formats, although that defeats their whole point. The value of these pieces lies in the fact that the medium of film, which used to be a simply copying tool of some optical process, has become the canvas where the creative process takes place. Seeing that actual place of the creative process was supposed to be interesting.

Having said that, how interesting were they? Not much, to be honest, and it's rather a blessing that all of them lasts for just a few minutes. McLaren's daringly simple camera-less filmmaking idea is amusing, but the footage itself isn't. The jagged drawings made by hand-scratching the film stock are crude, and their simple charm fades after

around 10 seconds of viewing. Yet these films have continued to be regarded as classics in the field of art we call animation. Why might this be so?

One reason is that these films represented a fresh approach to a new technology and new medium. People don't pay money to go and see a bear dance because the bear is good at dancing. It's because a dancing bear itself is unusual. McLaren produced a new bear. Also the avant-garde art world in general has in some ways turned into an idiotic competition to see who is the first to do every pointless and stupid act, which also adds to McLaren's fame (although thankfully this tendency seems to be on the decline).

This is also related to the myth of creativity on which art has for so long depended, the idea that art is created by people who make some kind of prodigious or superhuman effort, who receive some kind of inspiration and create from scratch something entirely original that hasn't been seen before. According to this way of thinking, the first person to do something new created whatever it was they created because they were blessed with the appropriate talent and/or inspiration. Under this notion, art involves worshipping this creativity. IMHO, this is why people feel the need to revere certain art works that has lost its initial technical/aesthetical merit (or didn't have any to begin with). They serve as a kind of fetish, valued simply by the fact that the great god of creativity has blessed it with his/her presence at one time in history.

But there's another reason why McLaren's work is held in such high esteem. It's true that in theory at least, scratching film stock is something anyone can do. But I imagine that when McLaren was making his films, both film stock and the equipment needed to make films were rather costly. Treating expensive film stock in this way was clearly wasteful. Moreover, carefully

scratching the film frame by frame must have taken a considerable amount of time and effort. The results were magnificent fruits of wastefulness. In one sense anyone could have done it, but in economic terms only a very select few could have managed it.

Particularly at a time when people were impoverished, the fact that someone could even contemplate squandering such resources was a sure sign that they were part of a select minority. Either they were very rich, or they were crazy enough to sacrifice other aspects of their lives for the sake of achieving their objectives. This again is clearly related to our theme of "some kind of prodigious or superhuman effort".

A million monkeys and Shakespeare

Most optical lens-based art is an extension of this idea. However, advances in technology are transforming the assumptions behind these ideas, and at the same time producing things that are quite different to the schema of art I have just outlined. A classic example of this is YouTube (www.youtube.com).

J.G. Ballard once stated that the future would be boring. Multitude of middle class families living in vast, dreary, featureless suburbs shooting countless utterly worthless home 8mm films (they didn't have portable videos back then) that would never get a second (or even first) look. It seems that Ballard's idea of the future (especially in the 1980s) is one big endless screening of these immensely boring home videos. And in fact, that is exactly what YouTube is. It is actually a vast collection of boring, worthless home videos. It's well known that the idea for YouTube came at a party hosted by the founders, whose sole intention was to create a site where everyone could upload and share their home videos.

Ballard has written extensively about this boredom dominated future, which he clearly regards as something negative. He

considers it a symptom of an undisciplined way of life by people pampered by civilization and lacking in such things as talent and effort. Ballard despises this “soft” way of life and has written extensively, particularly in his most recent works, about the way in which it leads to psychological imbalances in modern people leading to the breakdown of modern society.

But watching YouTube is nothing but boring, as many people including myself have learned the hard way, by inadvertently wasting hours and days of our valuable lives. This is not (just) because of all the copyright infringing videos. Hidden amongst the countless utterly lame home videos, there are actually a few that are surprisingly cool. Shortly before YouTube, a video of a fat kid pretending to be a Jedi Knight waving his light saber (i.e. a broom) became a huge hit on the Internet. Other examples include videos that show ideas spreading virally, like those of people fooling around with Mentos and Diet Coke eruptions and making dry ice bombs out of PET bottles. In some cases it's the lamest moments of the lamest home videos that turn out to be the most interesting, provoking nothing like the boredom that Ballard described.

What's more, what makes these videos interesting have nothing to do with talent. Mostly it's simply the result of chance. But as someone once said, if you get a million monkeys to hit keys at random on a typewriter keyboard, eventually they'll type out a Shakespeare play. YouTube has certainly managed to gather together a million monkeys. And although it may not necessarily be Shakespeare, from time to time it certainly does throw up stuff that's interesting to some extent.

This is what's so original and fascinating about the video and other forms of expression of the YouTube age. Their fascination lies in the fact that the work is not the result of outstanding talent or effort, but

is a product of chance as countless people simply tried different things on their own initiative. Of course, there are examples from the past where things have been discovered by chance, where aesthetics and new forms of expression have emerged as the result of a series of random events and accidents. In a way this is similar to the things that form the basis of the aesthetics of folk art, such as vernacular craftwork and townscapes. However, in most cases these were single events that attracted little attention and were subsequently forgotten. But with YouTube, there is a possibility that they may be preserved. This is not a product of wasteful use of scarce resources by the select few in terms of ability and wealth. It's wastefulness anyone can enjoy cheaply in an affluent society. We're not talking about something produced by someone with a finely-honed aesthetic sense or great skill, but something whose fascination stems from the fact that it's the result of the half-baked, lighthearted actions of an undisciplined bunch of people who hit upon something interesting purely by chance. This lightheartedness is something that isn't easily realized in other forms of expression. Even the worst hack writing requires some kind of effort on the part of the author. But these days it takes neither effort nor ability to point a video camera and hold down the record button. It's only logical to expect that once in a million times or so the result will be a "work" that's interesting.

But it doesn't stop there. In YouTube and other similar services, popular (usually interesting in one way or another) videos naturally rise to the top, depending on the number of views or their ratings. Viewers are also able to post video responses to other people's clips. This leads to a video dialogue by different contributors. In some cases it's this dialogue that makes the otherwise boring videos interesting enough to be viewable. And then there's Nico Nico Douga¹, which is a derivative of the notorious alternative

Internet forum 2channel². This site offers a truly interesting service whereby users can leave comments that scroll across the video while its playing. Some weird stuff is in the process of emerging, stuff that resembles more a network of pieces than a single "work", in which there is nothing like the traditional separation between the creator and the observer, in which it seems everybody is the creator and everybody is the beneficiary. Whether or not this is art is not a particularly interesting question. But what's certain is that this is a new form of creativity. Earlier signs of this phenomenon can be found in the Flash movies³ as well as the Mona character and other examples of ASCII art⁴ on 2channel, while sites like YouTube offer glimpses of the real potential of the creative efforts of multitudes devoid of elite "individuals".

Video art produced by the multitudes: a premonition of a new society

In a sense, the experimental animated films of McLaren that I mentioned at the start of this article, the ones that aren't all that interesting themselves, foretold the kind of thing outlined in the preceding paragraph. This may appear to contradict what I wrote earlier. I have said that the value of McLaren's films lies in the fact that although they were an example of wastefulness by a person who was to a certain extent privileged. But at the same time, they hinted at the possibilities of a more popular form of film art. They point to the possibilities of a low-cost form of film art, where someone could produce moving images without the expensive optical equipment, as long as they had some film stock itself. One could also say that the crude drawings McLaren scratched on the film stock are an expression of the assertion that "it's possible to make film art even if one has no talent at drawing", and foretell the emergence of a society in which anyone can make video art in a similar

vein. In one sense, YouTube, with its collection of crude videos shot on cheap home video cameras, digital cameras, and mobile phone cameras, is the realization (albeit in a different form) of this. However, it should be stressed that what McLaren had in mind was a new form of "individual" expression. Today we are on the verge of taking this to the next stage.

This collectivization may itself be a kind of premonition of a new society. YouTube is a video sharing website, but over at the photo sharing website Flickr (www.flickr.com), people can place photos on maps like those at Google Maps to show where (and when) they took them. It's only a matter of time before YouTube offers features like this. Eventually (maybe sooner than you think), we'll reach the point where images of every moment of every place on the face of the Earth where there are people will be recorded in some form or another. You could call this a kind of surveillance society. Moreover, it would be a surveillance society created not at the behest of some central authority, but somehow through voluntary actions of willing free individuals. The fact that such a society is emerging at the same time as the rise of forms of expression dominated by the masses and the multitudes and the resultant relative decline of "individual" forms of expression is extremely thought provoking. In several decades, it may be that we will look back on this period and realize (as a mass) that the changes in forms of expression we are currently witnessing on the likes of YouTube were a precursor to changes affecting humankind as a whole, by which I mean the collectivization of humankind and the concomitant loss of the individual. And Yew, my readers, will be assimilated. Resistance is futile... or is it?@

1 A website that enables users to repost videos originally posted to other video-sharing sites. Viewers can leave comments that scroll across the video while it's playing.

2 A massive Japanese Internet forum consisting of thousands of anonymous bulletin boards. Users are said to number as many as ten million. 2channel covers a wide range of topics dealing with everything from "hacking" to "this evening's dinner menu", and while on the one hand some discussions have demonstrated high levels of creativity and popular support enough to be re-packaged into best selling books and movies, it has also gained notoriety due to its numerous slanderous postings, crime threats and postings that invade privacy, which in many cases have resulted in lawsuits.

3 Short movies in Flash format. Includes movies featuring animated versions of Mona and other character-art characters (see 4) as well as music video clips and short movies on topics popular at 2channel.

4 Visual artwork including everything from emoticons, pictograms, and characters to illustrations dozens of characters, much in the spirit of the old time line printer art. Since it is done in Japan, it uses the Japanese character set, although they are frequently referred to as "ASCII Art". In particular, Mona and other characters derived from it are extremely popular at 2channel. The name Mona derives from the Japanese expression "Omae mo na" ("You too").

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Born 1964 in Tokyo. Received his BS from the University of Tokyo in urban engineering and his MS from the MIT Center for Real Estate. Currently works for a major research firm, and as a translator and critic covering a broad range of disciplines including economics, Internet culture, computers and literature. He is a proponent of Project Sugita Genpaku (the Japanese translation version of the Project Gutenberg). Author of *Slashing Ideas*, *Just a Book on William Burroughs* and *Computer no kimochi* (Computer sense), among others. His translations include *Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace* (Lawrence Lessig), *The Cathedral and the Bazaar* (Eric S. Raymond) and *The Age of Diminished Expectations* (Paul Krugman).