**THE TRAGEDY OF SELF IN DIGITISED POPULAR CULTURE:**

**THE EXISTENTIAL CONSEQUENCES OF DIGITAL FAME ON YOUTUBE**

**ABSTRACT:** Digital data is constitutive of many forms of popular culture and user engagement. How data feeds back and is integrated into practice is of critical importance when it comes to analysing the place of the ‘self’ in contemporary culture. This article provides an account of video-blogging on YouTube. It takes as its case study three UK ‘YouTube Celebrities’ – Charlie McDonnell, Chris Kendall and Benjamin Cook – and focuses upon three vlogs which all express disquiet with their celebrity. This unease is articulated in relation to the digital consummation of self YouTube provides its users. Through a textual and performance analysis the article explores the cultural heritage of the vlog in what Charles Taylor calls western culture’s ‘expressive turn’. It argues that what a digitised popular culture gives us is a novel space to rework longstanding cultural ideals around the self, individuality and self-expression.

**KEY WORDS:** Social Media \* Popular Culture \* Tragedy \* Performance \* YouTube

**Introduction**

The constitution of ‘self’ through digital data is a central social and political concern for both social science and public debate (Lupton, 2016; Giroux, 2015; Pasquale, 2015; Gerlitz & Lury, 2014). Sociologists have begun mapping the territory of a digitised popular culture (Beer & Gane, 2008; Beer & Burrows, 2013) and argued that in ‘new social life of data’ we need to understand how the “performativity of data circulation …feeds into the performance of subjectivity and the constitution of everyday experiences” (Beer & Burrows, 2013:68).

To this end this article focuses upon the place of ‘the self’. The general consensus prescribes to a jaundiced view. “One …needs anchors of integrity”, argues Pasquale (2015), “in more substantial ‘sources of the self’ (in Charles Taylor’s evocative formulation) than points, likes and faves.” This disquiet with quantified expressions of human worth is a leitmotif in classic critiques of modernity (Marx, 1976; Simmel, 1990; Durkheim, 1971). Yet the paradox of our dissatisfaction with metricised forms of self-worth is that such platforms also constitute a crucial basis to our individuality and its acknowledgement by others (Gerlitz & Lury, 2014). As this dissatisfaction runs through both academic criticism as well as social media users, this article provides a cultural sociological account of the performance of disquiet through the case of video-blogging on YouTube.

The aim is to take account of the cultural politics of ‘the self’ which informs anxiety around digitally constituted forms of self-worth on social media. It will be concerned with the performance of disquiet; a tragedy of self in digitised popular culture. This account arises from a textual and performance analysis of three video-blogs which not only acknowledge this uneasiness but also perform it. They are by three UK-based YouTube celebrities, Charlie McDonnell (‘charlieissocoollike’), Chris Kendall (‘crabstickz’) and Ben Cook (‘ninebrassmonkeys’). The analysis will focus upon “I’m Scared” (09/11/2012; Views: 1,809,985) by Charlie, “Quitting YouTube” (05/01/2013; Views: 600,811) by Chris and “YouTube vs. The World” (from 12:15-22:30) (28/09/2013 Views: 337,577) by Ben (‘ninebrassmonkeys’). These vloggers are all connected socially and dialogically: they are young (24-35) ‘creatives’ who work closely with Google and wider media industries as well as being subject to a shared audience and common ‘vlogging culture’. Formally, these vlogs all express discontent and an ambivalent unhappiness toward YouTube, their own self, relationship with their audience as well as obligations to video-blogging. Yet the purpose of analysis is to unravel the ‘tragedy of self’ to demonstrates its cultural heritage and anchorage in a *particular* history.

These vlogs will be treated, aesthetically, as tragic soliloquys which articulate internal struggles of self about ‘what to do’. It is by thinking of these vlogs as tragic soliloquys that I wish to bring together a cultural sociological account of the forging of selfhood in social media practices and the cultural critiques which are associated with such processes. Such an aesthetic understanding connects the romanticism of self found in popular culture with academic and cultural critiques of the ‘metricised self’ and their valuation practices. Crucially we have to understand video-blogs (*vlogs*) as cultural performances wherein individuals “display for others the meaning of their social situation.” (Alexander, 2006:32) Not only is the ‘soliloquy’ the cultural expression of liberal expressive (possessive) ‘individualism’ and ‘interiority’ (Belsey, 1985), the same social-political value that underlines many critical accounts of ‘big-data’ (Pasquale, 2015), it is also a political device in the performance of YouTube vlogging.

This special issue of *Qualitative Research* seeks to investigate how the rise of data-driven societies impacts upon social practice. Central to qualitative research is the meaningful interpretation and explanation of social actions. While web 2.0 advances have met with claims of revolutionising human social relations (e.g. Wesch & Whitehead, 2012), this article instead pursues these developments within the cultural matrix and webs of meaning within which the social actors under analysis are situated. The intention is to interpret how data-driven apparatuses inform and shape the performances and dramatic effects of situated social media users.

Methodologically this endeavour is characteristic of hermeneutics: treating social practices as ‘texts’ whose horizons of meaning are not isolated instances but whose meaningful orientations stretch back into deeper recesses of cultural tradition. Alexander’s (2003) ‘structural hermeneutics’ requires a “commitment to hermeneutically reconstructing social texts in a rich and persuasive way.” (Alexander, 2003:13) In what follows, instead of treating the meaning of vlogging in terms solely relevant to the structure of digital platforms, the aim is to persuasively argue for a thick description of vlogging as a continuation of the ‘expressive self’ of western, European modernity (Taylor, 1989). By initially conceptualising the vlogs as reminiscent of ‘tragic soliloquys’, the article contextualises these vlogs within the cultural legacy of the Romantic Movement (Taylor, 1989; Campbell, 1987). The article then precedes to provide a textual, performance analysis of their ‘tragic selfhood’ within the language of authenticity and classical humanism. As such it seeks to interpret the actions of vloggers acting in digitised popular culture through the lens of European tragedy, utilising themes of lamentation and inaction to elucidate the dynamics of web 2.0 structures and power-relations.

**The Research**

The three vloggers and their individual vlogs are chosen as they demonstrate a transition in YouTube as a media platform. They are early users of YouTube who have ‘found fame’ in the initial stages from user-generated sharing and community building. At the time of analysis they were experiencing its move toward a corporate medium which has formalised previously chaotic user-practice. Crucial to the account is how this early vision of YouTube as a space of sharing, creativity, community and mutual dialogue in video-content remains central to their ethos of vlogging.

*The Vloggers*

The three vloggers are all UK based with metric scores which place them in the category of a YouTube ‘microcelebrity’. Their subscription rate, view-count, and name-recognition is enough to evidence *fame*, but crucially this fame is readily deployed as ‘attention capital’. Their fame is a resource for commerce (channel monetisation through advertising; branded merchandise, etc.). Senft’s (2012) definition of ‘micro-celebrity’ on web 2.0 encapsulates the double aspect of ‘authentic’ performance of self on social media as akin to that of preserving a ‘brand identity’ while also using carefully managed ‘authenticity’ for commercial gain. Micro-celebrity is a practice as much as an attribution (Marwick, 2014:115-116). As such, it is fraught with difficulties around authenticity vs. self-interested promotion (Senft, 2012) and negotiating intimacy with commercial interest (Abidin, 2015).

Charlie McDonnell (25) has been on YouTube since 2007 and has 2,396,602 subscribers and a view-count of 295,560,961. Charlie has had success – in the sense of ‘micro-celebrity’ (Senft, 2012) – on YouTube since his video ‘How to be English’ was featured on the homepage of YouTube in 2007, bringing with it a fan base as well as national news attention. He is known for his vlogs which range from life diaries, commentaries upon popular culture and educational science videos. Charlie has also received mainstream media attention, appearing on UK chat shows and BBC Radio 1.

Chris Kendall (28) has been on YouTube since 2006 and has 695,602 subscribers and a view-count of 37,465,713. Chris’ vlogging success rests upon his character driven comedy, his highest viewed videos being parodies of TV shows and actors, ‘Sherlock (parody)’ and ‘Colin Firth Impression’ and other parodies of Hollywood movies or popular television shows. His celebrity also extends beyond YouTube, appearing in sketch and situation comedies on the BBC (e.g. BBC Three’s *Cuckoo* and *Live at the Electric*).

Ben Cook (33) has been on YouTube since 2012, becoming known for his documentary series *Becoming YouTube* which provides a factional account of Ben’s adoption of a vlogging persona and descent into the depths of YouTube creativity and celebrity. He has 197,796 subscribers and a view count of 5,693,181. While sharing a much smaller audience than Charlie and Chris, Ben’s vlog ‘YouTube vs. The World’ is an excellent dramatization of the politics and power-dynamics at work on YouTube. It interestingly documents the constitution of self in a digital medium and can be seen to dramatize how the “performativity of data circulation …feeds into the performance of subjectivity,” (as Beer & Burrows (2013:68) call for).

Aired on YouTube between December 2012 and February 2014, Cook’s *Becoming YouTube* is both an ethnographic documentary exploring the culture of UK YouTube micro-celebrity as much as it is a dramatization of the life of a ‘nobody becoming a somebody’ on YouTube, Cook himself. *Becoming YouTube* may be treated as a tracing a transitional period in YouTube’s platform development. With the introduction of YouTube’s ‘Advertiser-friendly’ content policy (initiated Sept. 2016) and YouTube Red (Nov. 2016) we are currently witnessing a move from ‘YouTubers’ as amateur content creators to celebrities providing exclusive originals on a serialised streaming service (akin to *Netflix*, *Amazon Prime*, etc.). *Becoming YouTube* (c.2012-14) acts to contextualise the move Chris, Charlie and Ben were experiencing with the impending demands of increased commercialisation some five years ago. Appearing as interviewees in the documentary, Chris and Charlie epitomise the YouTube culture Cook seeks to cover and dramatize. We may read the vlogs under consideration here, falling directly within this period (Charlie, Nov. 2012; Chris, Jan. 2013; Ben, Sept. 2013), as disquieted commentaries upon this transition.

*Becoming YouTube* interviews major UK and some US ‘content creators’ (dubbed ‘the YouTube digerati’) and dramatizes their situation through fictional narrative material, both comedic and melodramatic. Yet this series itself is not to be separated from the celebrity and vlogging culture it reports on. Cook is aware of, and dedicated to, how YouTube is a dialogical medium and through the series he is actively proposing a right and wrong way to ‘do’ YouTube vlogging – politically his position is committed to the more utopian forms of democratic socialism which circulate around new social media and Web 2.0. By profession a journalist who has contributed to the *Radio Times* and *Doctor Who Magazine* as well as major UK newspapers, Cook’s *Becoming YouTube* is in part an ethnography of the landscape of YouTube as it moves from an amateur video-sharing site to a professional, corporate medium (Burgess, 2015) and part manifesto for ‘how to be a YouTuber’. Yet Cook’s documentary is also an *idealisation* of YouTube; it is a production which contains all the signs of YouTube’s move away from egalitarian-socialist forms of video-sharing (high-end sound, editing, video-quality and extended pre- and post-production) and views drawn from interviewing ‘YouTube celebrities’, yet advocates its amateur, grass-roots socialism of self-sharing as a political stance.

*The Vlogs: Ethnographic Context*

The three vlogs – ‘I’m Scared’, ‘Quitting YouTube’ and ‘YouTube vs. The World’ – have to be understood within this period of transition which YouTube has been subject to. While isolated UK-cases, these vloggers are experiencing a cultural sea-change within web 2.0 culture. In the decade since its inception in 2005 as an open-access video-sharing site to its current corporatized and industry driven period as a subsidiary of Google Inc., YouTube’s indigenously ‘famous’ users are having to negotiate their current status and relationship to their ‘platform’.

As a societal trend, Burgess (2015:284) predicts that the tensions to be handled in this epoch of social media technology is in users “maintaining their interpretative flexibility …such that social media may continue to be sites of cultural generativity.” Of course, this is easier said rather than done. As Miller (2009) has cautiously stated, the zeal for new media is often a rehashing of previous forms of utopian thinking which accompanies new technologies. YouTube and its associated platforms, he argues, are merely distillations of three older utopian ideals: “free-cable’ …movements of the 1960s and 70s, the neoclassical, deregulative intellectual and corporate movements of the 1970s-80s; and the Post-Protestant, anti-accumulative hacker ethos of the 1990s and today.” (Miller, 2009:426) Ultimately, however, “until large-scale questionnaire and ethnographic studies have been undertaken, we should remain cautious in our cybertarian assertions” (Miller, 2009:427)

Of course, the problem with such methods Miller advocates is precisely what is at issue with the crisis of empirical sociology in the age of big-data. The redundancy of such methods is certainly worth considering. But it has its limits. Big-data is as much a mythology/ideology as it is an advance in neo-liberal, technocratic capitalism (Smith, 2014; boyd & Crawford, 2012; Vis, 2013): that big-data is ‘big’ such that it can capture all of the social world and gain knowledge of *all* is certainly myth in Barthes sense, “to naturalise beliefs that are contingent” (Vis 2013:3). What big-data cannot do, and sociologists can, is trace the meanings of social practices and locate the meaningful courses of action articulated within a shared cultural framework and its normative orientation (Smith, 2014).

The vlogs considered here are a testament to this localisation of meaning and interpretation. Three UK-based vlogs are chosen precisely because their view-counts, while relatively substantial, are merely reflections of what other, non-microcelebrity vloggers experience. Unlike other YouTubers who use YouTube to spring-board or extend their celebrity elsewhere, these three young vloggers articulate views, experiences and sentiments shared by potentially any would-be (young) vlogger.

Equally important for the account I am providing with these vlogs is that: *users of social media may be informed by big-data* (YouTube algorithms) *and consummated by it, but would prefer not to think of themselves in such terms.* There is alternative history of the ‘self’ to which they remain culturally orientated. This is where the interpretative strategy of tragic soliloquy gains its culturally specific salience. The ‘confessional’ may be a generalised feature of the ‘western self’ and identity troubles have been argued to be inherent to the emotional and immaterial labour of micro-celebrity (Senft, 2012; Abidin, 2015). However it must be kept in mind that the ideo-geography of the ‘confessional’ has its own discursive and symbolic economy. The confessional vlogs for the ‘It Gets Better’ campaign for LGBT young people, for instance, may share similar generic conventions to the ‘tragic soliloquys’ outlined here. However the relevance of the soliloquy is as a special genre of the confessional. Soliloquys refer to a ‘western’ tradition of the self, epitomised by Reformation Christianity and distilled into the ‘bourgeois’, ‘possessive’ individualism that dominates commodified transactions (Macpherson, 1962; Belsey, 1985). These vlogs dramatize the politics of authenticity in and through the medium of celebrification and, as such, the cultural heritage of the soliloquy is of distinctly ethnocentric significance.

**Toward a cultural sociology of the ‘vlog’**

Before I explore these YouTubers vlogs I want to provide a cultural account of what a ‘vlog’ is and how they may be hermeneutically situated within this ‘western’ tradition of selfhood. What is the drama they enact and what meaningful cultural sentiments do they endorse?

The vlog has been understood as a cultural space and performative means to narrate, document and forge a sense of ones individuality to both self and others (Papacharissi, 2010). In many ways vlogs are forms of what Malinowski (1923) referred to as ‘phatic communication’, communication which has no other purpose than demonstrating that one is present in an interaction and is granted acknowledgment by their interlocutor, ‘the other’ (cf. Jerslev & Mortensen, 2015; Lange, 2010). It is in and through YouTube’s form of user-engagement that vloggers participate in a cultural practice and performance aimed at forging and realising a vision of their ‘expressive individuality’, one crucial ‘source of the self’ for modern identity (Taylor, 1989). Vlogs are performances of self to oneself *and* others. Or better, vlogs are performances of self *as* other. The ‘expressive turn’ which Taylor (1989) identified in western romanticism is the notion that the self emerges from the power granted to the imagination; imaginative visions of self are made manifest and given form in various artworks (novels, poems, paintings, musical compositions and so on). Vlogs may be treated in the same vein: one comes to see themselves more in their expressive products, as objects of culture, than as subjects of expression. In the history of western modernity, we may interpret the vlog as a continuation of Durkheim’s ‘cult of the individual’ (1971): the collective performance of individual self-recordings turns oneself into a sacred object, initiating a cultural space to witness individual uniqueness and reflect upon a uniqueness we ‘all’ share.

The practice of ‘self-objectification’ means people come to see themselves as others see them (Miller & Sinnanan, 2014). Significantly the brand taglines of YouTube actively rely upon turning oneself into products, but products which are ‘you’. YouTube’s taglines include ‘Broadcast Yourself’ and ‘Dare to be You’ and after its launch in 2005. *Time* magazine named their 2006 Person of the Year *You*, “You control the information age. Welcome to your world.” (Lange, 2007; Miller, 2009). This ‘You’ needs placing in a wider socio-cultural context. The ambiguity of the term *you* is such that it both includes ourselves and turns the individual (singular) it into a collective (many) (Lange, 2007). The ambiguity of ‘you-I’ may be placed, also, within Taylor’s (1989) philosophical history of western selfhood.

Taylor (1989) extends his search for contemporary forms of selfhood back to its Judaeo-Christian foundations. In St. Augustine’s *Confessions*,the keystone of western radical reflexivity, we find inwardness as the basis for adopting a first-person standpoint (an ‘I’) in distinction to another, a ‘You’, which in Augustine’s theology was a path to God (Taylor, 1989:127ff). The self addresses itself in first-person (I) to God as an other (You). In the post-Romantic development of ‘inwardness’ and self-reflexivity, this You is turned from a God (who in Augustine’s theology curtails our creative imagination) to become our own inner-depths, an inwardness whose depths are inexhaustible. In this rendering, the central idea is “that each person has his or her own original way of being” (Taylor, 1989:184) and our “inescapable feeling of depth comes from the realization that whatever we bring up, there is always more down there. Depth lies in there being always, inescapably, something beyond our articulative power.” (Taylor, 1989:390)

While the ‘confessional’ character of contemporary consumer and media culture has been well documented (Bauman, 2007; Matthews, 2007; Raun, 2012), Varul (2015) has sought to explicitly stress its religious origins in relation to a theodicy and (implicit) ethical maxim. As Campbell remarks on the ‘romantic theodicy’ at root in consumer capitalism, God is replaced with individual creativity (Campbell, 1987:182). This becomes a form of faith but one that is “a purely personal drama of salvation and redemption to be acted out within the confines of the self.” (Campbell, 1987:182) Most importantly this self is never finished and the drama ongoing; the romantic personality of expressive inwardness demonstrates a “refusal to commit to any of the projects, dreams, identities constructed in the imagination.” (Varul, 2015:455)

Such a theodicy has its critics (Schmitt, 1986; Rojek, 2015). Romantics

tend to possess neither integrity or constancy. …Rather, they are adept at having things every which way, and embracing and discarding positions willy nilly, because they operate under the dual discipline of the unrestrained ego and ‘the occasion’ rather than lode stars of principle and consistency… (Rojek, 2015:77)

Simply, critics see the romantic personality as vacuous. The romantic personality is one with an inability to commit to set paths of action and principle. Yet, for Varul, the romantic personality holds an alternative ethical value: “we are obliged to respect the reversibility, the open potential, the creative expressivity in others as much as we feel ourselves entitled to our own.” (Varul, 2015: 456)

**The Analysis**

The ‘tragic vlogs’ analysed below attest to such a romantic politics of selfhood. Yet this is merely one *possible* way to understand the vlog. If vlogs are a practice which value the self as sacred and where performances of ‘self *as* other’ become realised, then we need to understand not only the cultural politics which lies behind such practices but also how this becomes evidenced and confirmed in vlogging as such.

Of course these videos are indeed isolated in the vast array of vlog content on YouTube and by no means generalizable. Yet they are in fact an interesting performance of that which is much more typical of YouTube. They are phatic communications which seek affinity by way of deferral: affinity vlogs confess to dramatic inaction (not uploading videos for a while) and provide an index to future action (Lange, 2010:82). The point I am drawing out with the select vlogs is that in their dramatic inaction they are able to tell us something interesting about the politics and performance of self involved in vlogging on YouTube. By way of dramatic inaction, they articulate the tragedy of self which a digitised form of selfhood is subject to. Yet, through their performance, they seek to accomplish not solutions but possible ways of thinking about what a vlog, and YouTube, is. Their actions are not directed toward conveying information or courses of action. Instead they are a reflection upon the medium itself. They performatively situate a ‘problem’ in the presentation of a YouTube self. As performances of tragedy they have the dramatic orientation toward intervention; a claim to what counts as and ought to be thought of as normative goals of truth and justice (Baker, 2014).

**“I’m not here to entertain you”: Tragedy & Inaction**

Treating these vlogs as tragic soliloquys arises from the shared textual and performative similarities with them. They occur when the drama of the play has paused and they turn ‘inward’ and reflect upon their status within the narrative itself; they do this in seeming (not actual) isolation. This is clearest in Charlie and Chris’ vlogs as Charlie appears against a black backdrop in black and white; devoid of colour and negative space (only a black void). The dramatic effect is an outward expression of inner turmoil. Chris, on the other hand, uses a thumbnail for his vlog with his head sunken and hand over face and obscured by his hair. Ben, however, begins his soliloquy as a series of verbal self-lacerations after a scene in his fictional sketch has gone wrong. Crucially, they all break their comedic persona which they have become ‘famous’ for. These vlogs are not what we ‘usually’ watch these vloggers for.

The opening of Charlie’s “I’m scared”, the first voice to articulate the problem of vlogging in YouTube’s process of industry celebrification, attests to this:

I’m not here to entertain you today; I don’t have the capacity to do that right now.

I am here as one regular human being to another; because I am not happy right now.

I’m not happy with myself; and I need to talk to someone about it.

Charlie is dramatizing inaction. He is acting out an inability to perform. Classicist Richard Seaford (2003) has traced the textual qualities of tragic drama, noting that characters express themselves in speeches which comprise two-opposed statements which often describe their actions in contradictory pairs. It is in tragedy where people become problems unto themselves: “In the tragic perspective …human action are seen, not as things that can be defined or described, but as problems.” (Vernant & Vidal-Nacquet, 1990:38). In textual form, Seaford (2003:141) calls this form-parallelism and dramatically this leads to the central feature of tragedy: *lamentation*. As Charlies goes on he says, “I just haven’t been the best version of myself recently.” Charlie’s ‘I’m Scared’ is a lamentation of self as *other*: his former self and current self as YouTube vlogger are read through past videos and present efforts.

Lamentation takes a form that allows its expression to intersect with the dramatic features of being a YouTuber. Chris and Ben share, while not the same script style, a similar way of depicting dramatic inaction. Chris’ vlog begins:

Quitting YouTube. [Long pause]. How do I want to start this video? I want to start it by starting. That is it. That’s all. There is no perfect start there is just beginning. [Pause]. Hi, I’m crab [Laughs]. Hello. This is me quitting YouTube. Okay, I’ve got some explaining to do. I feel like I’m probably going to get into a little bit of trouble, but, you know.

Here we have lots of ‘words’ but little ‘action’: inaction is dramatized through delays and deferrals, silence, rhetoric and self-referral. Ben, too, begins in a similar way yet instead turns toward the audience and directs his self-ire toward the viewer:

You can put that in, are you filming? You can put that in. Hello, faithful viewer. Person at home. You probably won’t see this, so. Probably don’t even care, do you? You don’t care about changing the world. Why should you, it’s not…you just want to watch British Boy With a Fringe…

In Ben’s case we have, again, many words and little action but also further demonstration of how anxiety and disquiet directed toward themselves results from being watched – as others to themselves. When Charlie speaks of a ‘version of himself’, Chris negotiates ‘how to begin’ and Ben berates an audience who ‘probably won’t see this’ they reveal the circuits of recognition (and misrecognition) of self at work in YouTube vlogging: vlogs are performances of self for others, and others confirm their sense of self.

It is in this way that we can talk of a vlog as a performance of self as *other*. Charlie says:

I realise this recently when I tried to work out, why I do anything, really why anybody does anything and the best answer I could come up with is – every person, deep down, whether they’re willing to admit this to themselves or not, wants other people to like them.

Here we’re seeing the articulation of inwardness and expressive depth in relation to external recognition. Charlie disregards the claim to his persona in this video, speaking in the language of ‘one human being to another’. To be a human being to another, he must be afforded the ability to appear as *he* wishes. On YouTube we see this problem of recognition expressed in the metric-language of digitised social media. Chris is more explicit in this politics of the self in drawing out the ‘YouTube-ness’ of this:

What I have quit is YouTube. […] I’m surprised anyone is going to sit through this. They’re going to be like “Oh yeah he didn’t quit. Dislike!” [Pauses. Moment of revelation.] And that is what I’m trying to get away from! Thinking like that. […] […] I think what it was, I’m a creative person, I like to make people laugh, and YouTube reacts to certain things that you do, like it reacts to things like if you’re pretty, or if your video is about the ‘top 10 things that happen to you when you fart’ or something. You know, YouTube reacts to that. And YouTube doesn’t react to other things, like if I do a video based on a TV show in the UK that nobody really watched but I found funny, it doesn’t react as well to that, so what happens over time you become a little bit more effected by your followers and stuff, and you stop doing what you want to do.

All these statements refer to claims to their ‘creativity’ being limited as it is judged through the ‘likes and dislikes’ of YouTube’s metrics. We see Chris employ the language of ‘likes’, as a metric of value, which becomes the basis of YouTube valorisation – in the Marxian sense – as his *persona* having exchange-value [Author, 2014]. “YouTube”, says Chris, “reacts to certain things.” Indeed, Charlie’s accounts makes much the same claim: “what holds me back isn’t that it isn’t going to be very good it’s that you won’t like it, and by extension you won’t like me.” While Ben’s ire states: “That any of you idiots can type at all is a surprise. Well there you go: dislike this.”

**Algorithmic sociality, or tragic connections**

While these vlogs all *perform* claims to intimacy, disclosure and disquiet in the language of ‘one human being to another’, the question is really how are they (and we) relating to *one-another*? Digital sociality is not a direct relation of reciprocity. The dialogic medium of web 2.0 is constituted through the technical means of algorithms. Algorithms create illusory relations of ‘connection’: ‘Most Viewed’, ‘X Likes’, etc. are forms of relations between selves which arise from the ordering and organising patterns of the algorithms’ criteria, thereby obfuscating *how* connections are made and naturalising the processes involved (MacKenzie, 2006; Lash, 2007; Beer, 2013). As Beer (2013) claims, the processes algorithms are put to are often thought of as dehumanising as people are judged without human discretion. But the real problem is that these algorithms *know* what is desired and as we’re seeing from our vloggers, they come to ‘think like the algorithm’. In so doing, they misrecognise *human connection* with *algorithmic connections*: they use terms like ‘affected by your followers’, but these followers are others forged by the algorithms YouTube employs. Their creativity becomes short-circuited and can be read as a digitised ‘dialectic of control’ (Giddens, 1982): *knowing* that YouTube’s algorithms ‘react to certain things’, Chris’ internalises their predictive power and has to direct his content accordingly. As such algorithms come to organise the metaphysical categories of time, agency and power which the ‘self’ works within. Instead of forging connections between self-and-other, rather YouTube – like many others platforms – “aims to deploy its measure of the influence of individual in social media so as to drive its *own* actions.” (Gerlitz & Lury, 2014:181, original emphasis)

Here all three vlogs articulate this problem in relation to ‘time’ and it is an ‘algorithmic time’ (MacKenzie, 2006:64) which is the basis of their fame as ‘broadcasted selves’:

“…not only am I not posting content as regularly as I want to and know that I can …” (Charlie)

“I was away for two months, that felt really good, it felt really freeing … taking two months away from it, it takes you out of it, …out of the addictive side of YouTube” (Chris)

“…I saw the YouTube digerati and I thought, ‘I want a piece of that’… Well, look where it’s got me – a weekly series on YouTube, that isn’t even monthly, no ideas, no proper job, no hope.” (Ben)

The celebrity vlogger, caught in an ‘algorithmic time’, – a power immanent to their practice as vloggers (Lash, 2007), – becomes ‘other’ to themselves. In the face of their YouTube analytics – demographic, geographic, most-popular, most-viewed content – they are in a position of excess of knowing and deficit of recognition. In terms of drama, these vloggers have *knowledge* of their situation but fail to *act* on it(Critchely & Webster, 2013:5-6). As Nietzsche (1993:39) remarks: “understanding kills action, action depends upon a veil of illusion.” We can see here the excess of knowing produces much the same effect Nietzsche suggest the tragic figure, Hamlet, suffers from: *lethargy*. Having knowledge of the realities of their celebrity they are compelled to inaction. As Ben says, “I’m so tired! I don’t think I want to Become YouTube anymore!” Or, Charlie: “I’m not here to entertain … I don’t have the capacity to do that right now.”

While these vlogs dramatize inaction they are not ineffective in this regard; tragedy has a purpose and takes the form of an argument. This is found in its dramatic goal of catharsis. Tragic drama represents a sequence of events towards a hero’s downfall and suffering by way of the ‘logic’ within their actions, “a mistake such as anyone might make” (Vernant & Vidal-Nacquet, 1990:247). Through theatre spectators identified with the tragic hero and saw their own potential to succumb to such fate. In the face of this spectators of a tragic hero’s downfall are obliged to reflect upon the ethical implications of their own courses of action (Vernant & Vidal-Nacquet, 1990:247) With our vloggers, this catharsis is organised around recourse to the language of humanity. Their anxiety and disgust around their celebrity is treated as a fault of ‘being human’:

“I hope that this is just what it’s like to be human, that everybody feels the same way as me, just as anxious as I do about other people, but I don’t know for sure, and I don’t know what to do about this either is, like the simplest answer is to just stop caring about it, but I have no idea how to do that.” (Charlie)

“It’s the sad thing, and I think every YouTuber isn’t on it fully, to share themselves and have a laugh. A lot of them have a bigger idea of what they’re going to do and so have I. And it’s not a bad thing, it’s not a selfish thing, it’s a very human thing. Everyone’s projecting them into the future, like, ‘what’s coming up?’” (Chris)

These appeals to ‘being human’ – especially in the ‘confessional’ aesthetic in celebrity culture – is certainly part of a skilful and artful ‘exposure management’ which keeps their celebrity in-tact (Rojek, 2015). Yet our analysis ought to go beyond understanding the realpolitik of celebrity performances (on YouTube or elsewhere). Rojek(2015) provides a condemnatory critique of contemporary forms of public engagement, namely that acceptance and approval trump moral character and integrity; the performance of intimacy and disclosure of private and personal disquiet is the end of shared and meaningful publics. Rojek (2015) is worried that the ‘gestural economy’ of acceptance and approval in contemporary culture is fundamentally isolating and devoid of purpose beyond a façade of acceptance. Indeed, this could be a way to view these vlogs: they may claim a common humanity but in fact they are gestures geared toward manipulating favour and acceptance to preserve their power and celebrity.

**The Soliloquy: an aesthetic-ethical act**

I want to go beyond such an interpretation and salvage the romantic ethic and virtues they epitomise. Rojek’s objections are ancient inheritances. Plato’s *Republic* also denied the tragic poets a place in his ideal polis due to their production of illusion (over truth): theatre would produce a society of the spectacle. Critchley & Webster (2013:16-17) note how the ancient sophist Gorgias described theatre as truths communicated in lies: by way of illusion theatre achieves truths *through* deception and promotes values *in* illusions. Crucially these ‘truths’ are performative; through drama we gain a ‘case’ for them and taking them up. In a culture where public forums are privatised, we ought to see how social performances aim to re-fuse collective sentiments in ways which are increasingly theatrical (Alexander, 2014). These vlogs all evoke a common myth in western culture: they draw upon and make the case for the autonomous, unique and self-enclosed ‘self’. This is founded in the cultural history of the soliloquy.

The soliloquy has a privileged place in Western drama. It is a product of liberal humanism and renaissance drama which proclaimed “the existence of an interiority, the inalienable and unalterable property of the individual, which precedes and determines speech and action.” (Belsey, 1985:34) However, where does this interiority come from? What are the origins of our inalienable sense of individuality? Belsey (1985) gives the example of Hamlet, the archetype of the liberal humanistic self. Hamlet is indeed a useful example to draw out some (cautionary) parallels with our vlogs: his soliloquys are all confessions of inaction (“to be or not to be”).

When Hamlet expresses his grief as “I have that within which passes show” compared to the “actions that a man might play” (*Hamlet* in Belsey, 1985:41) we are at the root of the mystery of subjectivity which has plagued the ‘western self’ since the renaissance. For Belsey, this inaction is the ‘self’ of liberal humanism falling into contradiction with its own sense of unity:

Who is speaking when Hamlet castigates himself for his inaction? …The ‘I’ of the utterance is here identified as the other, the ‘I’ of misrecognition, in contrast to the ‘I’ which recognises the failure to act as inadequate, something to castigate. That ‘I’, the distinct differed subject of enunciation, is the humanistic subject… (Belsey, 1985:50)

The problem of the liberal humanistic self, then, is that they are unable to express their own origin and own meaning. The liberal, humanistic self cannot be ‘themselves’. We are seeing much the same at work in the vlogs. Vloggers talk of the same forms of misrecognition but fail to come down on who they *are*. Brian Cumming’s reading of Hamlet’s soliloquy furthers Belsey’s, arguing that soliloquy’s are “a place of self-doubt and self-cancellation” (2013:172). In his soliloquy’s, Hamlet, “far from speaking his mind, confronts us with a fragmentary repository of alternative selves, and searches within for the limits of being.” (Cummings, 2013:180) This is precisely what is at work with the vlogs discussed here, for our vloggers are also showing themselves in their vlogs to be ‘alternative selves’ – performances, characters, their ‘brand’ – but never *themselves*. Ben, Chris or Charlie’s ‘true selves’ are not found in these vlogs, either; while exceptional to their usual ‘show’ each vlog is instead another self in a ‘fragmentary repository of alternative selves’. As Belsey (1985:50) says: “Hamlet’s subjectivity is itself un-speakable since the subject of the enunciation always exceeds the subject of the utterance. …and *this* is the heart of his mystery, his interiority, his essence.” So, too, with our YouTubers: they are *more than their vlogs* and they are here performing this more by way of inaction, deferral and non-commitment. This is not the fall of public man or the end to a virtuous civic (*digital*) culture, instead it is performing claims to extra-private selves when privacy becomes public. If private life is lived in public, then privacy becomes what is not captured or recorded.

As such these vlogs seek to make a claim on the mystery of their self, a mystery which YouTube’s digitised forms of ordering, organising and measuring worth seemingly extinguish. These vlogs seek to salvage a consistent link between *who they are seen to be* and *who they think they are* without either side collapsing into the other. It is here that we find an ethics of selfhood which connects the romantic character of contemporary popular culture with vlogging as its cultural expression. All three vlogs dramatize how their self was formed through vlogging and their reception on YouTube; and they agonise about their position in this state where they have seemingly committed to a version of themselves which others have more influence in forging. This is the tragedy of self for the YouTuber (Simmel, 1997). As political and aesthetic acts, these vlogs seek to make the case for a reversible, occasion driven sense of self.

But how is this an ethical virtue?

If the occasionalism and reversibility of the romantic is to be an ethical virtue, then Varul (2015:456-457) notes it must be drawn out in choices of action which hold choosers accountable to themselves. Instead of committing to a single path, the occasional character of acts leads to the necessity of developing a ‘moral career’ of the self. This career holds the impulse to choose accountable by forging an immanent link between the new choice and the old. To not commit to ‘one version of oneself’ is itself an ethical principle as it aims to weave a path which is unending and not curtailed by others; a project which is autotelic. In all three vlogs there is a wish to move outsideof their consummated selves as vloggers, selves made ‘whole’ and seemingly ‘finished’ by the digital data which is accumulated and constitutes their performances. It is in seeking this ‘outside-ness’to their self where this romantic virtue is held onto as a political position of a ‘how to be a vlogger’. Against the data which consummates these vloggers, we may view these vlogs as protests toward a thwarted sense of being ‘outside themselves’.

**Conclusion**

The debate around big data and digitally constituted popular culture has been provocatively claimed to be “an increasingly powerful, prevalent and popular way through which sociologists might continue to procedurally ‘miss the point’” (Smith, 2014:191): privileging the aggregates of practice over practice itself fails to understand their practical accomplishment. The argument here has been completely in keeping with such a position. The focus on how vloggers speak about their own practice has meant that the analysis of the digital constitution of ‘self’ in social media aggregators is rendered into a *drama*; a drama which arises out of how a select – but culturally significant – group of YouTube users come to terms with their relation to their medium. Digital data acts as a character (agent) in the drama of self which has a particular, contingent cultural history. How a digitised popular culture connects with wider histories of ‘self’ has shown that cultural meanings shape and define the situated practice of YouTube users. We may not generalise from these cases but we can see how new forms – vlogs – connect with enduring practices (soliloquys) and legacies (romanticism). Ethnographers of the internet have the role of taking practices of a general form – *the internet* – and show how its users draw upon culturally situated narratives in their forging of its content. Central to this account has been how YouTube, as a source of the self, plays a role less of denying us of our integrity by subjecting our performances to a regime of ‘points, likes and faves’ (Pasquale, 2015) but instead reminding certain users that such renderings remain inadequate. Metrics sourced from big-data algorithms act as antagonists to the romantic heroes of YouTube explored here. Their ‘tragedies’ are performative and self-aware depictions of unease which connect to a myth of western personhood: that each individual has a ‘self’ that is sovereign and whose expression in various creative outlets – from Sunday painting to commodified YouTubing – perpetuates this endless ‘expressive’, unique individuality.

**Bibliography:**

[Author 2014]

Abidin, C (2015) ‘Communicative intimacies: influencers and perceived interconnectedness’, *Ada: Journal of Gender, New Media & Technology*, 8: doi:10.7264/N3MW2FFG.

Alexander, JC (2014) ‘The fate of the dramatic in modern society: social theory and the theatrical Avant-Garde’, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 31(3):3-24.

Alexander, JC (2006) ‘Cultural pragmatics: social performance between ritual and strategy’, in Alexander, JC, Giesen, B, Mast, JL (eds.) *Social Performances: Symbolic Action, Cultural Pragmatics, and Ritual* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press)

Alexander, JC (2003) *The Meanings of Social Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)

Baker, SA (2014) *Social Tragedy*, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan

Bauman, Z (2007) *Consuming Life*, (Cambridge: Polity)

Beer, D (2013) *Popular culture and new media: The politics of circulation*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave)

Beer, D & Gane, N (2008), *New Media: The Key Concepts*, (Oxford: Berg)

Beer, D and Burrows, R (2013) ‘Popular Culture, Digital Archives and the New Social Life of Data’, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 30(4):47-71.

Belsey, C (1985) *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity & Difference in Renaissance Drama*, (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd.)

boyd, d & Crawford, K (2012) ‘Critical questions for big data: provocations for a cultural, technological, and scholarly phenomenon’, *Information, Communication & Society*, 15(5):662-679.

Burgess, J (2015) ‘From ‘Broadcast Yourself’ to ‘Follow your interests’: making over social media’, *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 18(3):281-285.

Campbell, C (1987) *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*, (Oxford: Blackwell)

Critchely, S & Webster, J (2013) *Stay, Illusion: The Hamlet Doctrine*, New York: Pantheon Books

Cummings, B (2013) *Mortal Thoughts: Religion, Secularity & Identity in Shakespeare and Early Modern Culture*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press)

Durkheim, E (1971) ‘L’indivdualisme et les intellectuels’ in Giddens A(ed.) *Emile Durkheim: Selected Writings*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)

Gerlitz, C & Lury, C (2014) ‘Social media and self-evaluating assemblages: on numbers, orderings and values’, *Distinktion: Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory*, 15(2):174-188.

Giddens, A (1982) ‘Power, the Dialectic of Control and Class Structuration’ in Giddens A (ed.), *Profiles and Critiques in Social Theory*, (London: MacMillan)

Giroux, HA (2015) ‘Selfie culture in the age of corporate and state surveillance’, *Third Text*, 29(3):155-164.

Griffith, M & Papacharissi, ZA (2010). Looking for You: An Analysis of Video Blogs. First Monday, 15 (1), uncommonculture.org.

Jerslev, A & Mortensen, M (2015) ‘What is the self in the celebrity selfie? Celebrification, phatic communication and performativity’, *Celebrity Studies*, 7(2):249-263.

Lange, PG (2007) ‘Searching for the ‘You’ in ‘YouTube’: an analysis of online response ability’, paper presented at EPIC 2007, Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference. Keyston, October.

Lange, PG (2010) ‘Videos of affinity’, in Snickars, Pelle & Vonderau, Patrick (eds.), *The YouTube Reader*, Stockholm: National Library of Sweden

Lash, S (2007) ‘Power after Hegemony: cultural studies in mutation’, *Theory, Culture & Theory*, 24(3):55-78.

Lupton, D (2016) *The Quantified Self* (Cambridge: Polity)

Macpherson, CP (1962) *The political theory of possessive individualism: from Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)

MacKenzie, A (2006) *Cutting Code: Software and Sociality*, (New York: Peter Lang)

Malinowski, B (1923) ‘The problem of meaning in primitive languages’ in Ogden CK and Richards IA (eds.) *The Meaning of Meaning* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul)

Marwick, A (2014) *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity and Branding in the Social Media age* (New Haven: Yale University Press)

Marx, K (1976) *Capital: Volume One*, London: Penguin

Matthews, N (2007) ‘Confessions to a new public: video nation shorts’, *New Media & Society*, 29(3):435-448.

Miller, T (2009) ‘Cybertarians of the World Unite: You have nothing lose but Your Tubes’, in in Snickars, P & Vonderau, P (eds.) *The YouTube Reader*, Stockholm: National Library of Sweden

Miller, D & Sinanan, J (2014) *Webcam*, (Cambridge: Polity)

Nietzsche, F (1993) *The Birth of Tragedy*, (London: Penguin)

Papacharissi, ZA (2010) *A Private Sphere: democracy in a digital age*, (Cambridge: Polity Press)

Pasquale, F (2015b) ‘The Algorithmic Self’, *The Hedgehog Review: Critical reflections on contemporary culture*, 17(1): Avaliable at: <http://www.iasc-culture.org/THR/THR_article_2015_Spring_Pasquale.php> (Accessed Feb. 2016).

Plato (1974), *The Republic*, London: Penguin

Raun, T (2012) ‘DIY Therapy: exploring affective self-representations in trans video blogs on YouTube’, in Karatzogianni, A. & Kuntsman, A. (eds.), *Digital cultures and the politics of emotion: feeling, affect and technological change*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

Rojek, C (2015) *Presumed Intimacy: Para-social relationships in media, society and celebrity culture*, (Cambridge: Polity)

Seaford, R (2003) ‘Aeschylus and the Unity of Opposites’, *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 123:141-163.

Senft, TM (2012) ‘Microcelebrity and the Branded Self’ in (eds.) J. Hartley, J. Burgess, A Bruns *A Companion to New Media Dynamics*, (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell).

Schmitt, C (1986) *Political Romanticism*, (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press)

Simmel, G. (1990) *The Philosophy of Money*, London: Routledge

Simmel, G (1997) ‘The Concept and Tragedy of Culture’ in Mike Featherstone (ed.) *Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings*, (London: Sage)

Smith, RJ (2014) ‘Missed miracles and mystical connections: Qualitative research, digital social science and big data’, in Hand, M. and Hillyard, S. (eds.) *Big Data? Qualitative Approaches to Digital Research*, Vol. 13. *Studies in Qualitative Methodology* (Emerald Group Publishing Limited).

Taylor, C (1989) *Sources of the self: the making of modernity identity*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press

Varul, M (2015) ‘Consumerism as Folk Religion: Transcendence, Probation and Dissatisfaction with Capitalism’, *Studies in Christian Ethics*, 28(4):447-460.

Vernant, JP & Vidal-Naquet, P (1990) *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, New York: Zone Books

Vis, F (2013) ‘A critical reflection on Big Data: Considering APIs, researchers and tools as data makers’, *First Monday*, 18(10): <http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/4878>

Wesch, M & Whitehead, NL (2012) *Human no more: digital subjectivities, unhuman subjects and the end of anthropology* (Boulder: University of Colorado)